

M.F.K. FISHER

THE

ART OF
EATING

M.F.K. FISHER'S
FIVE MOST FAMOUS BOOKS
IN ONE VOLUME

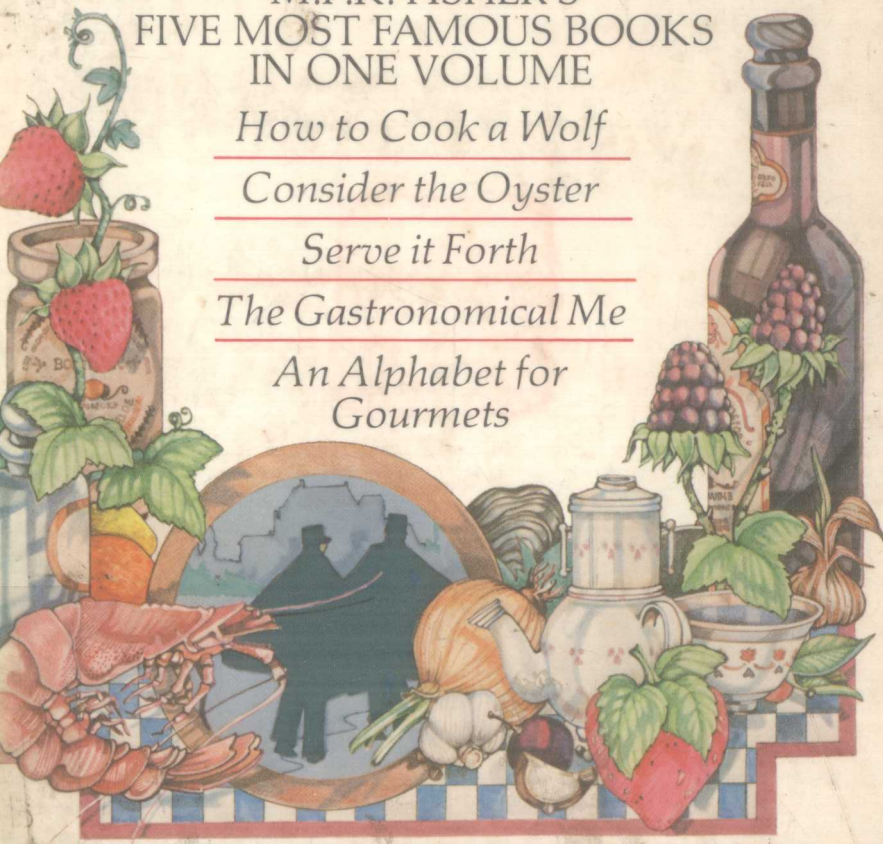
How to Cook a Wolf

Consider the Oyster

Serve it Forth

The Gastronomical Me

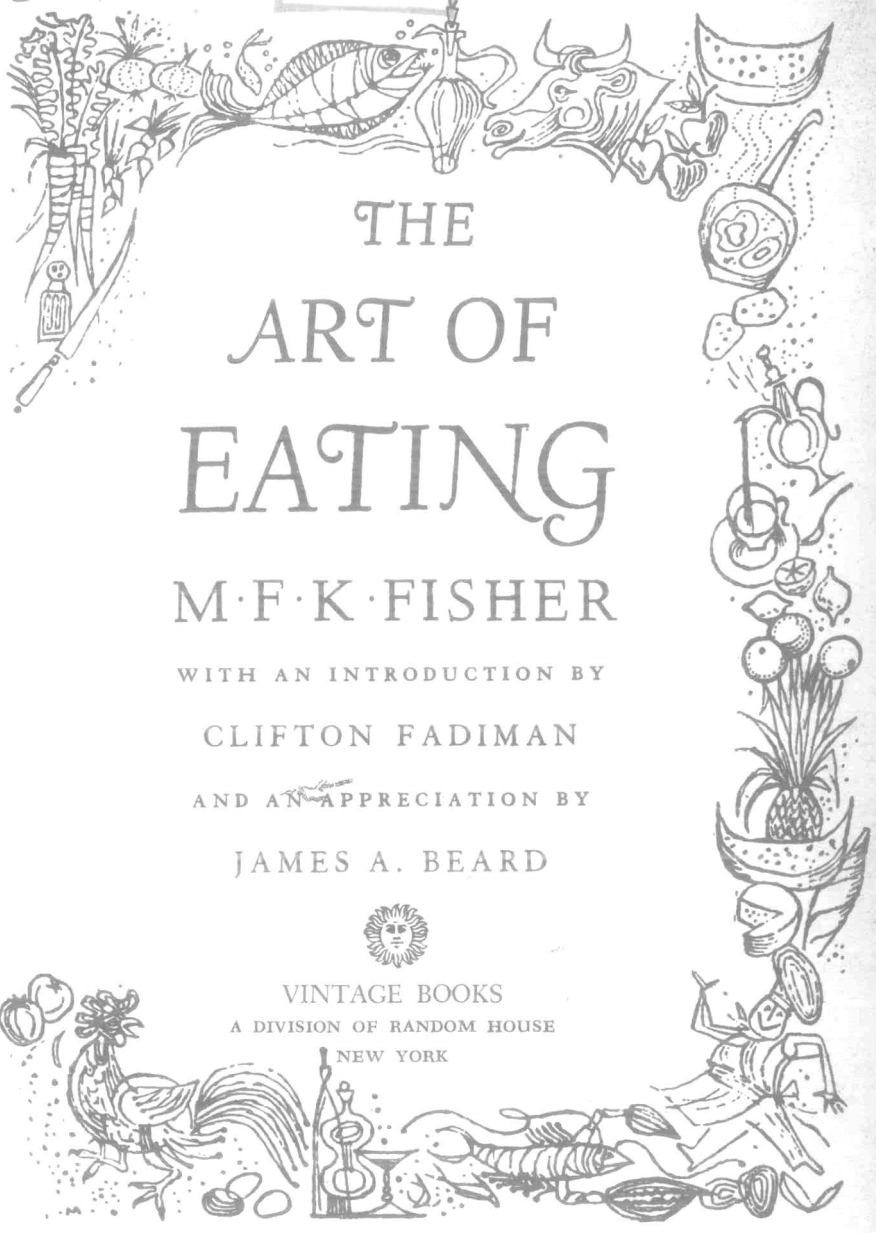
*An Alphabet for
Gourmets*



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THE
 ART OF
 EATING
 M·F·K·FISHER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
 CLIFTON FADIMAN
 AND AN APPRECIATION BY
 JAMES A. BEARD



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The Art of Eating

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FIVE GASTRONOMICAL WORKS

BY

M · F · K · FISHER

SERVE IT FORTH

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CONSIDER THE OYSTER

·
HOW TO COOK A WOLF

·
THE GASTRONOMICAL ME

·
AN ALPHABET FOR
GOURMETS

Decorations by Leo Manso

Introduction

LET Thackeray provide our text: "Next to eating good dinners, a healthy man with a benevolent turn of mind, must like, I think, to read about them." Amen.

I have been addicted to eating for half a century and to date show no sign of breaking the habit—or its kindred one of devouring food by courtesy of Gutenberg. I do not speak of recipe books, which are part of the literature of knowledge, but of those belonging to the literature of power, those that, linking brain to stomach, etherealize the euphoria of feeding with the finer essence of reflection. "He who does not mind his belly will hardly mind anything else." I will out-dogmatize Dr. Johnson: He minds his belly all the better who is learned in belly lore.

We Americans, however, do not as a rule take gladly to the literature of gastronomy. Perhaps a native puritanism is at fault. Though things are on the mend, we still plump ice cream into carbonic acid gas, rank steak and potatoes just below the Constitution, and contrive the cafeteria. How explain such things except as forms of self-punishment, stern reproofs to the rampant flesh? And, by the same token, to judge from its small audience, we must feel something vaguely licentious or censorable about the literature of food.

Indeed we will not even discuss it. In Anglo-Saxon countries, as Ford Madox Ford once remarked, food is no more talked of than love or Heaven. The tantrums of cloth-headed celluloid idols are deemed fit for grown-up conversation, while silence settles over such a truly important matter as food.

Now good eating itself is of course the nub of the matter. But good books about good eating have their own noble uses. While the most exquisitely balanced dinner can never be relived, a book may evoke its graceful ghost. I own a small volume called *Tables of Content* by the dean of oenophiles, André Simon. It merely records some

lunches and dinners he was lucky enough to get outside of during the late twenties and early thirties. But the menus, the names of the wines, the notes are enough to start glowing the second imagination that dwells in the palate.

A writer as good as Simon can set a table in your mind—but he must be good. Part of his goodness flows from the relation he bears to his subject, the relation of love and respect. Much of the literature of gusto is in fact well written. A man who is careful with his palate is not likely to be careless with his paragraphs. You will hurl Thoreau at me—Thoreau, who would as lief eat raw chipmunk. You will bring up Shaw, who lived on weeds, water and liver pills. But both these exceptions would have written even better had they collaborated with a good French cook. I am persuaded that poor Thoreau died at forty-five partly of malnutrition, and that Shaw would not have hurried off at the (for him) absurd age of ninety-four had he not progressively weakened himself with his lethal vegetarian messes.

A good book about food informs us of matters with which we are to be concerned all our lives. Sight and hearing lose their edge, the muscles soften, even the most gallant of our glands at last surrenders. But the palate may persist in glory almost to the very end. Indeed the greatest gourmets alive are elderly men and, less frequently, elderly women. Where is the tongue, the palate that is truly grown-up before thirty? The ability to enjoy eating, like the ability to enjoy any fine art, is not a matter of inborn talent alone, but of training, memory and comparison. Time works for the palate faithfully and fee-lessly.

Furthermore, the alimentary canal contains the only stream that flows through all history and geography, laving banks on which cluster those works that mark man at his most civilized.

Finally, gastronomical writing at its best is almost as much touched with the spirit as the bread and meat and wine with which it deals. There are no gross foods, only gross feeders; and by the same token even the homeliest prose about food, provided it be honest, can penetrate to the heart as do all words that deal with real things. A lordly dish of terrapin—or good bread and cheese—can be as uplifting as any landscape, and more so than many works of art at which we are bid to “Oh!” and “Ah!” I have yet to meet the man who, with a good *tournedos Rossini* inside him, was not the finer for it, the more open to virtuous influences. “Asparagus,” Charles Lamb says softly, “in-

spires gentle thoughts," and even to read about such things cannot fail to purify our spirits.

All such pleasures may be savored in this volume, the work of the most interesting philosopher of food now practising in our country. The term philosopher has been chosen after due thought. Writes Mrs. Fisher: "There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine is drunk. And that is my answer, when people ask me: Why do you write about hunger, and not wars or love." Anyone who can set down such a sentence is no recipe monger, no writer of magazine pieces exploiting gastronomy's *dernier cri*, no boring apostle of standardization's sleekest product, "gracious living." She is a philosopher, one who believes that "it is impossible to enjoy without thought," that "when we exist without thought or thanksgiving [for food] we are not men, but beasts."

Her subject is hunger. But only ostensibly so. Food is her paramount but not her obsessive concern. It is the release-catch that sets her mind working. It is the mirror in which she may reflect the show of existence. For, despite her denials, there is much in these five volumes about wars and love, much about death and joy and sorrow and indeed many of the major concerns of men and women. For all her awesome learning and authority, Mrs. Fisher writes not as a specialist, but as a whole human being, spiky with prejudices, charming, short-tempered, well-traveled and cosmopolitan, yet with her full share of intolerances. She is a person, not a gourmet masked as a writer. Her passion comes from inside her, and it is a passion, not an enthusiasm or a hobby.

Here then is a witty, well-furnished mind roving over the field of food, relating it to the larger human experience of which dining, while a miracle, is still but a part. Yet I would not have you think Mrs. Fisher always or only the philosopher. As the index to this book demonstrates, she is as practical as she is inspiring. She never loses sight of the fact that we struggle to gastronomy's altitudes only through the foothills of pots and pans and kitchen stoves and meats and vegetables and many tastings and humiliating failures.

So that if you are in quest of recipes only, here is a treasure trove; and if you seek for something beyond recipes, this is no less your book. It can be thrice blessed, this book, blessing him that keeps it for himself, him that gives, and him that takes. For what better gift can there be for anyone still in firm possession of a palate, whether

it be your weekend hostess, or the new-vintaged bride, or the matron of mellow years, or the popinjay bachelor who fancies himself a Prosper Montagné, or just anyone fit to savor a personality as candid and polychrome as Mrs. Fisher's?

Of the five volumes here reprinted in classic form the most downright useful is *How to Cook a Wolf*. Originally published in 1942, it was intended as a kind of culinary guide for bedeviled housewives suffering under the burden of wartime food shortages. It has lost little of its point. Indeed, accompanied by the notes and glosses that the author added in the 1951 edition, it becomes more useful than ever—even though I can hardly agree that a recipe for roast pigeon can be of much value to economy-minded households. But, if you are hay-poor, how inspiring to learn from Mrs. Fisher how to cook in a haybox; or, if you are plain poor, How To Be Cheerful Though Starving. Here too is the conclusive word on How To Boil An Egg.

Since Lewis Carroll no one had written charmingly about that indecisively sexed bivalve until Mrs. Fisher came along with her *Consider the Oyster*. Surely this will stand for some time as the most judicious treatment in English of a mollusc whose life career is matched in improbability only by our rash decision in the distant past to use it as a food.

An equally curious volume is *An Alphabet for Gourmets*. Of the recipes that act as tailpieces to these twenty-six miniature essays I am no great judge. The rest of the pert and pertinent matter, with its sly pokes at the fops and cultists of gastronomy, should divert anyone. I refer the reader particularly to several paragraphs on the complex relation between eating and making love. These include the details of a dinner warranted to satisfy one appetite while blunting another. The literature of venereal cookery, by the way, is vast, ancient and probably harmless. The only dependable aphrodisiacs, my worldly friends tell me, are not to be found in books. They are two in number, the first being the presence of a desirable woman, the second her absence.

Every man, it has been said, has in him an autobiographical novel. It has been even better said that in most cases it should be kept in him. However that may be, all of us surely house within ourselves another unwritten book. This would consist of an account of ourselves as eaters, recording the development of our palates, telling over like the beads of a rosary the memories of the best meals of our lives.

In *Serve It Forth* and *The Gastronomical Me* Mrs. Fisher has done just this, though the first-named also contains a good deal of purely historical information. In these strange volumes, sometimes funny, sometimes sorrowful, always full of the rich juices of keenly felt life, the kitchen, the dining room, the restaurant, the café, the transatlantic steamer, and the bedroom mingle in a flavorful *hochepot* of memories. Some of the stories are works of art—I shall leave it to the reader to make his own selection. Rereading these volumes after many years I found I had forgotten few details of the story of Papazi and the snails, or the account of the delights of eating tangerines à la radiator, or the anecdote about the last virgin woman truffle-hunter in France.

The number of writers on food who are both artists and honest men or women is limited. Among them must be placed M. F. K. Fisher, wise and witty spokesman for

“ . . . the race

Of those that for the Gusto stand.”

Of this race it is commonly agreed Brillat-Savarin stands at the head. It so happens that Mrs. Fisher has translated to perfection his great *Physiology of Taste*. This circumstance alone would entitle her to rank high among gastronomer-scholars. But her own original work gives her a claim to an even nobler eminence. Of all writers on food now using our English tongue she seems to me to approach most nearly, in range, depth, and perception, the altitude of Brillat-Savarin himself. And, with that said the treasury of praise is exhausted.

CLIFTON FADIMAN

March 8th, 1954

Appreciation

The first of M. F. K. Fisher's books to fall into my hands was *How to Cook a Wolf*, published during World War II. I was a cryptographer in the Army at that point, and I reveled in her brilliant approach to wartime economies for the table. (I later actually tried that life-saving recipe for "Sludge," so intent was I on fighting the wolf.) Like so many readers before me, I was hooked. I quickly searched out her earlier books, *Serve It Forth* and *Consider the Oyster*. Oddly enough, though we eventually moved in the same professional sphere, corresponded, talked by telephone long-distance, and shared a number of friends, it took twenty-five years more for us to meet. By then I had long since been a captive to her prose, her charm, and her taste for the better things of this planet.

On rereading *The Art of Eating*, which contains the core of her work, I find it amazing that so much of these five books has lingered in the mind and the feelings—not just witty and sensible passages about eating, but deeply personal thoughts and experiences that resound in one's own emotions. M. F. K. Fisher has the effect of sending the reader away with a desire to love better and live more fully.

Mrs. Fisher is a woman who has had many gifts bestowed on her—beauty, intelligence, heart, a capacity for the pleasures of the flesh, of which the art of eating is no small part, and the art of language as well. Though she can write with a silver attelot dipped in a sauce of Carême or Montagne, her palate goes beyond ortolans and rare vintages. She can also write about eating and drinking with a pure, primitive enjoyment. I think of that intoxicating description, in *Alphabet for Gourmets*, of a family meal in Switzerland, *al fresco*, highlighted by the ritual of eating peas fresh from the garden, cooked right on the spot. This celebration—it could be called nothing less—supports my thesis that good simple food, even rudimentary food, can give the same delight as the most elaborately prepared dishes.

M. F. K. Fisher has been a rarity in American gastronomy. This country has produced quantities of cookbook writers—all too many who write without personality or originality—but few writers in the great European tradition of Brillat-Savarin, Maurice des Ombiaux, or George Saintsbury. The first of American gastronomes to gain recognition was George Ellwanger, from my home state of Oregon. Ellwanger's initial book, published in 1898, was called *Meditations on Gout: With a consideration of its cure through the use of wine*. This was followed by the far more explicit and fascinating volume *The Pleasures of the Table*, first published in 1902 and now available in a facsimile edition. Ellwanger was an esthete who counted gastronomy among his favorite arts and who was ahead of his time in the appreciation of good eating and fine wines. He was succeeded by a few others, such as Theodore Child and Percival Z. Didsbury, who wrote briefly on those subjects, but the field was empty for many years until the advent of M. F. K. Fisher.

For an art as transitory as gastronomy there can be no record except for a keen taste memory and the printed word. *The Art of Eating* reminds me again that in M. F. K. Fisher memory and word are joined incomparably. She writes about fleeting tastes and feasts vividly, excitingly, sensuously, exquisitely. There is almost a wicked thrill in following her uninhibited track through the glories of the good life. What pleasure awaits the reader who has not known the five volumes that make up *The Art of Eating*. And for those of us who have already known and loved the work of M. F. K. Fisher, the perpetuation of this great omnibus brings back old delights and comforts.

JAMES A. BEARD

About the Author

After attending a variety of schools in California and Illinois, M. F. K. Fisher spent three years in France at the University of Dijon. Her first book, *Serve It Forth*, was published in 1937 and established her as a gastronomer and writer of note, a reputation reinforced by her subsequent writings—among them Time-Life's *The Cooking of Provincial France*, *Among Friends* and a brilliant translation of Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste*.

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