



Everybody with a mouth has a recipe book. Folk whose lives are unencumbered by bookshelves and who never read will have Nigella, Jamie and Delia in the kitchen. Cookbooks have become secular family bibles.

The least interesting thing about food is the recipe. So why is it that good writing about food is so rare? The literary canon about the nature, history, pleasure, ethics and anecdotal of the table is slimmer than most cooks. There is probably more good writing about cricket than there is about dinner. Not that food doesn't appear in good writing, from Dickens in *A Christmas Carol* to Ratty's ecstatic picnic.

Meals and food are the great set pieces of literature, and ingredients and dishes its metaphors and similes. What makes food writing in English so difficult is that we have so few words to describe the stuff. The English have never been comfortable being postprandially lyrical. Since the Norman Conquest, we think it a fey, foreign, French-ish affectation.

So when the bookshop Heywood Hill asked me to recommend 10 food books for their writing, to read for erudition and pleasure, without having to wear an apron, I had to think quite hard. Except for the very best, it was as obvious as a pineapple in a fruit bowl. **MFK Fisher** is the greatest observer and greedy, obsessive, amusing food writer ever. After her, it got more contentious.

Brillat-Savarin couldn't be left out, with his evocative, exiled remembrance of a lost home and its overturned table; **Claudia Roden** on Jewish food; **Dorothy Hartley** and **F Marian McNeill**, a historian and folklorist from the mid-20th century, anthropologically recording the kitchens of England and Scotland. And **Anthony Bourdain's** *Kitchen Confidential* is the best insight into professional cooking. There's **Katharine Whitehorn's** funny, sensible and timely *Cooking in a Bedsitter*; **Alan Davidson's** *North Atlantic Seafood*; **Harold McGee's** *On Food and Cooking*; and **Elisabeth Luard's** *Family Life*.

What was also surprising were the books you might have thought were shoo-ins, but on rereading seemed far less agreeable and interesting than I remembered them: Elizabeth David, now too dated and arch and overtaken by events and ingredients; Mrs Beeton — I was reminded of quite how awful she always had been; and that great bible of French cookery, Larousse, now pontificates over a defunct menu. There is no pleasure in flicking through it, just a gloomy reminiscence.

Although English food writing has lagged behind English food making, today it is more vibrant, eloquent, informed and eccentric than it has ever been. The food sections of most magazines and papers are a great deal better written than the sports or even the political sections. In 10 years, should they ask me again, I expect it will be equally as hard, because, by then, there will be too much choice. ■

A Bird in the Hand: Chicken Recipes for Every Day and Every Mood

by *Diana Henry*
Mitchell Beazley £20

"Surely a chicken's a chicken?" said a friend when discussing Henry's latest book, a collection of recipes for cooking Britain's favourite fowl. For those who thought that cooking chicken stopped with a roast, there's even more reason to delve into her world of schnitzel and saltimbocca, pies and pho. Her fresh thinking will leave even the most ardent traditionalist keen to branch out and try the roast chicken with peaches, honey and lavender, or with morcilla (Spanish black pudding) and sherry.

A Modern Way to Cook by Anna Jones **Fourth Estate £25**

Jones's approach is the antithesis to the age-old reliance on meat and veg. Instead, she cleverly integrates barley and lentils, nuts and spices into flavour-filled vegetarian dishes. In this sequel to *A Modern Way to Eat*, chapters have been split into 15-, 20- and 30-minute recipes that are nutritious and achievable (the 15-minute one-pot spaghetti is a revelation). There are also sections aimed at slower-cooked dishes that sing the praises of a good vegetable stock or a vat of soup. Best for healthy and tasty eating, without any preaching.

Everyday Super Food by Jamie Oliver **Michael Joseph £26**

This year, superfoods went mainstream, thanks largely to this book. While there is a touch of the chia and alfalfa to some of the recipes, Oliver's key ingredients include the more accessible courgette and sweet potato. On average, the recipes hover around the £2.50-per-portion mark, addressing the gap between healthy and affordable. As ever, the meals are cleverly conceived and delicious. Personal favourites are the vegeree not kedgereee and the skinny carbonara, which uses frozen peas for a pesto in a store-cupboard-friendly twist on a classic.

The Nordic Cookbook by Magnus Nilsson **Phaidon £29.95**

A huge book, interspersed with helpful asides that make you feel as if you've been invited into the home of the Swedish chef to soak up kitchen secrets usually whispered down generations. It sets out to chronicle day-to-day Scandi cookery in all its glory, with the 730 recipes flitting from traditional meatballs to flygande jakob — a chilli creamed chicken and banana casserole. There is also plenty of inspiration for home cooks interested in cold smoking or cheese-making, as

well as anyone who sees the beauty in a simple stew or bowl of creamed potatoes with dill.

Five Quarters: Recipes and Notes from a Kitchen in Rome by *Rachel Roddy* **Saltyard Books £25**

Five Quarters stands out as particularly considered and evocative. Roddy writes from her studio in Rome, and peppers the hearty Italian recipes with tales from the city and the colourful characters she meets. Knowledge picked up along the way is imparted in useful passages filled with tips, such as using the water that you cook beans in ("the cloudy, dubious-looking liquid that could be thin wallpaper paste") as the base for a soup. Impeccably researched and transportive, it's a proper read, rather than a quick flick.

Mamushka by *Olia Hercules* **Mitchell Beazley £25**

As someone with Eastern European heritage, I could be accused of bias, but this is a game-changer of a book. In tribute to her native Ukraine, Hercules gives our preconceptions of the region's culinary tradition a much-needed overhaul, with vibrant dishes that are laced with fresh dill, parsley and sorrel. She acknowledges traditional ingredients such as mutton, cabbage and catfish, and provides hands-on guides to pickling gherkins and making dumplings, creating food that is both authentic and delicious.

30 Ingredients by *Sally Clarke* **Frances Lincoln £25**

It takes knowledge and expertise to get the most out of an ingredient, which is where Clarke's decades of experience come in handy. The book marks the 30th anniversary of her eponymous west London restaurant, and covers as many ingredients. She provides tips on best practice — never wash a cep or half-bake an apricot — as well as "root to shoot"-style dishes, such as apricot kernel and fig-leaf ice cream. Recipes are seasonal and exciting, with clear instructions and helpful images.

The Seahorse: The Restaurant and Its Recipes by *Mitch Tonks and Mat Prowse* **Absolute Press £25**

It has taken the Seahorse seven years to release a cookbook. In that time, the Dartmouth restaurant has become a classic, and the Italian-inspired seafood and offal-heavy recipes in this book will help conjure up the excitement of a visit there. It will particularly appeal to serious foodies who don't shrink from a 60-garlic-clove bagna cauda, and who might swoon at the thought of clams with braised pig's trotters. ■

Tuck into a good read

Rachel Walker
chooses this year's
best cookbooks
to savour, plus
AA Gill on the
joy of good
food writing

