



# Simple Cooking

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FOOD BOOK REVIEWS

FIVE DOLLARS

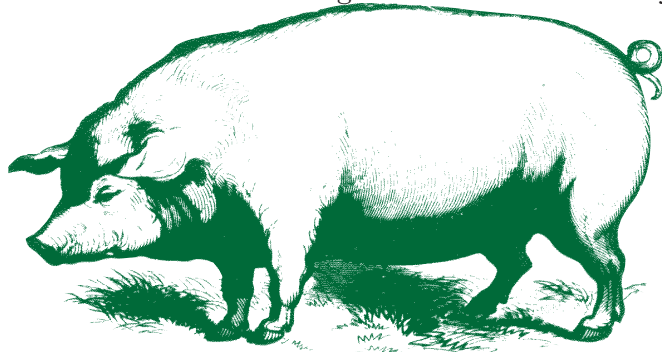
## Short-Listed

**The Whole Beast: Nose to Tail Eating, Fergus Henderson (Ecco, \$19.95, 202 pp.).** A mighty gust of hype swirls around Fergus Henderson and his London restaurant St. John, fanned vigorously by Anthony Bourdain in his introduction to the American edition of **The Whole Beast**. If, somehow, this has blown past you, St. John opened in 1994 at the site of a former smokehouse near Smithfield meat market. This is quite appropriate, since the cooking is resolutely and brilliantly devoted to the further reaches of carnivorous pleasure, particularly the usually avoided parts of familiar beasts, with a minor emphasis on game. An offal lover myself, I sought the book out for this very reason, but suspiciously. If Ferguson was so continually hailed as a chef's chef, I reasoned, it was more than possible that the home cook would find the door to his recipes politely but firmly shut in his face.

To a slight degree, this turns out to be true. A lot of the featured ingredients in this book—lamb's brains, pig's spleen, duck's necks, fresh snails—are only available to chefs, and then only to those with a really good network of suppliers. But that, fortunately, is somewhat beside the point. Henderson is one of those chefs who takes meticulously chosen ingredients and, by preparing them with inspiring simplicity, allows them—not him—to be the stars of the show.

For example, the first recipe that made me stop in my tracks as I leafed through his book was for leek, potato, and oyster soup, in which the last of the three, freshly shucked and with their juices included, are added to a purée of the first two that has been thinned with fish stock. I've always found the classic American oyster stew, essentially oysters swimming in cream, a rich but ultimately wimpy disappointment. By replacing the cream with that subtle but flavor-expanding vegetable purée, I have a vision of an oyster stew that might actually spring to life in the mouth.

Henderson's cooking is rich with such chefly



## Loose Canon

**A** MERICAN COOKING, as it is now at the turn of the 21st century, answers a question that most of us never thought to ask: How can millions of people, most of them strangers to each other, products of different social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, manage to create what we might call a shared culinary commons—a place where we can all sit down and find something good to eat.

There's no doubt that we've done this. Get in your car and drive one, two, three, four hundred miles in any direction, and you'll come across a grocery store where you'll have no problem filling your shopping cart or a restaurant offering dishes that, if not exactly familiar, are hardly strange.

This, if you stop and think about it, is a rather amazing state of affairs. Even if readers of this publication, who have at least that much culinarily in common, were extensively polled, the result would, I suspect, uncover no more than a handful of dishes we prepare in more or less similar ways. This isn't because we're so different, each from the other, but because we have so many choices—and because so many conflicting forces (and impulses) propel us in contrary directions.

Elsewhere in the world, a country's signature dishes are emblematic of the best of the cuisine: France's pot-au-feu, Greece's moussaka, Mexico's mole poblano. But in America, the reality is that the more a dish is commonly shared the more likely it is to be the choice of those who can't do better... and so regularly dine on Campbell's chicken noodle soup, Kraft macaroni and cheese, Dinty Moore beef stew, Table Talk blueberry pie.

The way shared taste works in America is more complicated than in more traditional societies, and it gets more so with each passing year. Take music, for example. In the last decade or so, I've become oblivious to whatever the top ten hits of the moment are, or even if there still is such a thing. I have more satisfying ways of finding music. Because of that, the likelihood of my meeting someone who has more than a couple of the same CDs I own is highly unlikely. In fact, if I know anyone who has the same CDs as I, chances are I gave them to him, or he gave them to me—or that this is a "hot" CD that somehow managed to connect with us both, the latest from Bob Dylan, Bonnie Raitt, or the Boss.

Of course, the idiosyncratic cooking in this household, where tamales are sometimes served at breakfast and scrambled eggs and zucchini on pasta eaten for sup-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

virtues (imagination, thorough knowledge of his ingredients, generosity in the sharing of *trucs*), without any of the attendant vices—except, perhaps, an occasional heavy hand with the butter, the restaurateur’s Love Potion Number 9. Those interested in dishes using the more accessible odd animal parts will find much here to enchant them: the famous roast bone marrow with parsley salad; crispy pig’s tails; and gratin of tripe. Those who are not offal fans will be drawn to such fare as the salted duck legs, green beans, and cornmeal dumplings; smoked eel, bacon, and mashed potatoes; the roasted “conserve” of beets to serve with cold tongue.

That last recipe points to another strength of his book. Henderson embraces humble vegetables with the same intensity that he does variety meats. You have to love a guy who is willing to spend a couple of days reducing a pound of celeriac down to homemade celery salt to use as a dip for boiled eggs. There are homey recipes for “mushy” zucchini, roast pumpkin, pan-fried radishes (leaves included), and turnip bake. Indeed, “homey” is another good word to describe Henderson’s cooking, since British comfort food is also a leitmotif here, with recipes for “hairy tatties,” giblet stew, kedgeree, deviled crab, a very nice Welsh rarebit, and soft roes on toast.

There’s more worth noting—the chocolate ice cream “in progress,” the headcheese made from scratch (take one pig’s head)—but I think I’ve made the point: you don’t have to be an offal hound to seek out this book. Henderson is an amiable and unaffected presence in these pages, soft-spoken, economical of phrase, and larding his seriousness with little jokes and outbursts of enthusiasm (“The joy of finding a giving nodule of trotter in a dish!”). I felt a genuine pang when I learned he has Parkinson’s disease, which has forced him to give up cooking for a mostly supervisory role. It’s a cruel twist of fate to be inflicted on such a fine, subtle, and imaginative chef.

## Roast Bone Marrow with Parsley Salad

[SERVES 4]

1 dozen 3-inch pieces of veal marrowbone  
a healthy bunch of flat-leaf parsley, stemmed

2 shallots, peeled and very thinly sliced

1 modest handful of capers (extra-fine if possible)

### dressing

juice of 1 lemon • extra-virgin olive oil

a pinch of sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

### to serve

a good supply of toast • coarse sea salt

• Put the marrowbone pieces in an ovenproof frying pan and place in a hot 450°F oven. The roasting process should take about 20 minutes, depending on the thickness of the bone. You are looking for the marrow to be loose and giving, but not melted away, which it will do if left too long (traditionally the ends would be covered to prevent any seepage, but I like the coloring and crispness at the ends).

• Meanwhile lightly chop your parsley, just enough to discipline it, mix it with the shallots and capers, and at the last moment, dress the salad.

• Here is a dish that should not be completely seasoned before leaving the kitchen, rendering a last-minute seasoning unnecessary by the actual eater; this, especially in the case of coarse sea salt, gives texture and uplift at the moment of eating. My approach is to scrape the marrow from the bone onto the toast and season with coarse sea salt. Then a pinch of parsley salad on top of this and eat. Of course once you have your pile of bones, salad, toast, and salt it is diner’s choice.

# 剥肴司井

**The Eater’s Guide To Chinese Characters, James B. McCawley (Univ. of Chicago, \$15.00, 248 pp.).**

This book was originally published in 1984, and by the time I learned about it I had moved to Maine, which is too bad. It would have added another dimension to my exploration of Boston’s Chinatown restaurants...if I turned out to possess the nerve and the self-discipline to put it to good use. The purpose of the book is to help us decipher Chinese culinary ideograms, so that, ideally, the adventurous diner can then order what the Chinese do and not what the English part of the menu foists onto clueless *gwaito*. This includes those tantalizing specials printed on colored strips of paper pasted to the wall that the waiter politely but firmly refuses to translate.

McCawley, a professor of both linguistics and East Asian languages, has divided a selected number of ideograms into those that the innocent eye can parse as being constructed horizontally, vertically, as enclosures, or—naturally, the large category—none of these (see the illustration above). Each category has its own single-page chart with each ideogram linked to the page that explains it. I tested this against the takeout menu of a local restaurant and was able, after about fifteen minutes of assiduous consultation, to decode the four ideograms beside “House Special Sizzling” as meaning “Three Fresh Crispy Rice.”

At this point, had I been sitting in a busy Chinese restaurant, a waiter hovering at my side, I would have chucked the book across the room and ordered the Luncheon Special #4. However, I’d also have sheepishly retrieved it later: McCawley would be the first to tell you that there’s no easy route to comprehending written Chinese. His solution is practice, practice, practice, and, worse, memorize, memorize, memorize. The tables I was blithely don’t consulting actually appear until halfway through the book, and you’re not supposed to start using *them* until you’ve absorbed at least some of the extensive information on Chinese characters, Chinese menus, and Chinese eating habits that precede them (along with, believe it or not, several spot quizzes). If you frequent Chinese restaurants that serve a mostly Chinese clientele, you’ll enjoy wrestling with this book. If you’re planning a trip to mainland China, don’t leave home without it.

**A Taste of Cuba, Beatriz Llamas (Interlink, \$26.95, 139 pp.).**

As a general rule, cookbooks published in English about Cuban cooking are written by exiles. These can be quite fine—Mary Urrutia Randelman’s **MEMORIES OF A CUBAN KITCHEN**, Maria Josefa O’Higgins’s **A TASTE OF OLD CUBA**—but, even so, there is something penumbral about them, the melancholic sense of a world forever lost...as, indeed, it probably is. The author of this book, however, currently lives in Havana and—abetted by the vibrant illustrations of street scenes and everyday Cuban life by Ximena Maier—gives us a lively portrait of Cuban cooking, as it is done on that island right now. (In fact, it was written in Spanish and translated into English—not always with the deftest of touches—by Claudia Lightfoot.\*

\*Lightfoot seems to be (a) British and (b) lacking some kitchen experience. She confuses corncobs with fresh ears of corn and calls unhelpfully for just “squash” in a recipe for squash pudding (what *kind* of squash, please?). But the recipe I’m still rolling around in my head is the one for “shrimp breasts,” which are extracted from the heads of jumbo shrimp. From the photo, I would say they *are*

This leads to an attractive assortment of recipes that range from everyday home cooking to street food, restaurant fare, and even some historic and regional dishes. Cuban cuisine is an effervescent amalgam of influences, some faint—the original indigenous population; Chinese, from workers brought there in the 1800s; French, from plantation owners who fled there from the the slave revolts in Haiti—and others signal—namely Spanish and African. (I also wonder about the impact of America, our culture having made such inroads there, from the Spanish-American War to the advent of Castro. But it's something Llamas doesn't mention.)

From the perspective of method, Cuban cooking is readily accessible, with many flavorful soups and stews, rice dishes, and fried foods. Difficulty with ingredients provides only occasional roadblocks (Creole-style roast leg of pork and chicken "Rancho Luna" are but two of the dishes that will make you yearn for an easy supply of sour oranges).† Among the entirely makeable dishes that caught my eye were green plantain soup, avocado and shrimp salad, fresh tuna escabeche, red snapper with capers, *conгри* rice (rice and black beans), and some fascinating desserts, including *boniatillo*, a creamy purée of sweet potatoes, egg yolks, Muscatel, vintage rum, and lime syrup; papaya fritters with banana sauce, and an intriguingly simple sweet corn pudding. Each recipe has a preface, many of which give us a quick glimpse into Cuban life, as in this one that introduces the recipe for cabbage stew.

Nowadays, no self-respecting Cuban will leave home without carrying the indispensable "just in case" *jaba* in their bag. The *jaba* is just a bag with handles, often a plastic supermarket one, and I believe the word *jaba* comes from the English "handbag." This item, simple to acquire and highly valued in Cuba, is essential to the daily search for food. For example, if you are walking down the street and see a passer-by selling cheap cabbages or the first mangoes of the season, you have your *jaba* at the ready to take them home. Equally, if there is food left over at a restaurant meal or event, you can quickly gather it into your *jaba* for the following day.

In short, this is an excellent introduction to one of the Caribbean's most vivacious cuisines.

## Avocado & Shrimp Salad

[SERVES 4]

- 1 pound jumbo shrimp, heads removed
- 3 Hass avocados, peeled and pitted
- 2 tablespoons lime juice
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped onion
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh cilantro

•Cook the shrimp in salted, boiling water for 3 to 4 minutes. Drain, let cool, and peel, removing and discarding the black dorsal thread.

• Cut the avocado into thick pieces. Put these into a salad bowl and mix with the lime juice, the salt, and a tablespoon of oil. Dress the shrimp with the rest of the oil and the chopped onion. Add to the avocado and mix carefully. Sprinkle with the cilantro and serve.

those heads, peeled of their exterior carapace and deep-fried.

†Interestingly, most of the beef recipes here call for *tasajo*, or dry-cured beef (imagine a one-pound piece of jerky), a legacy from the days before refrigeration (the way a taste for corned beef lingers on in New England), and now imported from places like Uruguay.

**The American History Cookbook, Mark Zanger (Greenwood, \$32.95, 482 pp.).** This absorbing cookbook—as-school-text delves deeply into American history and unearths all manner of recipes from original sources, recasting them in a carefully spelled out, easy to follow format and aptly placing them in their historical context. The emphasis here is on the cooking of ordinary Americans—be it in lonely homesteads, Civil War camps, school lunchrooms, or at the Women's Exchange. Zanger connects particular dishes to all kinds of popular movements—the Abolitionists, the labor unions, the health food faddists. You'll find recipes for election cakes, Victorian health food, and dishes whipped up in windjammer galleys. The book is directed to school-age children and their teachers, but it will prove educative to any of us, and it makes a perfect companion to the author's excellent **AMERICAN ETHNIC COOKBOOK FOR STUDENTS**, reviewed in SC•79.



**Zingerman's Guide to Good Eating, Ari Weinzweig (Houghton Mifflin, \$19.95, 483 pp.).** Good things—how they've evolved in the decades since I became an interested eater. When I was in my twenties, a wedge of brie was an event to be celebrated; a tin of pure Sicilian olive oil something to covet; a can of 100% Colombian coffee the connoisseur's choice. Gourmet stores had an aura of pathos about them, unplaceable at the time. In retrospect, I can see that this was because almost everything they sold gained its cachet from being from somewhere else, not from being good. What transformed this was a new breed of entrepreneurial adventurer, like the wine merchant Kermit Lynch, who went to Europe, visited the wine producers, made his own selections, and did the importing himself.\* When food emporiums began to do the same, we discovered a world of food with three dimensions instead of two...and everything changed.

However, one of commercialism's most important laws is that if something is truly good, a way must be found to spoil it. If before the culinary revolution there were few choices, now, in its aftermath, there are a mind-boggling number, many of them bogus. Our local supermarket has at least a dozen brands of balsamic vinegar, sold at different prices in increasingly fancy bottles. But are any of them any good? The same store offers "artisanal" bread from three famous but very distant bakeries. The bags of one of these proclaims its bread to be "brick-oven baked." Is it? Not in the supermarket's steel-rack ovens. No doubt, there's an answer to this question...but it isn't in my heart to find out what it is.

All this diminishment has a perverse effect that—for lack of a better word—I'll call *seepage*. When lesser products attempt to wrap themselves in the lustre of authentic artisanal foods and ethnic dishes, they actually leech meaning from the originals—the way a striking movie can, after inspiring a host of imitators, become all but unwatchable itself. Indeed, there are certain trendy terms—panini, chai, mesclun—that have all but destroyed the true meaning of those words.

\* Ten Speed Press has recently issued a notably handsome collection of Lynch's original wine mailings, under the title **INSPIRING THIRST** (2004, \$40, 400 pp.). It's hard to imagine another wine importer whose catalogue notes (for that's essentially what these are) would deserve reprinting a quarter century after they were written. Lynch's are. Oenophiles alone will be interested in the tasting notes, but anyone interested in wine—and the often eccentric winemakers who produce the good stuff, sometimes, it seems, by sheer tenacious willpower—will happily accompany Lynch on his travels to practically every corner of France. The photographs by his wife, Gail Skoff, reproduced in these pages with great fidelity, are themselves worth the price of the book.



Ari Weinzwieg is one of the rare food purveyors who follow in the footsteps of Kermit Lynch and Giorgio DeLuca of the original Dean & DeLuca, among very few others—which is to say someone who doesn't just browse the importers' catalogues but goes to the artisans themselves, to taste, see, and learn. This is what makes his guide heartening as well as valuable. Weinzwieg not only guides you to specific producers of some of the world's best extra-virgin olive oils, vinegars, cheeses, honeys, sea salt, cured meats, and so on, but, just as importantly, lays out, in articulate detail, the essential aspects that separate the real thing from the approximate (or the outright fake).

Weinzwieg will remind you again of the time when you first tasted, say, English farmhouse Cheddar and found an all-too-familiar cheese suddenly imbued with magnificence. Indeed, his prose sparkles when he shares his excitement at encountering something especially good—be it polenta from the Marino mill in Piedmont, L'Etivaz cheese from Switzerland, or saffron growing in fields outside the town of Madrideojos in Spain. He can also be quite amusing, as here, where he is learning to slice authentic Jamón Serrano:

[A]nother American in our group suggested I try to trim away more of the white fat from my small slice. A Spaniard nearby stared at my friend with a look between horror and disgust.

"What's the matter?" I inquired.

"If I am buying jamón from you, and you take away all this fat," he said, eyeing the knife I had in hand, "I will have to kill you."

No book like this can be complete, and ZINGERMAN'S GUIDE TO GOOD EATING is, in truth, mostly a catalogue of Weinzwieg's own enthusiasms (enhanced with 130 carefully chosen recipes). Where his interest is strictly limited, as it is with green tea, the information he provides is little better than perfunctory. However, when it is totally engaged, as it is with everything from artisanal bread to Italian and Spanish rices to vanilla beans, he will sweep you right along with him to a deeper, happier understanding of what you eat.

## Linguine with Arugula and Hot Pepper

*This is the kind of fast food I like to eat. You can make the entire recipe, start to finish, in 15 minutes and have time to make a salad while it's cooking. Use more or less olive oil, as you wish. The more—and better—the oil, the better the pasta will taste.*

[SERVES 4]

Coarse sea salt to taste

1 pound top-quality linguine

1/4 cup full-flavored extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for serving

4 garlic cloves, peeled and halved

1 small onion, coarsely chopped [about 3/4 cup]

Hot red pepper flakes to taste, plus more for serving

1 pound fresh young arugula leaves, any large stems removed (if the leaves are large, tear them in half)

1 tablespoon pine nuts, lightly toasted (see note)

1 cup freshly grated Pecorino Romano, plus more for serving

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

- Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add 1 to 2 tablespoons salt to the pasta, stir well, and cook until the pasta is almost al dente.

- Meanwhile, make the sauce. In another large pot, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the garlic and sauté for 1 to 2 minutes, until softened. Add the onion and sauté for 3 to 4 minutes, or until soft. Add the pepper flakes and sauté for 1 to 2 minutes more. Discard the garlic.

- Drain the pasta. Add the arugula leaves and pine nuts to the onion mixture and toss quickly so that the arugula wilts slightly. Add the drained pasta to the arugula mixture, then the grated cheese. Toss well.

- Serve in warm bowls, finished with an additional ribbon of olive oil on top. Pass extra pepper flakes, grated Pecorino Romano, and salt and pepper at the table.

☛ **COOK'S NOTE: Toasting pine nuts.** Cook the nuts in a hot (not smoky), dry skillet over medium heat for 2 to 3 minutes, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned.



## La Cocina de Mamá: The Great Home Cooking of Spain, Penelope Casas (Broadway, \$29.95, 308 pp.).

Since my eyes glaze over whenever I encounter any reporting on the hot new chefs of Spain and their amazing creations, it would be tempting to proclaim this book as a welcome antidote to their carryings on—a return to the “real” Spain and that country's filling, humble home cooking. Tempting, but also totally wrong. Those chefs are right here in this pages, each of them claiming that, when it comes to cooking, their *mamá* can kick your *mamá's* butt. So can their *granmamá*... and, now and then, even their *papá*, as well.

For the past twenty years, Penelope Casas and her husband, Luis, have taken Americans on culinary tours through Spain, eating at both gastronomic temples and (much more often) humble mom-and-pop places. One of the latter she and Luis discovered after making a detour into the mountainous province of León to visit a 17th-century iron forge. They emerged well past lunchtime and are wondering where in this deserted place they could find something to eat. Finally, in a tiny village with unpaved streets and slate-roofed houses overflowing with flowers, they discovered a bar, open and willing to feed them.

The bar, Bodegón, is heaven sent, and we happily feast on simple village fare—potato omelet, garden-fresh salad, crusty country bread, and homemade chorizo and lamb chops, both grilled over an open fire—a most perfect meal. We finish with a magnificent homemade apple yogurt cake. We quickly become fast friends with owners José María, his wife, María, and sister Cándida. Their mother, father, and nonagenarian grandfather, who has just returned from tending the fields, join us.

It was from people such as these that Casas sought the recipes found in these pages. And, if you think about it, you'll see what an inspired notion this was. Restaurateurs—and the chefs who cook for them—often come from families where good cooking was treasured, and they are able to remember their mothers' best dishes and to clearly describe what made them special. Casas not only gets the recipe but recounts what it was that made her want to do so. Every one has its own story, its own cast of characters, its own intaglio of a remembered past.

This is often hearty fare, with dishes like Carmen Pastor's meatball and artichoke soup; Antonia Rollón's stewed potatoes with pork ribs; Ramón's mother's rice with shrimp and chorizo; or Aurora Sánchez's pasta, rabbit, and green bean stew. But there is more refined food as well: Francisca's hake in clam and garlic sauce or Felix Durán's rack of lamb stuffed with mushrooms and scallions. And there are salads (red pepper, tomato, and tuna), vegetable dishes (sherry-infused baked sliced potatoes), and, naturally, tapas (Mamá Pepa's garlic shrimp) and desserts (Carmen's orange cake, Grandma's

soft custard with walnuts and cornmeal fritters).

Despite the fact that the recipes in this book come from so many sources, **LA COCINA DE MAMÁ** is not an overview of Spanish cooking—something thoroughly and estimably covered by this author in **THE FOODS AND WINES OF SPAIN** (Knopf, 1982) and **DELICIOSO! THE REGIONAL COOKING OF SPAIN** (Knopf, 1986). Here, she offers us the chance of a moment's intimate contact with some very gifted Spanish cooks, lets us look over their shoulders as they work, and, best of all, gives us the opportunity to sit down and sample for ourselves some of the finest home cooking in Spain.

## Fernando's Sherry-Infused Potatoes

*The seafood that day in May when I was in Restaurante Bigote in Sanlúcar de Barrameda with a group of American gourmets in tow, was as glorious as ever, but what really captivated everyone were Fernando's potatoes. They seemed simple and straightforward enough, but there was something extraordinary about them that eluded us. I should have known; the subtle flavor was none other than manzanilla, the bone-dry sherry made in this town, and the magic ingredient in so much local cooking.*

[SERVES 4]

3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> tablespoons olive oil

1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> pounds peeled white potatoes, cut into 1/<sub>8</sub>-inch slices

Kosher or sea salt • black pepper

2 bay leaves, halved • 1/4 medium-large onion, slivered

3 tablespoons manzanilla or dry fino sherry

2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

• Preheat the oven to 300°F. Coat an 8 x 12-inch roasting pan, preferably nonstick or Pyrex, with 1/2 tablespoon of the olive oil. Add half the potatoes in a slightly overlapping layer and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Scatter the bay leaves and onion over the potatoes and layer over the rest of the potatoes, sprinkling again with salt and pepper. Spoon the last 3 tablespoons of oil over the potatoes. Place in the oven and bake for 30 minutes. Turn the potatoes, cover lightly with foil, and cook for about 20 minutes more, until the potatoes are almost tender.

• Turn up the oven temperature to 450°F. Sprinkle the sherry over the potatoes, cover again with the foil, and continue baking until it is absorbed and the potatoes tender, about 10 minutes. Sprinkle with parsley and serve.



**The Breath of a Wok, Grace Young and Alan Richardson (Simon & Schuster, \$35, 240 pp.).** This in-depth look at the Big Kahuna of the Chinese kitchen proved to be one of the most engrossing Chinese cookbooks to fall into my hands since Fuchsia Dunlop's **SICHUAN COOKERY** (published in the USA as **LAND OF PLENTY**—see my review in SC•79). Here, again, the introductory material is substantial and unusually rich in detail. But this time it is prodigiously enhanced by often breathtaking photographs by the book's co-author, Alan Richardson, who accompanied Grace Young on her excursions to mainland China. There, woks are still being made by hand and exhibit regional differences. We learn about these and also why some chefs prefer the older, more fragile cast-iron woks to those made of rolled steel.\*

\* Anyone who sees the delicately variegated surface of a traditional hand-hammered, rolled-steel wok won't rest until they get hold of one. A place to do just that is The Wok Shop—718 Grant Ave., San Francisco CA 94108 • (415) 989-3797 • [WWW.THEWOKSHOP.COM](http://WWW.THEWOKSHOP.COM)—which offers three sizes of hand-hammered woks, starting at \$9.95.

Following this is a section full of top-notch advice on, first, “acquiring a virtuous wok,” then on seasoning and generally caring for it. I was particularly impressed by the chapter discussing how various Chinese cooks season their woks—an act that often incorporates a bunch of Chinese chives (which are larger and more strongly flavored than plain ones). Young never quite puts her finger on why, exactly, this is done. Explanations range from the practical or the spiritual to the helpless shrug. I lean toward the notion that the chives give the surface a gentle but thorough scrub, while releasing chemical compounds that overcome and perhaps even extirpate any lingering metallic taste from the foundry.

Besides the introductory material (and an end-of-the-book glossary of Chinese foodstuffs), Young scatters several essays, some evocative, some informative, through the book—“Reverence for a Wok,” “The Wok Warriors,” “The Master Lesson,” “The Wok as a Musical Instrument” (a description of the complex rhythms a Chinese chef produces while working his wok over high heat). However, the most important of these is “Wok Hay: The Breath of a Wok,” which explores the special flavor—some would say presence—that graces dishes prepared in a masterfully utilized wok. I wish I'd had it to consult when I wrote the essay about wok cooking in SC•85. Not that I got my facts wrong, but Young is an old hand at conjuring it up. The two or so pages of explanation and useful tips, both by her and several other chefs, are enough to make this book a necessary acquisition for anyone attempting authentic Chinese cooking.

The larger part of the book, naturally, contains a thoughtful collection of recipes, gathered from a wide assortment of Chinese cooks. Some are chefs, others cook at home. And while there are familiar dishes among them, most are new, certainly to me. Some of these are unbelievably simple (Florence Lin's slow-stir-fried red peppers, Liang Nian Xiu's Moon Hill corn and green beans, Lee Wan Ching's sizzling pepper and salt shrimp); a few require one, even two pages of directions (Susanna Foo's mango chicken, Amy Tan's family's *Jiao-zi*). Most, of course, fall somewhere in-between, and they touch practically every base in Chinese cooking.

This is no accident. Young believes that “the wok is the only pan ideally suited for stir-frying, pan-frying, braising, poaching, boiling, deep-frying, steaming, smoking foods, and even cooking rice”—and has selected the recipes in part to support this claim. The brave soul who is willing to use a wok for deep-fat frying will find recipes for “Scallop Crisp Spring Moon” and Winnie Hon's XO sauce; those with a yen to use it as a smoker can expand their repertoire from tea-smoked duck to tea-smoked striped bass and Florence Lin's tea-smoked chicken and eggs.

Mostly, though, there's an amazing range of stir-fried dishes, a chapter each devoted to poultry, meat, fish and shellfish, rice and noodles, and vegetables. There are also shorter sections covering braising, poaching, and boiling/steaming. The problem—and this is the one real criticism I have of **THE BREATH OF A WOK** (apart from its mysterious lack of duck dishes)—is that not all of these recipes can be successfully achieved using our heat-challenged American ranges. Young glosses over this, but it can't be ignored. Readers should cautiously approach any recipe here demanding quick, high-heat wok cooking. Still, there are many that don't. In SC•85, I quote a writer who claimed that overenthusiastic stirring left a hole in her wok. I took that for a joke; now, with this book to goad me on, I'm getting nervous that it could happen to me. ○



per, probably has less in common than most with what the neighbors are putting on the table. But what little I know about how other people cook leads me to believe that it isn't a shared repertoire of dishes that stitches us all up in a common cuisine.

Of course, we do share common ingredients, culinary forms (casseroles, stews, roasts), and recognizable rhythms of daily eating (breakfast, lunch, supper, snacks). But for critics of American cooking, our lack of a coherent collection of prized national dishes leaves it trapped in adolescence, at once too anarchic and too jejune. It needs to go to college and major in the classics. This at least is what Raymond Sokolov proposes in his latest book, **THE COOK'S CANON: 101 CLASSIC RECIPES EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW** (HarperCollins, \$25.95, 251 pp.), which its dust jacket describes as "a liberal arts education for the palate."



By definition, you can't have a canon unless you decide what is canonical. —Raymond Sokolov, *THE COOK'S CANON*

UNFORTUNATELY FOR HIS ARGUMENT, Sokolov starts off by shooting himself in the foot. "Canon" has many meanings, but in this context it denotes an assemblage of authentic or exemplary texts. The Jane Austen canon is comprised of those works indisputably written by her. The Western Canon traces the evolution of the modern sensibility through our civilization's most seminal works. What lies at the core of this understanding is a sense of direct, perceivable connection—from Shakespeare to Milton to Wordsworth to Tennyson to Hardy to Lawrence. If the connection seems trivial, the writer, no matter how good, is not included.

Sokolov, however, presents the creation of a canon as a matter of personal opinion: "Professor X has his favorites. Professor Y has his." In truth, the creation of a canon requires precedent and scrupulous debate. He refers to the deliberations of the Council of Trent (1546) as establishing "a canon of officially anointed books to include in the Catholic Bible," but seems unaware that the council's considerations were based on the determinations of centuries of church thought. Naturally, there are always some works that don't quite make it into the canon but also refuse to go away—a newly discovered, unsigned poem possibly written by Shakespeare. It is mostly hear that the opinions of Professors X and Y enter the scene, and in hot debate.

Sokolov looks to France for his inspiration, a country that *can* boast of a culinary canon, and asks why we Americans can't create a similar (or, because we can draw on so many different traditions, an even better) one of our own. He, of all people, should know the answer. In 1976, he wrote **THE SAUCIER'S APPRENTICE**, a carefully thought out primer on classic French sauces, replete with diagrams showing where each sauce fits into its family tree.

That book was possible because French cooking springs from a largely coherent culture, one of the manifestations of which is a passion for codifying. The French have done this to their language, their literature, their wine, and certainly to their cuisine.

Consider, for example, one of my favorite cookbooks, Robert Courtine's *CENT MERVEILLES DE LA CUISINE FRANÇAISE*,\* which tells the story of the hundred dishes the author considers *la crème de la crème* of French cuisine. In doing so, he manages to condense the cultural history of French cooking into dishes still being prepared in

the present day. He doesn't even bother to present this as a canon. As a French gastronome, Courtine simply embodies one. "*La cuisine française? C'est moi!*"

But things work differently here in America. Once, inspired by Courtine, I proposed a book to be called *THE HUNDRED GLORIES OF AMERICAN COOKING*. But the publisher took two years before finally accepting my proposal, and by then I had decided it wouldn't be worth the effort. American cooking is as much about the dishes we *don't* have in common as about the ones we do.

**THE COOK'S CANON** is a perfect example of this paradox. Here, at random, is a sampling of its recipes:

sauerbraten • *savarin valaisanne* • shepherd's pie • shrimp, crab, and okra gumbo • *sole meunière* • soufflé • Southern fried chicken • spaghetti alla carbonara • standing rib roast with Yorkshire pudding • steak au poivre • strawberry preserves • suckling pig • Szechwan dry-fried beef • tamales *con rajas* • tempura • terrine of foie gras

What such a gathering suggests is exactly the idiosyncratic opinions of Professor X and Professor Y—or, more specifically, of Professor S. It matters little that Sokolov prefaces each recipe with an explanation as to why this particular dish (and his version of it) made it onto his list. If he had happened to choose a hundred and one entirely different recipes, his introductions to those would be just as convincing... and no more canonical. Without meaningful connection, there's just no canon here.

In his introductory essay, Sokolov compares his book to "a traditional survey course in the humanities, a book about the 'Western' heritage." Well, at sixty-two, I've made less than half the dishes Sokolov lists. And, apart from reminding me of some others that, like *tripes à la mode de Caen*, I'd like to get around to preparing someday, I found only two or three unfamiliar recipes that looked like they might be interesting to try.

Sokolov might well accuse me of not aspiring to culinary literacy, which certainly could be true. However, I can still remember how soporific those courses on the history of civilization often were—and how the anthologies with which they were taught debased and trivialized great literature by jamming together a chunk of this with a piece of that. In his book, what this reminds one of is not so much the glories of great cuisine as those old-fashioned "continental" restaurant where *moules marinière* rubbed shoulders with *risotto alla Milanese* and *paella valenciana*.\*

As a corrective to all this, compare Sokolov's effort to Auguste Escoffier's magnificent *LE GUIDE CULINAIRE*—a book that presents a precise encoding of more than five thousand recipes from the French classical tradition. The purpose of that book was to help chefs perfect what they already knew and to show them how familiar dishes had direct links to others that they had yet to prepare.

For Escoffier, everything is meaningfully connected because the book articulates something that already exists and with which its practitioners are intimate. Sokolov, conversely—and perversely—has assembled a collection of recipes that have few connection with each other and so offer the cook no entry into a greater whole. ○

\*Of course, it also reminds one of a certain genre of cookbook, those that purport to collect "the world's greatest recipes." Recently, fresh life has been breathed into this genre by David Rosengarten's **TASTE: ONE PALATE'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE WORLD'S GREATEST DISHES** (Random House, 1998, 333 pp.) and Anya von Bremzen's **THE GREATEST DISHES! AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 RECIPES** (HarperCollins, \$27.50, 350 pp.). Both have qualities that lift them above Sokolov's: Rosengarten's for the depth with which it treats each recipe, and von Bremzen's for its verve and the freshness of many of her choices.

\*A translation was published here in 1973 by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, as *THE HUNDRED GLORIES OF FRENCH COOKING*.



# TABLE TALK

**SEEDS OF CHANGE.** Even though we currently live in a city apartment, I haven't lost my habit of garden-dreaming come late January, early February, or that of looking through new seed catalogues that come my way. This year I was quite taken with this one, which offers strictly organic seeds with an emphasis on preserving heirloom plants, introducing rare ones, and recommending others that foster biodiversity. This year, for example, they are promoting eight plant varieties to intercrop among your regular vegetables to provide a habitat for pollinators, butterflies, and other welcome friends, while confusing garden pests. They have an unusually large herb collection, including rare yellow lavender, Korean licorice mint, and purple shiso, which is used by the Japanese as both an herbal tea and to color umeboshi plums. Among the vegetable offerings are Indian Woman yellow beans, Lutz salad-leaf beets, heirloom Green Glaze ("greasy greens") collards, heirloom red-stalk celery, heirloom Rosa Bianca eggplant ("a creamy consistency"), true Transylvanian garlic ("an effective vampire deterrent"), many chile, garlic, tomato, and corn varieties, and a stupendous number of salad greens. They also specialize in Latin American herbs and vegetables, including the Bolivian sunroot, a staple among the Andean people but mostly unknown here. The print catalog is \$2.50, but everything in it can be found online at [www.seedsofchange.com](http://www.seedsofchange.com). **Seeds of Change, PO Box 15700, Santa Fe NM 87592 • (888) 762-7333.**

**SELECT BOOKS** is an independent bookshop in Singapore specializing in Southeast Asian titles. That city is an important publishing center, and many of the books that are printed there are written in English. This, naturally, includes cookbooks, many impossible to find in the United States. Select Books offers almost two hundred culinary titles, ranging from Betty Saw's **ASIAN RETRO FOOD: DISHES OF YESTERYEAR** to Julie Wong's **NONYA FLAVOURS: A COMPLETE GUIDE TO PENANG STRAITS CHINESE COOKING**; Chen Hei Chan's **THE ART OF TASTE, SECRETS OF THE CANTONESE KITCHEN**; and Devagi Sanugam's **BORN TO EAT: A COLLECTION OF FAVOURITE RECIPES**—a bilingual Tamil cookbook. The Singapore dollar is currently (September 2005) valued at sixty American cents, so prices are low. (Shipping, alas, is *very* pricey—unless you specifically arrange to have your purchases sent by sea mail.) [www.selectbooks.com.sg](http://www.selectbooks.com.sg) (cookbooks are in the leisure section).

**WORD OF MOUTH.** Subscriber MINNIE KENT BIGGS: "My stepsister's (with Italian husband and training) favorite pasta sauce is a quantity of broccoli, overcooked until quite soft, then mashed with anchovies—filets are okay—and chopped garlic. Serve and yum!" ❧ ARI WEINZWEIG, in **ZINGERMAN'S GUIDE TO GOOD EATING**: "Pistachio oil has a beguiling emerald green color that's beautiful when you pour a little on the plate before placing a slice of roasted lamb atop it." ❧ VIANA LA PLACE, in **UNPLUGGED KITCHEN**: "Very tender young radish leaves are delicious raw in salads; they are excellent with scrambled eggs. That's what Italians do with leftover radish greens...." ❧ REGINA SCHRAMBLING, the *Los Angeles Times*: "Thomas Keller [of French Laundry and Bouchon] makes the simplest sauce for haricots verts seem extraordinary: whipped cream spiked with red wine vinegar. The tartness cuts the richness, the coating is like butter but so much lighter. And as subtle as the

sauce is over the beans, when you chill it and spoon it, it's like the most amazing soft ice cream."

❧ **COOK'S NOTE:** To make the dressing, set a small bowl over a larger one containing ice. In this, beat  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup of heavy cream until the whisk begins to leave a trail behind it, from 1 to 2 minutes. Then whisk in 1 teaspoon of top-quality red wine vinegar, with  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon salt and black pepper to taste. This amount will dress 8 ounces of cooked and chilled haricots verts or slivered green beans.

**SICHUAN PEPPERCORN UPDATE.** Florence Fabricant, writing in the July 27th edition of *The New York Times*, reports that Sichuan peppercorns, banned by the FDA because of the chance they might harbor a devastating citrus canker, can again be legally purchased in the USA—if they have been heat-treated to a temperature of at least 140°F for twenty minutes. This process does affect their potency, reducing their menthol-like pungency by about ten percent. Fabricant suggests simply adding more to make up for this, which seems wishful thinking to me. However, since many Sichuan peppercorns sold in this country were without any zing whatsoever, a fresh batch of these treated ones will be a big improvement. (If you live near Fresno, look around and you may find that you can buy them fresh. Russ Parsons told me that Hmong farmers in the area grow them and sell them with their leaves in plastic zip-lock bags. The Hmong rub the crushed leaves on their aching joints for relief from arthritis—must be just like Ben-Gay!) The rest of us can get the treated version directly from spice merchants, where the turnover keeps the supply fresh. One source we like is The Spice House, 1941 Central St., Evanston IL 60201 • (847) 328-3711 • [www.thespicehouse.com](http://www.thespicehouse.com).

**NEWS FROM HERE.** As all but our newest readers will know, Matt and I recently found ourselves facing a move, since our apartment building was being turned into condominiums. To our surprise, the second place we looked at was so very much to our taste that we decided to rent it, even though that meant a move three months earlier than we planned. That's all happened—we now inhabit completely refurbished but pleasantly retro-feeling quarters. The kitchen has real oak flooring, an old-fashioned double porcelain-coated sink, and no modern frivolities like a dishwasher or garbage disposal. Consequently, however, both this issue of **SC** and the book sale were necessarily delayed. Well, here's the new issue, and the book-sale catalogue should soon be in the mail. **But**—if, when we first announced it back in February, you immediately sent us an e-mail requesting the PDF (electronic) version, try to remember if I replied to confirm its receipt. If not, your request may have been lost due to computer failure. There's no need to worry if you got back an answer or if you sent your request any time after March 1st. However, if in doubt, do e-mail me again ASAP: [COOKBOOKSALE@OUTLAWCOOK.COM](mailto:COOKBOOKSALE@OUTLAWCOOK.COM).

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## PROSPECT BOOKS

This unique and imaginative publishing effort is concerned wholly with bringing to light books of genuine culinary worth that would otherwise never find a publisher. Based in Britain, it began under the aegis of the late Alan Davidson and is now directed by Tom Jaine, whose own interests have expanded the list in provocative and unexpected ways.\* This page only skims the cream from Prospect's recent releases; a complete catalog can be had by writing to PB, Allaleigh House, Blackawton, Totnes, Devon TQ9 7DL, Great Britain, or by contacting Tom directly at tom.jaine@prospectbooks.co.uk. *Note that the recipes in all these books use British/metric measurements.*

**RECIPES FROM CORSICA**, by Rolli Lucarotti (\$24.95, 232 pp.). The French say of Corsica that it is "the nearest of the faraway isles." Although it is, in fact, a part of France, Corsicans see that mostly as an embarrassment. Their language, *Corsu*, is closest to Tuscan Italian, and their insular way of life means that those who live in the next village are foreign enough; mainlanders are from another planet. The cooking of the island reflects its Mediterranean locale, its dramatic mountainous terrain, and, of course, its access to the sea.

Lucarotti, who has lived in Corsica on and off for thirty years, provides a brief but lucid introduction to the place, the cuisine, the circumstances and influences that have made it what it is, and the kitchens in which it is prepared. The island is famous for its honey and its chestnuts, the flour from which is still used in many baked goods. Staples also include olive oil, sheep and goat cheese, cured pork products, potent herbs of every sort, and wild game.

The recipes are authentic, which means some are hard to reproduce off-island, like sea urchin soufflé, blackbirds with cherries, and pig's stomach stuffed with chard. However, any adventurous cook with a taste for Mediterranean cooking will find unusual recipes here that call out for making—a very simple chickpea salad, marinated salt anchovy appetizer, leek and red bean soup, braised chicken with sage stuffing, veal stew with green peppers, rustic potato and tomato casserole, and apple galettes. *Black and white ink drawings.*

\* I should note that this has included issuing my own book **OUTLAW COOK** in Great Britain, which is now the only way to get hold of a (relatively) reasonably priced copy—about \$30, plus shipping, unless the dollar plunges yet again before this gets into your hands.

**THE ELDER: IN HISTORY, MYTH, AND COOKERY**, by Ria Loohuizen (\$17.95, 140 pp.). "The elder," the author tells us, "is surrounded by more legend, superstition, and folklore than almost any other tree, shrub, or plant." This is not the case in the USA, although elderberries are still used here to make wine. (The American elder is not quite the same as the European one—*Sambucus canadensis* instead of *Sambucus nigra*—but its blossoms and berries can be put to the same culinary uses.) Those who delight in plant lore will find Loohuizen's scholarly enthusiasm engaging. It turns out that every part of this shrub (or, as some feel, big hulking weed)—root, bark, twig, flower, berry—has its magical, medicinal, or culinary use. Those who enjoy concocting their own facial creams or hair conditioners, cough syrups, jellies, vinegars, wines, and liqueurs will find full instructions here for putting its berries and flowers to these and other purposes, including ways of incorporating each directly into your cooking. *Illustrated.*

**MOURJOU: THE LIFE AND FOOD OF AN AUVERGNE VILLAGE**, by Peter Graham (\$27.00, 231 pp.). The author has lived for two decades in the town of Mourjou in an old region of Auvergne called the Châtaigneraie, after the chestnut forests that once covered the area. Auvergne is in the center of the country—Auvergnats like to describe France as "Auvergne with a bit of land around it"—much of it a rugged and mountainous place, where it has not always been easy to earn a living. The people who live there pride themselves on their old-fashioned self-sufficiency, and the dishes for which the region is famous are mostly hearty and economical farmhouse fare, like *soupe aux choux* and *petit salé aux lentilles*.

Graham proves an ideal guide to this world, observant, articulate, and not given to sentimentalizing (let alone caricaturing) his neighbors. These people are interesting enough without such underlining. The local butcher, Raymond Vigier operates a combination butcher shop/saloon. When the meat business is slow, he slips through an opening in the wall to join his *copains* for a nip. Also, feeling that the bar was a bit cramped, he broke through the wall that separated it from his living room, revealing "a sofa, armchairs, a writing desk, a dresser, a fireplace, and, sometimes, some ironing."



Customers are not actually invited to sit there, but when an important sports event is taking place, Vigier turns the television so that they can look in and watch it.

Unlike the authors of many such books, Graham is an expert cook and an enthusiastic explorer of Auvergnat cuisine. Consequently, while everyday life in the Châtaigneraie is the constant thread in the narrative, each chapter is each devoted to a separate category of food: soups, egg dishes and pancakes, cheese dishes, vegetables, and so on, with separate prose chapters on the local cheeses and wines.

He carefully places each dish in the context of Auvergnat life and describes differing opinions on how to make it. For example, his account of regional debates on what constitutes an authentic *coq au vin* is fascinating, and his thoughtful recipe rescues it from the realm of cliché.

Naturally, most of what you find here are local dishes: *cassoulette de cèpes*, *escargots et noix*; *patranque* (a pan-fried amalgam of sopped bread, butter, garlic, and cheese); pig's ears in cheese sauce; potato and cream pie; *fouace* (an ancient, yeast-leavened cake). My only complaint is that recipe titles are given only in French. Those not conversant with that language must keep reading just to learn what the dish is all about—not a bad thing, maybe, but not particularly helpful, either. *Illustrated.*

**TRADITIONAL FOODS OF BRITAIN: A REGIONAL INVENTORY**, by Laura Mason with Catherine Brown (£19.50, 400 pp.). This is one of my favorite books, providing in-depth descriptions of 400 regional British foods that have been sold to the public for over three generations. This includes particular breeds of animals and poultry (Tamworth pig, Aylesbury duck); fish and other seafood (char, cockles, elvers), fruits and vegetables (Ribston pippin, black peas), cheeses and other dairy products (Cotherstone, Wealden Round, whey butter), and on and on.

Where it *really* gets interesting to me, however, is when the text devotes its attention to "made" foods of every sort, be it bun, relish, sausage, meat pie, confection, conserve, ale, cake, biscuit, pudding... I can't hope to name them all. Even meat dripping is listed. Here at last are detailed descriptions of things I've only read about or tried to imagine via a recipe: fat rascals, Dorset knobs, humbugs, singin' hinnies, Oxford sausage. Similarly, I can now learn how foods I've tasted and enjoyed are actually made: Ashbourne gingerbread, Edinburgh Rock, ginger wine, mushroom ketchup. All in all, it's a thoroughly engrossing read. *Illustrated with handsome b&w photographs.* ♦



# Out Of The Vault

**Land of Plenty: A Treasury of Authentic Sichuan Cooking, Fuchsia Dunlop (W. W. Norton, \$30, 395 pp.).** In 1994, Fuchsia Dunlop went to the provincial capital, Chengdu, to study at Sichuan University. But she already knew that her real interest was that area's cooking, a subject that might not have been taught where she was officially enrolled but certainly was at a nearby famous cooking school, the Sichuan Institute of Higher Cuisine. So, one sunny October afternoon, she and a college mate set out on bicycles to find it.

We could hear from the street that we had arrived. Fast, regular chopping, the sound of cleavers on wood. Upstairs, in a plain white room, dozens of apprentice cooks in white overalls were engrossed in learning the arts of sauces. Chillies and ginger were being pulverized with pairs of cleavers on tree-trunk chopping-boards, Sichuan peppercorns ground to a fine brown powder, and the students scurried around mixing oils and spices, fine-tuning the flavours of the rich dark liquids in their crucibles. The air hummed with a gentle rhythmic pounding, the sound of china spoons in china bowls. On long parallel tables sat bowls of ingredients; pools of soy sauce and oil, piles of sugar and salt. Notebooks scribbled with Chinese characters lay around on the tables amid the blood-red chillies and scattered peppercorns. The light streamed in through open windows. We decided immediately that this was where we had to study.

They both began taking private classes there with the assistance of the school's English tutor, who helped them decipher the Sichuan dialect and explained unfamiliar culinary terms. Dunlop did so well that she impressed her teacher, a legendary chef named Gan Guojian and, to her surprise, was invited to become a regular student, something that had never before been offered to a foreigner. "Naturally," she writes, "I leapt at the opportunity, enrolled and paid my modest fees, and was promptly issued with my own chef's overalls and Chinese cleaver." And never looked back.

The author's curiosity about Sichuan cooking was not in the least limited to what she was being taught at the academy, however. She charmed her way into the kitchens of several of the city's restaurants, including that of the traditional snack specialist Long Chao Shou, and spent her free time (amazing that she had any) wandering the bustling streets and alleyways.

Exploring Chengdu was a never-ending pleasure. I recall sitting with an old roast-duck vendor in a narrow backstreet which meandered among the wooden courtyard houses in the centre of town, discussing the food of the past and watching the life of the teeming city flow by. Fruit vendors passed, bearing bamboo baskets laden with cherries or "dragon-eye" fruit dangling from either end of their bamboo shoulderpoles. A sharp metal clink heralded the arrival of the knife-sharpener, bearing two cleaver blades and a pair of round-handled Chinese scissors.

What she has made of this experience can be found in *SICHUAN COOKERY*, which is the sort of eye-opening, groundbreaking, reporting-from-the-source kind of cookbook that until previously has been restricted to the provincial cooking of Italy and France. Now, out of the blue, we have a seminal exploration of one of China's great regional cuisines, written with intelligence, sympathy, and impressive attention to the smallest details. In short, it's been years since a cookbook has excited me as much as this one.

*shi zai zhong guo  
wei zai si chuan*

China is the place for food  
But Sichuan is the place for flavor  
—traditional Chinese saying

**T**HE PROVINCE OF SICHUAN is located in the center of China, with Yunnan to the south and Xizang Zizhiqu (or, as some of us think it should still be, Tibet) to the west. It is ringed with mountains and, until the introduction of air travel, could be reached only by following the tortuously snaking and gorge-filled path of the Yangtze river. The poet Li Bai described it as harder to get to than heaven itself. Curiously, while this isolation allowed it to develop a culture and a cooking style very much its own, it also drew refugees seeking sanctuary during China's many troubled times, thus regularly introducing dishes and foodstuffs that would otherwise have been unknown there. These would subsequently enhance an already famous and complex cuisine.

Most famous among the arrivals, of course, was chile pepper, which first arrived in China in the late Ming period (16th century), when it was known as *fanjiao*, or barbarian pepper. As the rest of the world was also then discovering, chile is an ideal addition to the cooking of hot and humid places, and Sichuan is so much so that it is said that dogs there bark at the sun, it is so rarely seen.

Absence of sunshine aside, fertile soil, hot weather, and an abundance of rain and river water make Sichuan one of China's most fertile agricultural areas. A wide range of fruits and vegetables are grown there in abundance, tea plants thrive on the misty mountainsides, and, until the advent of rampant pollution, fish flourished in the many rivers and streams. And this is only a partial list. As the author notes, "To the eyes of Chinese gourmets, the entire Sichuan region, with its mountains, forests, rivers, and plains, is one extraordinary larder filled with the stuff of gastronomic dreams."

The marriage of this abundance with the natural Chinese interest in culinary matters produced an extremely sophisticated cuisine. Sichuanese chefs are famous for their skills—cutting methods, control of heat, and elaborately worked-out seasoning techniques. They have different culinary terms for every way of slicing up food, carefully catalogued subtle gradations of taste, and names for twenty-three complex flavors (each—strange flavor, hot-and-numbing flavor, red-oil flavor, salt-savory flavor, etc.—explained in detail in an appendix).

Because of all this, a Sichuan banquet can be an overwhelming experience, an endless display of exotic flavor blendings and virtuoso cooking skills, often employing the rare and expensive ingredients called *shan zhen hai wei*—"treasures from the mountains and the seas." Such banquets are a major component of the regional cuisine, and Dunlop writes about them evocatively and well.

Fortunately, she is just as—if not even more—interested in the two other basic traditional categories, vernacular cooking and street food, and just as willing to seek out cooks notably adept at preparing them. Take Sichuanese roast duck, which, like Peking roast duck, evolved from techniques used to roast suckling pigs for the Emperor. Both are prepared in much the same manner, but the Sichuanese version is chopped up on the bone and served in a deep bowl in a thick broth made from pork bones and the duck's roasting juices. Mr. Liu, who sells it from a tiny stall which is usually mobbed with customers, talked her through the making of the dish during a lull in business. Mr. Liu, as it turned out, was much freer

with his recipe than Mr. Xie, a noodle shop proprietor, who was not especially interested in revealing his recipe for his locally acclaimed version of dan dan noodles. To get it required frequent visits and constant cajoling. Of course, not all the recipes come with such tales; the point is that they reveal, again and again, her determination to find out what ingredients and techniques bring out the best in each dish. Because of this, all the recipes are prefaced with valuable explanatory material that usually details the provenance of the dish, locates its place in the larger context of the cuisine, and provides helpful cooking notes that often include local variations, as here with fish soup with pickled greens:

The ginger, garlic, and chilli give the soup a peppery zing, but local people often enhance this by adding a final scattering of spices and hot oil, which can make the soup so hot it will blow your head off.

Finally, I should point out that, while Sichuan cuisine is flavor-intensive, it is not, for the most part, particularly complicated or demanding of special (or long lists of) ingredients. If you are at all engaged in Chinese cooking, your kitchen cabinet already possesses many of the things she calls for: hot bean paste, Sichuan peppercorns, black Chinese vinegar, dark soy sauce, etc.—although you may have to make an effort to locate the Sichuanese preserved vegetables that are used in several dishes and work up some nerve to make your own fermented glutinous rice wine.

The bottom line for me with any cookbook is not that it contains recipes that are worth trying but recipes that I am already certain I shall. *SICHUAN COOKERY* passes this test with flying colors, because there are many dishes here that I am panting to make and Dunlop's carefully detailed instructions make me confident of success. Among them are the Sichuanese version of sweet-and-sour pork, dressed in a dark, tangy sauce, utterly unlike any version I have encountered before; her take on "second-sister rabbit cubes," chunks of rabbit with peanuts in hot bean sauce, a dish that has been celebrated in local verse; and "pockmarked Mother Chen's beancurd," a famous preparation that "epitomizes Sichuan's culinary culture, with its fiery peasant cooking and bustling private restaurants" but is rarely made correctly in Chinese eateries abroad. I encourage you to go and do likewise. ❖

## Sweet and Sour Red Peppers

From *SICHUAN COOKERY*, by Fuschia Dunlop

*Sweet peppers are also known in Chinese as lantern peppers (deng long jiao) because they look a bit like China's traditional festive red lanterns. In Sichuanese cookery, they are often stir-fried with pork or beef, but they also feature in a number of cold banquet dishes. The following mellow, gentle starter, which I enjoyed at the Shufeng restaurant in Chengdu, is easy to prepare. It needs to be served with one or two other dishes with contrasting tastes and textures—perhaps some smoked duck or other cold meat and a crisp green vegetable (olives might be a nice accompaniment too, although they're not Sichuanese). The same sauce can be used as a dressing for other cold vegetable dishes.*

[SERVES 4 AS AN APPETIZER WITH ONE OR TWO OTHER DISHES]

2 red bell peppers • 3 teaspoons white sugar  
3 teaspoons clear rice vinegar • salt to taste  
2 teaspoons sesame oil

• Cut the peppers in half and remove the stems and seeds. Steam or boil for a few minutes until just cooked. Rinse in cold water, and then peel away the skins (this step can be omitted but gives a more sensuous result). Cut the peppers into strips and these put into a mixing bowl. Dissolve the

sugar in the vinegar. Add 1 or 2 pinches of salt, to taste. Pour this sauce over the peppers and toss together. Then add the sesame oil and toss once again. Arrange prettily on a serving plate.



## From the Cook's Canon

### Fresh Ham with Star Anise (Tipan)

This Chinese wedding dish shows its Szechwan origins in the dried chilies and brown peppercorns that flavor its cooking liquid. But it is not one of those fiery Szechwan dishes that neophytes remember primarily for their heat. Indeed, it showcases the very distinctive flavor of the star anise and the richness of the ham itself. In China, this is a dish of celebration.

[SERVES 6 AS A MAIN COURSE IN A WESTERN-STYLE MEAL WITH APPETIZER AND SUBSTANTIAL DESSERT.]

3 pounds fresh ham  
3 scallions, trimmed and cut into green and white sections  
One 3-inch piece fresh ginger  
1/2 cup dried mushrooms, unsoaked  
2 star anise • 3 dried red chilies  
2 teaspoons Szechwan peppercorns  
2/3 cup soy sauce  
1/3 cup Chinese rice wine  
2 tablespoons sugar  
1 tablespoon sesame oil  
1 teaspoon salt  
10 ounces well-washed spinach

• In a pot just large enough to fit the ham, combine the ham, scallions, ginger, mushrooms, star anise, chilies, peppercorns, and enough water to cover the ham. Bring to a boil, skim, cover, and cook for about an hour at a fast simmer. After a half hour, turn the ham. Continue cooking, until the liquid has reduced to half its original depth. Keep turning the ham every 15 minutes.

• Add the soy sauce, rice wine, and sugar. Reduce the heat and simmer, covered, for another hour.

• Add the sesame oil and 1 teaspoon salt. Then raise the heat and boil, uncovered, until the liquid has reduced to one-quarter its original depth. Serve straightaway with steamed spinach (see next step) or refrigerate for as much as 4 days before reheating.

• Just before you are ready to serve the ham, put the spinach in a saucepan. Cover and set over low-medium heat. After a couple minutes, check the spinach. It is done as soon as it wilts, but before it loses its brilliant green color. Drain thoroughly and array on a serving platter with the ham. Pour the ham cooking liquid over the ham and serve.