A French omelet worthy of the man, if not the definition, can be made, the second time at least if the first time it turns into a stiff ugly curd, by following these directions:

Basic French Omelet

6 eggs

3 tablespoons butter (good oil if absolutely necessary)

salt and pepper

1. Be sure that the frying pan (8 or 10 inches) is smooth on the inside. Heat the butter in it until it gives off a nutty smell but does not brown. ('This will not only lend an exquisite taste,' Escoffier says,'but the degree of heat reached in order to produce the aroma will be found to ensure the perfect setting of the eggs.') Roll the pan to cover the sides with butter.

2. Beat eggs lightly with a fork, add seasoning, and pour into the pan. As soon as the edges are set, run a spatula under the center so that all the uncooked parts will run under the cooked. [By now I know, fatalistically, that if I am using a pan I know, and if I have properly rolled the precise amount of sweet butter around that pan, and if the stars, winds and general emotional climates are in both conjunction and harmony, I can make a perfect omelet without ever touching a spatula to it. Such occasions are historical, as well as accidental.] Do this once or twice, never leaving it to its own devices. When it is daintily browned on the bottom and creamy on top, fold it in the middle (or roll if you are a master), slide it onto a dish, and serve speedily.

3. Chopped herbs, cheese, mushrooms and almost anything else may be added at your discretion, either at the first in the stirred eggs or when it is ready to fold. [Delicate creamed fowl or fish, generous in proportion to the size of each omelet, can be folded in, or new peas or asparagus tips, lightly cooked in butter.

M.F.K. Fisher's How to Cook a Wolf, first published in 1942 – and then again, with additional notes in square brackets, after the armistice – the legendary food writer's advice on making the most of what's available to you is just as pertinent today as it was at the height of the Second World War.

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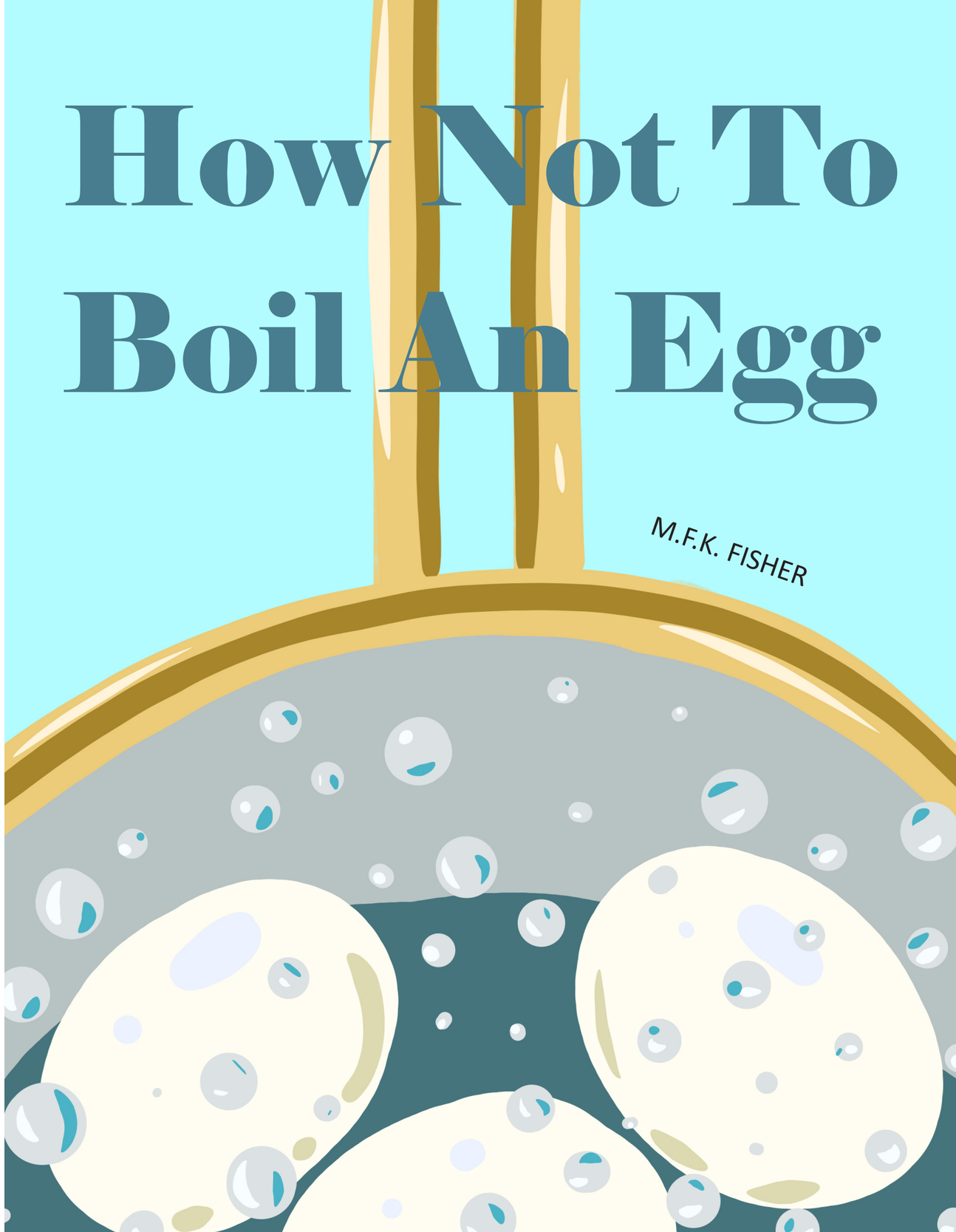
How Not To Boil An Egg

M.F.K. FISHER



The simplest way to eat an egg, if you refuse to swallow it raw, even in its fanciest high-tasting disguises, is to boil it. Rather it is not to boil it, for no more erroneous phrase ever existed than "to boil an egg". There are several ways not to boil an egg so that it will be tender, thoroughly cooked, and yet almost as easily digested as if it were raw.

One fairly good one is to drop the egg gently into simmering water, first running cold water over it so that it will not crack, and then let it stand there in the gentle heat for whatever time you wish. It will cook just as fast as if the water were hopping about in great bubbles, and it will be a better-treated egg, once opened.

Another way, which I think is the best one, is to cover the egg with cold water in a little pan. Heat it briskly, and as soon as it begins to bubble, the egg is done. It will be tenderer than when started in hot water, which of course makes the part nearest the shell cook immediately, instead of heating the whole thing gently.

I have never yet seen an egg crack when started in cool water, but some people automatically make a pin-hole in every egg they boil, to prevent possible leaks, lesions and losses. (If you still want hard-boiled eggs, start them in cold water, turn the heat off as soon as it begins to bubble, and let them stand in it until it is cold. They will be tender, and comparatively free from nightmares.) [This is not as good a system as it is cracked up to be, to make a timid little pun. More often than not, I have found since I so optimistically wrote of it, the eggs do not peel properly. Half of the white comes off with the shell. Ho hum.]

If you think eggs boiled in their shells are fit food for the nursery, and refuse to admit any potential blessing in one delicately prepared, neatly spooned from its shell into a cup, sagely seasoned with salt and fresh-ground black pepper and a sizeable dollop of butter, all to be eaten with hot toast, then it is definitely not your dish. Instead, try heating a shallow skillet or fire-proof dish, skirling a lump of butter [preferably waiting in the bottom, to absorb good melting heat from the egg . . .] or bacon grease or decent oil [This must have been a wartime aberration. Just lately I fired a cook who fried eggs in my best olive oil. The eggs, the oil, the whole house, and finally the cook took on an unbearable slipperiness.] in it until it looks very hot, and breaking a fresh egg or two into it. Then... and this is the trick... turn off the heat at once, cover the pan tightly, and wait for about three minutes.

The result will be tender and firm, and very good indeed with toast and coffee, or with a salad and white wine for supper.

This method, of course, is a compromise. It is not a fried egg, strictly speaking, and yet it is as near to making a good fried egg as I have ever got. I can make amazingly bad fried eggs, and in spite of what people tell me about this method and that, I continue to make amazingly bad fried eggs: tough, with edges like some kind of dirty starched lace, and a taste part sulfur and part singed newspaper. The best way to find a trustworthy method, I think, is to ask almost anyone but me. Or look in a cookbook. Or experiment.

There are as many different theories about making an omelet as there are people who like them, but in general, there are two main schools: the French, which uses eggs hardly stirred together, and the puffy or soufflé, which beats the white and yellow parts of the eggs separately, and then mixes them. Then, of course, there is the Italian frittata school, which mixes all kinds of cooked cooled vegetables with eggs and merges them into a sort of pie; and a very good school that is. Moreover, there is the Oriental school, best exemplified by what is usually called foo yeung in chop-suey parlors and is a kind of pancake of egg and bean-sprouts and and and. To cap the whole thing, there is the school which has its own dependable and usually very simple method of putting eggs in a pan and having them come out as intended. Brillat-Savarin called them œufs brouillis and I call them scrambled eggs.

The best definition of a perfect French omelet is given, perhaps unwittingly, in Escoffier's American translation of his Guide Culinaire: 'Scrambled eggs enclosed in a coating of coagulated egg.' This phrase in itself is none too appetizing, it seems to me, but it must do for want of a better man to say it. [This is said much more simply in its own language: une omelette baveuse.]