

= A Book of Mediterranean Food =

A Book of Mediterranean Food was an influential cookery book written by Elizabeth David in 1950 , and published by John Lehmann . After years of rationing and wartime austerity , the book brought light and colour back to English cooking , with simple fresh ingredients , from David 's experience of Mediterranean cooking while living in France , Italy and Greece . The book was illustrated with quotations from famous writers .

At the time , many ingredients were scarcely obtainable , but the book was quickly recognised as serious , and within a few years it profoundly changed English cooking and eating habits .

= = Context = =

Returning to postwar England , still with food rationing , after years living in the Mediterranean with its wealth of fresh ingredients , Elizabeth David found life grey and daunting . The food was terrible : " There was flour and water soup seasoned solely with pepper ; bread and gristle rissoles ; dehydrated onions and carrots ; corned beef toad in the hole . I need not go on . "

= = Book = =

Partly to earn some money , and partly from an " agonized craving for the sun " , David began writing articles on Mediterranean cookery . Her first efforts were published in 1949 in the British magazine Harper 's Bazaar . From the outset , David refused to sell the copyright of her articles , and so she was able to collect and edit them for publication in book form . Even before all the articles had been published , she had assembled them into a typescript volume and submitted it to a series of publishers , all of whom turned it down . One of them explained that a collection of unconnected recipes needed linking text .

David took this advice , but , conscious of her inexperience as a writer , she kept her own prose short and quoted extensively from established authors whose views on the Mediterranean might carry more weight . In the published volume , the sections are linked by substantial extracts from works by writers including Norman Douglas , Lawrence Durrell , Gertrude Stein , D. H. Lawrence , Osbert Sitwell , Compton Mackenzie , Arnold Bennett , Henry James and Théophile Gautier . She submitted the revised typescript to John Lehmann , a publisher more associated with poetry than cookery , but he accepted it , agreeing to an advance payment of £ 100 . A Book of Mediterranean Food was published in 1950 . Lehmann had suggested it be named " The Blue Train Cookery Book " , since he supposed that the romance of Mediterranean countries was to be found in the exciting train journeys to reach them .

The book appeared when food rationing imposed during the Second World War remained fully in force in Britain . As David later put it , " almost every essential ingredient of good cooking was either rationed or unobtainable . " She therefore adapted some of the recipes she had learned during in the years when she lived in Mediterranean countries , " to make up for lack of flavour which should have been supplied by meat or stock or butter . "

= = = Lyricism = = =

The historian of food Panikos Panayi argues that with A Book of Mediterranean Food , David profoundly changed English cooking . He considers the opening section to contain " perhaps the most evocative and inspirational passage in the history of British cookery writing " :

The cooking of the Mediterranean shores , endowed with all the natural resources , the colour and flavour of the South , is a blend of tradition and brilliant improvisation . The Latin genius flashes from the kitchen pans . It is honest cooking too ; none of the sham Grand Cuisine of the International Palace Hotel

David then describes the region and its perfumes :

From Gibraltar to the Bosphorous , down the Rhone Valley , through the great seaports of

Marseilles , Barcelona , and Genoa ... stretches the influence of Mediterranean cooking , conditioned naturally by variations in climate and soil and the relative industry or indolence of the inhabitants . The ever recurring themes in the food throughout these countries are the oil , the saffron , the garlic , the pungent local wines ...

= = = Illustrations = = =

Lehmann commissioned a coloured dust @-@ jacket painting and black and white internal illustrations from his friend the artist John Minton . Writers including Cyril Ray and John Arlott commented that Minton 's drawings added to the attractions of the book . David , a woman of strong opinions , thought good illustration important . Minton provided 15 decorations to give a feeling of the Mediterranean , rather than simple illustrations of dishes from David 's recipes . For example , his port scene shows a sailor drinking and conversing with a young woman beside a table laden with food ; in the background is a street restaurant and boats in a harbour . Although David did not like Minton 's black and white drawings , she described his jacket design as " stunning " . She was especially taken with " his beautiful Mediterranean bay , his tables spread with white cloths and bright fruit " and the way that " pitchers and jugs and bottles of wine could be seen far down the street . "

= = = Contents = = =

The chapters cover in turn : soups ; eggs and luncheon dishes ; fish ; meat ; substantial dishes ; poultry and game ; vegetables ; cold food and salads ; sweets ; jams , chutneys and preserves ; and sauces .

The soup chapter sets the pattern for the book , with short , simple recipes , such as soup of haricot beans ? two brief paragraphs ? interspersed with long , complex ones like that for Mediterranean fish soup , which covers three pages . The eggs and luncheon dish section likewise balances the concise and simple such as ratatouille aux oeufs against the detailed and discursive three @-@ page consideration of omelettes . Unlike many writers of cookery books , David rarely gives precise quantities or timings : in the fish chapter her suggestion for fresh tuna is :

cut it into thick slices like a salmon steak , and sauté it in oil or butter , adding , half @-@ way through the cooking 2 or 3 tomatoes , chopped , a handful of cut parsley , and a small glass of wine , either red or white . Serve plainly cooked potatoes with it .

The meat section begins with recipes for veal , generally unfamiliar at English tables in 1950 . David also gives recipes for kid and boar . Mutton , by contrast , was more often served then than in more recent decades , and David gives four recipes for it , one of them disguising the flavour to taste like venison by long marinating and highly seasoned saucing ,

The " substantial dishes " chapter discusses and illustrates the merits of risotto and paella , and deals with polenta and spaghetti ? both less familiar in Britain then than now ? and goes on to describe cassoulet . The next chapter , on poultry and game , begins with recipes for cooking chicken and duck , and goes on to partridge ? both à la provençale and in Greek style ? quail and pigeons , concluding with snipe cooked en papillote with mushrooms .

The Mediterranean theme of the book is emphasised in the section on vegetables , in which there are five aubergine recipes and only one potato dish (pommes Anna) . Dishes from Greece and North Africa are included along with typical southern French standards such as tomates provençales . The occasional non @-@ Mediterranean dish is included , including cèpes à la bordelaise (fried in olive oil with parsley and garlic) .

The cold food and salads chapter gives instructions for three dishes of cold chicken , several traditional pâtés and terrines , and another non @-@ Mediterranean recipe , the traditional Easter dish from Burgundy , jambon persillé de Bourgogne . David adds to this section suggestions for hors d 'oeuvres , including Greek dishes then unfamiliar in Britain including dolmádés and taramá , as well as traditional French recipes such as sardines marinées à la niçoise .

In the section on sweets , David comments that throughout the Mediterranean countries , the more

complicated sweets are very often bought from pâtisseries ; the few recipes she gives are for simple , traditional sweets made at home , such as torrijas (also called pain perdu) and cold orange soufflé . The jams , chutneys and preserves section includes preserved melon alongside more familiar fruits such as pears and plums .

In the final chapter , on sauces , David includes classics like béchamel , béarnaise , hollandaise and mayonnaise (which , she advises , " stir steadily but not like a maniac ") . To these she adds Turkish , Greek , Italian and Egyptian sauces , the majority of them intended to go with Mediterranean fish dishes .

= = Reception = =

= = = Contemporary = = =

The Times Literary Supplement observed in 1950 that " while one might hesitate to attempt ' Lobster à la Enfant Prodigue ' (with champagne , garlic , basil , lemon , chervil , mushrooms and truffles) , the resourceful cook with time to explore London 's more individual shops , and money , should not often be nonplussed . " The Observer commented , also in 1950 , that the book deserved " to become the familiar companion of all who seek uninhibited excitement in the kitchen . "

= = = Modern = = =

The celebrity cook Clarissa Dickson Wright comments that the book was " a breath of fresh air in the years of austerity that followed the Second World War , and [David 's] espousal of excellent , well @-@ prepared ingredients has become the hallmark of English food at its best . " At that time " food was dull , vegetables were [thoroughly] stewed and olive oil was something you bought at the chemist and was marked ' for external use only ' . " David , on the other hand , " evoked a world of sunshine and lavender , of bougainvillea and cannas , and of fresh and simple food beautifully prepared . "

John Koski , writing in the Daily Mail , notes that most of the publishers at the time thought a cookery book " at best absurd " when there was so little food to cook , and " the ingredients of the Mediterranean lands ? olive oil , saffron , garlic , basil , aubergines , figs , pistachio nuts ? were hardly to be found in Central London , and readers had to rely on memory or imagination " to enjoy David 's recipes . All the same , the recipes were " honest " , " collected in Provence , Italy , Corsica , Malta and Greece " , and the book was " acclaimed as a serious work " . Within a few years , Koski observes , " paella , moussaka , ratatouille , hummus and gazpacho had become familiar in home kitchens , restaurants and supermarkets throughout the country . "

Rachel Cooke , writing in The Guardian , quotes the chef Simon Hopkinson , who knew David in the 1980s , as believing that David 's " powerful effect .. on British palates .. was as much a question of timing as anything else " . She " arrived on the scene at just the right moment : the British middle classes , exhausted by austerity , were longing , even if they did not precisely know it , for the taste of sunshine . "

Caroline Stacey , writing in The Independent , calls the book " her hymn of longing to the cooking around the southern shores " , noting that it " changed what the British middle classes ate " , and that she " ushered not only olive oil and garlic , but also aubergines , courgettes and basil on to the stripped @-@ pine tables of 1960s kitchens . "

Melanie McDonagh , writing in The Telegraph , states that with A Book of Mediterranean Food , David " introduced the Brits to the cooking of Greece , Italy and Provence in 1950 after her return from Greece , via Egypt and India " . She comments that the cookery writer Jane Grigson , a " devotee " , said " Basil was no more than the name of bachelor uncles , courgette was printed in italics as an alien word , and few of us knew how to eat spaghetti ... Then came Elizabeth David , like sunshine . " McDonagh adds that David " was one of the first and much the classiest of the personality food writers , even though she was never a telly chef : paving the way for Jamie , Nigella

, Nigel and Hugh F @-@ W. "

Dissenting from the general acclaim , Tom Norrington @-@ Davies , also writing in The Telegraph , argues that the book " reached only a very small section of the population " , but at once qualifies this , stating that these readers were " undergoing a dramatic upheaval . Educated , moderately wealthy women suddenly found themselves in their kitchens without servants " . He cites Jane Grigson 's observation , introducing a collection of David 's writing , that " Elizabeth didn 't so much restore [middle @-@ class women 's] confidence in cooking as invent it " .

Joe Moran , writing in the Financial Times , describes the genesis of the book as a " defining moment " . It was when , " stranded by a blizzard " in a hotel in Ross @-@ on @-@ Wye whose restaurant served meals so dismal that they seemed to her to be " produced with a kind of bleak triumph which amounted almost to a hatred of humanity and humanity ? s needs " , David felt her famous " agonised craving for the sun " . Furious at the joyless food , she started to draft the " sensuous descriptions " of Mediterranean food that led to A Book of Mediterranean Food .

Marian Burros , writing in the New York Times , comments that David first showed " her importance " with the book . " The ration @-@ weary English could barely buy enough to eat but they were enchanted by her descriptions of meals that included eggs , butter , seafood , tomatoes , olives , apricots , ingredients that were difficult , or impossible , to obtain . Foods that are taken for granted today in England ? garlic , olive oil , Parmigiano Reggiano ? were unknown and generally viewed with suspicion before Mrs. David . "

= = Editions = =

The book has appeared in the following editions since 1950 , including translations into Danish and Chinese .