THE TASTE OF COUNTRY COOKING

EDNA LEWIS

The 30th Anniversary Edition of a Great Southern Classic

WITH A FOREWORD BY

ALICE WATERS

The Taste of Country Cooking

EDNA LEWIS

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This book is dedicated to the memory of the people of Freetown

and to Judith B. Jones, with many thanks for her deep understanding.

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FOREWORD

by Alice Waters

Miss Edna Regina Lewis was born in Virginia in 1916, in a bucolic, out-of-the-way settlement known as Freetown, which had been founded by her grandfather and other freed slaves after the emancipation of 1865. She enjoyed a childhood that could only be described as idyllic, in which the never-ending hard work of farming and cooking both sustained and entertained an entire community. In 1976, with the publication of this lovely, indispensable classic of a cookbook, she brought her lost paradise of Freetown back to life. Thanks to this book, a new generation was introduced to the glories of an American tradition worthy of comparison to the most evolved cuisines on earth, a tradition of simplicity and purity and sheer deliciousness that is only possible when food tastes like what it is, from a particular place, at a particular point in time.

To her readers thirty years ago, the community she depicted in these pages may have seemed even more remote than it does today. Back then, the possibility that many Americans might once again strive to eat only local, seasonal foods, raised or gathered or hooked by people they knew, seemed distant, at best. Back then, most of us were more or less resigned to the industrialization of our food, the mechanization of our work, the trivialization of our play, and the atomization of our communities. But with her recipes and reminiscences, Miss Lewis was able to gently suggest another way of being, one on a human scale, in harmony with the seasons and with our fellow man. For her, always, as it had in her childhood, pleasure flowed unstoppably out of *doing*. She saw clearly that the store-bought cake never brings lasting satisfaction; true contentment comes from baking it yourself, by hand, for someone you love. She also saw no need to rail against the absurdities of modernity; rather, she demonstrated the beauty of tradition, and by doing so, helped stir up a great longing for authenticity, accountability, and

sustainability.

Another notable advocate of simplicity, Mahatma Gandhi, famously remarked that we must become the change we want to make in the world. Like Gandhi, Miss Lewis was as radical as she was traditional. To become the change she wanted to make, she left the racially divided South and plunged into the maelstrom of New York City, working variously as a typesetter for the *Daily Worker* and as a dressmaker for Marilyn Monroe, among other jobs, before she became the chef of an East Side restaurant in Manhattan called Café Nicholson and, later, of Gage & Tollner in Brooklyn. In between, for a time she had a pheasant farm, which she ran with the same hands-on delight and concentration with which she cooked. She never rejected her cultural heritage; she expanded on it. She loved to wear colorful West African–inspired dresses of her own design, and her devotion to the foodways of her childhood ultimately led her to found the Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food. Her key insight was to recognize that truly great traditions belong to all the living, regardless of individual heritage; and that they belong to elective families as well as to those bound by consanguinity.

In the community of culinary celebrities, Miss Lewis's quiet dignity was legendary. On several occasions, my Chez Panisse crew and I traveled east to the big Meals on Wheels benefit in New York. Miss Lewis was unique among the high-powered chefs who were invited to cook at these affairs. Some of them would arrive with their food already made; some would arrive with big staffs and set up ruthlessly efficient production lines. Meanwhile, Miss Lewis would have set up all by herself in a little corner, and would be baking pies, one at a time, alone, or maybe with her friend Scott Peacock. There she would stand, a pillar of strength and calm, rolling out pie crust with a wooden rolling pin and crimping the pastry with her long, efficient fingers. She knew that real food made by hand means more to both those who make it and those who eat it. And she poured her self into her work because she knew that all you can take from this life is what you give away.

As you will discover from this book, Edna Lewis had an irresistible generosity and honesty of spirit. She was far more than the doyenne of Southern cooking. She was, and she remains, an inspiration to all of us who are striving to protect both biodiversity and cultural diversity by

cooking real food in season and honoring our heritage through the ritual of the table. By holding on to her values and expressing them in her life's work, she set a shining example of how to bring beauty and meaning to everyday life.

PREFACE

by Judith Jones, Edna Lewis's editor at Knopf

It was in the spring of 1972 that I first met Edna Lewis. Bob Bernstein, the head of Random House at the time, had suggested to his friend Evangeline Peterson that she and Edna talk with me about the cookbook they were doing together.

I was immediately struck by Edna's regal presence when she walked into my office. She was wearing one of the African-style outfits that she had made herself—a colorful, long, batik skirt and top, with matching scarf draped loosely around her neck and dangling earrings that swung when she tossed back her head. I became even more entranced when she started talking about the foods of her childhood and how she had grown up in Freetown, Virginia, a farming community that her grandfather, a freed slave, had founded. Her face would light up as she recalled gathering wild asparagus along the fence row or of the many dishes her mother would prepare for Revival Sunday (and the long, agonizing wait to taste them). I sensed immediately from her pleasure in these memories that she must be a wonderful cook.

The book that she and Peterson had put together was based on the dishes Edna served at Café Nicholson, in Manhattan's East Fifties, where Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams and other artists and writers would congregate of an evening to taste real Southern food. But it was just a collection of those recipes along with what seemed like popular café fare. And anyway this book, called *The Edna Lewis Cookbook*, was already completed and on its way to the printer, so I could be of little help.

But the book I'd like to see, I said, would be made up of the kind of memories she had just described and of the ways in which she and her family and the people of Freetown raised their food and prepared it throughout the year. Would they give that a try?

They were excited at the prospect. But when they came back a few weeks later with some sample pages in hand, I was disappointed. “This isn’t you, Edna,” I said. “It isn’t the voice I heard when you were talking to me.” At that point Evangeline Peterson, to her great credit, withdrew, saying that yes, Edna should be writing the book herself.

The challenge now was to help Edna recover that voice, and I sensed that she was uneasy about going it alone. So we tried talking out a section one afternoon, with me asking questions and prodding for more detail, and then while we were still giddy with her total recall, I suggested she go straight home and put it all down just as she had told it to me. It worked miraculously. The next week she brought in several pages, handwritten on a long, yellow legal pad, and the words flowed. We repeated these sessions every week through that winter, and before long this book had taken shape.

I think that every reader will feel genuinely grateful for the memories Edna shares with us and for the many things she teaches us, from the proper way to fry chicken to the secret of making “flannel soft” biscuits. Thank you, Edna Lewis. You will always be with us in the pages of *The Taste of Country Cooking*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my sister, Mrs. Virginia Ellis, for her invaluable help and very fine recipes, and for spending many hours over the hot stove cooking, canning, and preserving to refresh our memories; and to thank my brother, Lue Stanley, for his devotion to my efforts and his love for Freetown. To Dr. Glen R. Thomas my sincere thanks for generously placing his home and garden at my disposal.

My appreciation also to Mrs. Grace Saran, a young organic enthusiast and an expert in the knowledge of edible wild mushrooms.

I want to especially thank my niece, Nina Williams, whose help was most important in typing and re-typing the manuscript. She has been working with me on this project for four years, beginning at the age of twelve.

INTRODUCTION

I grew up in Freetown, Virginia, a community of farming people. It wasn't really a town. The name was adopted because the first residents had all been freed from chattel slavery and they wanted to be known as a town of Free People. My grandfather had been one of the first: His family, along with two others, were granted land by a plantation owner, Claiborn R. Mason, Jr., for whom one of them had served as coachman. The property was situated just behind Lahore—a village consisting of only one post office and a general store built around 1840; it still stands today, looking very much the same as it did then.

After the first three families were settled, eight more joined in and purchased land. They built their houses in a circle around my grandfather's, which was in the center. My grandmother had been a brick-mason as a slave—purchased for the sum of $950 by a rich landowner who had several tracts of land and wanted to build two imposing houses on different locations. Grandmother was put to work molding the bricks, then carrying them and laying them (one of the houses she worked on still stands today, owned and restored by a college professor, but the other was destroyed in the Civil War). It was a job that caused my grandmother great anguish because she would have to go off all day to work on the big house, leaving her babies in their cribs and not returning until late in the evening to feed and care for them. The fact that years later, after her children had grown up and were living in Freetown, she would still take her kerosene lamp and go upstairs to make sure they were there and all right is a measure of the pain she bore. It is no wonder that they decided to build a big house so they could all be together. The first part was made of logs, then they added four rooms and clapboarded the whole building. The kitchen was separated from the main house, as were all the kitchens in Freetown

then.

The first school in the area was held in my grandfather's living room, chosen no doubt because he was one of the oldest in the community and had a large and lively family. Children came from as much as six or eight miles to learn, and the teacher was from Ohio, a graduate of Oberlin College. Soon Freetown became a lively place, with poetry readings, singing quartets, and productions of plays put on by the young people. One of the biggest achievements was when my youngest aunt went away to a boarding school at Manassas, Virginia; her brothers had all worked and raised the money to send her. Later my sisters, brothers, and I attended the first accredited school in the area, which was built with funds raised by the same teacher—then quite well along in years—who had taught in Grandfather's living room. And it was the early freedmen who built the church and the entertainment hall and organized events like Revival Week, Emancipation Day, and various other feasts that punctuated our farm year.

The spirit of pride in community and of cooperation in the work of farming is what made Freetown a very wonderful place to grow up in. Ours was a large family: my parents, my grandfather, three sisters, two brothers, and cousins who stayed with us from time to time, all living under the same roof. The farm was demanding but everyone shared in the work—tending the animals, gardening, harvesting, preserving the harvest, and, every day, preparing delicious foods that seemed to celebrate the good things of each season. As well, there was the bounty yielded up by the woods, fields, and streams. It was always fun to go searching for nuts and berries, to have the men bring in some game in the fall or the first fish of spring, all of which not only added to our regular supply of food but always brought something festive to the table.

Whenever there were major tasks on the farm, work that had to be accomplished quickly (and timing is so important in farming), then everyone pitched in, not just family but neighbors as well. And afterward we would all take part in the celebrations, sharing the rewards that follow hard labor. The year seemed to be broken up by great events such as hog butchering, Christmas, the cutting of ice in winter, springtime with its gathering of the first green vegetables and the stock going away to summer pasture, the dramatic moment of wheat threshing, the excitement of Revival Week, Race Day, and the

observance of Emancipation Day. All these events were shared by the whole community, young and old alike. I guess that is why I have always felt that the people of Freetown were very special. They showed such love and affection for us as children, at the same time asking something of us, and they knew how to help each other so that the land would thrive for all. Each family had its own different talents, its special humor, but they were bound together in an important way.

Over the years since I left home and lived in different cities, I have kept thinking about the people I grew up with and about our way of life. Whenever I go back to visit my sisters and brothers, we relive old times, remembering the past. And when we share again in gathering wild strawberries, canning, rendering lard, finding walnuts, picking persimmons, making fruitcake, I realize how much the bond that held us had to do with food. Since we are the last of the original families, with no children to remember and carry on, I decided that I wanted to write down just exactly how we did things when I was growing up in Freetown that seemed to make life so rewarding. Although the founders of Freetown have passed away, I am convinced that their ideas do live on for us to learn from, to enlarge upon, and pass on to the following generations. I am happy to see how many young people are going back to the land and to the South. They are interested in natural farming and they seem to want to know how we did things in the past, to learn firsthand from those who worked hard, loved the land, and relished the fruits of their labor. I hope that this book will be helpful to them. But above all, I want to share with everyone who may read this a time and a place that is so very dear to my heart.

APPENDIX & INDEX

A Note on Baking Powder

I have discovered recently that Royal Baking Powder, which I call for throughout the book, is no longer being made because of the rising cost of cream of tartar. I would hope that the fact that it will no longer be available will stimulate an interest in searching for other forms of leavening. For my tastes, double-acting baking powder—the only kind you'll be able to buy now—contains so many chemicals that it gives a bitter aftertaste to baked goods, and even more so if the product is held over a day or so.

The women of Freetown used to make lovely cakes and breads that rose by the power of beaten egg whites, which were folded in at the last minute. For biscuits and corn breads they relied upon sour milk and baking soda as the raising agent, and, of course, yeast can be utilized in many types of cakes as well as breads. If cream of tartar is available, good results can be achieved by mixing 2 parts cream of tartar with 1 part baking soda, and using this in place of baking powder in the same amount the recipe calls for.

A Note on Herbs to Grow on the Windowsill

PERENNIALS
Tarragon Thyme Chives ANNUALS

Chervil Arugula Garlic

Many herbs grew uncultivated in the corners and along the sides of our garden: sage, horseradish, black basil, thyme, chervil, peppermint, and horehound. The food had so much flavor of its own, herbs were used in a very subtle manner. But we did use them, not only for special occasions but for simple, everyday cooking. Tarragon for all types of mayonnaise sauces. Chervil as a natural for sweet green peas, beans, salads, and sauces. Picked dried sage was indispensable at hog-butchering. For a more subtle flavor of garlic, use the green sprouts instead of the clove bulb—it sprouts readily in a warm room. Thyme was as usual for soups, stews, and stuffings; chives for sauces, salads, and omelets.

They all grow really well on the sill of an east window. Planted in good soil from a nursery, chervil can be planted in succession every other week. The seeds sprout readily. Plant 5 or 6 seeds in a 4-inch flowerpot. They grow well and last a few weeks. All plants should be kept moist but not wet and soggy. Temperature can be the regular temperature of the household. And, of course, they need fresh air. The water used should be that which has been drawn a few days ahead from the tap or well water, but don’t use water that has been standing in a plastic container.

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A Note About the Author

Edna Lewis was born in Freetown, Virginia, a farming community founded after the Civil War by freed slaves (among them her grandfather). For years she lived in New York, where she started her career at the famed Café Nicholson.

Ms. Lewis was the recipient of numerous awards, including the Grande Dame des Dames d'Escoffier International (1999). Together with Scott Peacock, she helped create the Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food. She was also the author of *The Edna Lewis Cookbook, In Pursuit of Flavor*, and, with Scott Peacock, *The Gift of Southern Cooking*. She retired to Decatur, Georgia, where she died in February 2006.

Also by EDNA LEWIS

The Edna Lewis Cookbook

In Pursuit of Flavor

The Gift of Southern Cooking
(with Scott Peacock)