Comment

THE ART OF EATING WORDS

Like poetry, cooking suffers in translation.

—John Thorne, *Simple Cooking*

From page to plate is a considerable leap. Much depends on the cook, but much, too, on the cookbook. If only we could eat the author's words—sometimes they are more artful than the dish they've inspired us to make. Sometimes a recipe is composed by a literary, not culinary, artist.

"Bake slices of white bread in the oven until they are crisp and golden," Elizabeth David suggests in *Italian Food.* The recipe continues: "Rub them with garlic, and then pour olive oil over them. In the districts of Tuscany and Umbria which produce olive oil, the *bruschetta* are eaten with the newly made oil." And there it ends.

Do you begin to salivate as you read those words? Reexamine the catalyst. David's mere mention of it doesn't guarantee that the oil *you* use will be from a northern Italian hill town you've just visited—you, in this imaginary incarnation, being an Englishwoman on a quest. You have come seeking peasants to engage in conversation, during which they will relinquish their culinary secrets. David lovingly describes this process but omits some important information, at least from the *bruschetta* recipe. For example, the garlic should be cut or bruised before it's rubbed; and rubbed not too hard or the bread may tear. And perhaps we ought to "brush" (not pour) the oil. The slices shouldn't drip. And it's nice to reheat the bread after the oil is applied. Or is "apply" too scientific a term? Does it break the spell? Maybe it would be better to just read the recipe, then turn the crumbless page.

John Thorne has a quarrel with cookbook writers (though he lauds David in words usually reserved for belletrists). "Cookbooks can be wonderfully entertaining and informative," he writes in *Simple Cooking,* a collection of pieces first published in his quarterly "food letter" of the same name. Thorne even qualifies as a cookbook connoisseur but hates to bring a volume to the stove. His cookbooks sit on a shelf in his living room, with other literature. Thorne is one example of someone who continually confuses food with the words used to describe it.

For instance, he writes of David: "Even if you have never tried one of her recipes, you sense her [perfect culinary pitch] in the clarity of

her prose." And of Richard Olney: "*Simple French Cooking* is one of a very short list of books that makes us think cooking [*sic*] through the sheer artful force of its example. Like a poem, it affects us with the impact of actual presence, shoving us mercilessly toward revelation."

The communication of divine truth is asking a lot of a cookbook, but Thorne asks nonetheless. He calls "subversive" a book like *Square Meals*, by the newspaper columnists Jane and Michael Stern, which is largely about "American" food generated by food corporations through recipes on packaging. According to Thorne, the authors make "no distinction at all between the food we actually [eat] and the food we only [imagine] eating."

But does Thorne make the distinction himself? Of Olney and others who write eloquently about food, Thorne opines: "It is in the prose with which they situate [their recipes] that we hear the hum of that devoted attention that made this food be. This is art. We know because it touches us beyond hunger: it makes us feel."

Which is it? Is Thorne actually moved by food? Or by the words that have described it? Or does he actually believe that if the writing is artful enough, the dish will be too? One thing he does profess clearly and often: "Recipe cooking is to real cooking as painting by number is to real painting." As a result, Thorne has made a good many cookbook authors angry.

At a meeting of the Culinary Historians of Boston one January night in 1985, Thorne gave his signature lecture against rote recipe-following to a roomful of food writers, including Chinese cookbook author Nina Simonds; the *Atlantic*'s food columnist, Corby Kummer; and the *Boston Globe*'s Sheryl Julian. Introduced as "controversial," Thorne came off as something worse than that, to judge by audience reaction. It was, rather, his turn to sound "subversive." For his is a deconstructionist's debunking of "seamless cookery," as he calls it—that is, the cooking described by cookbook authors who do not acknowledge the existence of any other cookbooks but their own.

In the days when many cooks neither read nor wrote, ingredients were added by the wineglassful and measured in terms of fists and thumbs. Then American cooking—which is not to say cooking in general—evolved under Fannie Farmer's leadership into something that smacked of chemistry. When Farmer introduced "scientific cookery" to Victorian housewives, cooking without a written recipe was what "The Mother of the Level Measure" was rebelling against.

Farmer is buried in Cambridge's Mount Auburn Cemetery, not far from where Thorne delivered his lecture, and perhaps the ground above her plot did perceptibly tremble. Still, what recipe authors may not grasp immediately from Thorne is that he recommends not discarding cookbooks but reading even more of them—especially the well-written variety. He feels that a home cook should do more often what a cookbook author invariably does: research.

In his own book, Thorne gives several recipes for the same thing: a tian, for example. As he notes, "The tian was a simple peasant dish of vegetables that took its name from the vast, heavy earthenware terrine it was cooked in—a *tian*—the classic shape of which, we have on good authority, was round (Elizabeth David) . . . square (Roy Andries de Groot) . . . rectangular (Julia Child) . . . oval (Mireille Johnston)." In short, Thorne would like cookbook authors to be more modest in their pronouncements and home cooks to be bolder in their approach to cooking.

Anyway, we can read about many more meals than we can ever possibly cook, much less consume. And anyone who has tried to invent a dish surely knows it can't often be done. Perhaps new cookbooks should not concentrate on offering new culinary creations. Rather, the author's own idiosyncratic way of writing about food may well be the book's unique ingredient. Fannie Farmer stressed science; the best contemporary food authorities seem to be trying, if not to nudge their writing toward art, at least to articulate their own sensibilities and experiences.

Nor is good food writing, such as Thorne loves, itself exactly new (although, like all good things, it is rare). *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, first published in the same year as David's *Italian Food*, is described by its author as a "mingling of recipe and reminiscence." And it is pleasantly unclear whether the recipes are Toklas's excuse to write the memoirs, or vice versa, so successfully does she entwine the two.

Even her directions for something as simple as hot chocolate do not hamper her writerliness; she cannot resist quickly sketching a vivid scene. She describes the drink as made by Red Cross nuns for soldiers in 1916, at which time Gertrude Stein was driving her car, Aunt Pauline, for the American Fund for French Wounded: "3 ozs. melted chocolate to 1 quart hot milk. Bring to a boil and simmer for ½ hour. Then beat for 5 minutes. The nuns made huge quantities in copper cauldrons, so that the whisk they used was huge and heavy. We all took turns beating." Who among us will not be drinking Alice B. Toklas's cocoa along with imaginary nuns and soldiers, after having read this recipe? Who among us did not just drink an imaginary cup of it?

"But, Alice, have you ever tried to write," a friend asked, without a question mark—that is, knowing the answer already—on learning of Toklas's decision to accept the publisher's invitation that led to this classic work. In the final line of the book, the coy Toklas belatedly replied: "As if a cook-book had anything to do with writing."

Artichoke plates! What a world!

—Joyce Carol Oates, *American Appetites*

One hallmark of an education is to know food, not fear it. It is also to understand, as does Jack London's rough-hewn hero in *Martin Eden*, that eating is "more than a utilitarian function"; it is "an aesthetic function . . . an intellectual function, too." At sea, Martin Eden ate salt beef with a sheath knife and his fingers. At his first meal at a civilized table, he was "unaware of what he ate," but "his mind was stirred." Don't many people believe that it's only members of the underclass who won't eat fish or mushrooms or have otherwise restricted (impoverished) tastes? On the other hand, many knowledgeable diners restrict their eating in entirely different ways.

As we've seen, the smart cookbook authors are becoming more sophisticated writers. But cookbooks are undergoing other changes as well. It's not just an illusion. More and more, these books are really about imagining food, and less and less about actually cooking it. A paradox: Cookbooks sell more copies than ever before, but at the same time, a larger and larger segment of the population eats take-out food or goes to restaurants.

The celebrated Berkeley restaurateur, Alice Waters, admits she is more comfortable with food than words. "Food must be experienced," she says in the preface to her first book, *The Chez Panisse Menu Cookbook*, "and I worry that writing about it may not make the sense I want it to! I wish I could just sit people down and give them something to eat." The book isn't Waters's work alone, but a collaboration with the writer Linda P. Guenzel (the recipes are edited by Carolyn Dille, a cookbook author in her own right).

And yet Waters is inspired by books: her hope was to create a restaurant "that had the same feeling as the pictures on the covers of [Elizabeth David's volumes]"—for example, the paintings of food and other objects by Renato Guttuso (1913–87). Illustrations in books frequently inspire her: "I have a wonderful picture book called *La Belle France*," she writes, "and I have spent hours examining all the details in the photographs: the old gentleman pictured in his garden as he chose a ripe peach and held it up to the camera's eye, the close-up of a strawberry patch overflowing with perfect tiny red berries, a restaurant garden with tables under the arbor right on the grass." She says such images helped mold her gastronomic tastes. What is more, it was not a real chef but a chef modeled after a real one and placed in a novel (Dodin-Bouffant, the bon vivant in Marcel Rouff's *The Passionate Epicure*) who "exhilarated and influenced [her] in countless ways."

For someone who mistrusts words, she puts a lot of faith in them. She speaks of "procedurally oriented cookbooks"—surely a lower form of food writing—and hopes that even a noncook could pick up her book and make a meal, assuming that those baser books would be used for reference. "The transformation of printed words from vagueness to clarity and comprehension is the most important step in the development of your baking skills," she says in her bread chapter. Interesting notion—one that we cookbook readers would love to believe.

Waters knows that bread is one of the most difficult things to learn to make from a book rather than from another person, and she ridicules "hackneyed instructions to 'knead until smooth.'" Her bread chapter is one of the book's best written: "Kneaded, most breads should have a resiliency like that of your relaxed inner thigh." That is a sophisticated sentence: vivid, provocative, *and* technically correct. It gives a reader's imagination a great deal of pleasure. But does Waters realize that it's tempting to simply gorge on her words?

Another reason we might be tempted to read rather than cook: her recipes often call for many unusual and expensive ingredients. Golden caviar and white truffles, yes, but also things like quail eggs, "tiny" escarole, squash blossoms, and small green lentils imported from France. "Luxury cooking" (as the *New York Times* has called it) is not for all of us. Even if we could spend the money, we might not be willing to spend the time locating or growing some of these precious items. Waters herself does not rely on supermarkets. "Our goal," she states, "is to be totally self-sufficient so that we need not depend upon the unreliable quality and inconsistencies of the commercial food wholesalers." This may be a commendable objective, but it is not one that most cooks can hope to achieve. "Genuine involvement with food fosters sensory receptiveness," according to Waters, but, apparently, only to the "right" tastes, textures, and smells.

At the end of the book is a dubious treat: a 46-page section called "Memorable Menus," which lists the courses (no recipes) for some of the most sensational meals served during Chez Panisse's first ten years.

Consider, for example, the Alsatian Regional Dinner:

Pig's Ears Breaded and Grilled with a Mustard Sauce
Alsatian Vinaigrette Salads
Live Garrapata Trout Cooked in a Court-Bouillon
and Served with a Butter Sauce
Munster Cheese
Tart of Dried Fruit with a Coffee Cream

The trout were kept alive in aeration tanks in the kitchen, then killed as needed, by being gutted through the neck. "As far as I am concerned," says Waters, "the only way to eat trout is to kill it and then throw it right into the pan." The annotation for "The Gertrude Stein

Dinner," to commemorate her hundredth birthday, includes this sentence: "I won't ever forget the Gigot de la Clinique because it took everyone at the restaurant at least a week of using syringes to shoot the tangerine juice and brandy into the legs of the lamb." It is all meant to be an inspiration, but it ends up being forbidding. And meal titles like "The Dinner Vernon Made for Me" and "Dinner for Fred on His Birthday" are obscure: captions for snapshots of someone else's dear family, people who are and will remain strangers to us.

Anyone who wants to write about food would do well to stay away from similes and metaphors, because if you're not careful, expressions like "light as a feather" make their way into your sentences, and then where are you?

—Nora Ephron, *Heartburn*

In 1954, Evelyn Waugh was invited by a newspaper to consider all the books he'd read that year, and named Elizabeth David's *Italian Food* as one of the two best. It has been continuously in print ever since, the latest edition being a glossy coffee-table-type book, with sumptuous, full-color illustrations (Italian artists' depictions of food, crops, and game, and of people eating and cooking from the fifteenth century onward).

At the start of this essay, I quoted David to show how words could deceive a cookbook reader, and in doing so, I may have unintentionally cast doubt on David's literary worth. The way she begins an anecdote about the candied walnuts of Turin, for example, might as easily be the opening of a piece of fiction: "It was the autumn of 1963. With my old friend Viola Johnson I had been on a brief visit to Alba to eat the famous white truffles, and now we were due to return to London. In those days there were direct flights between London and Turin, and that circumstance provided a good opportunity for Viola to see her father who still lived in his native city, where she had herself been born and brought up. But at this moment we were shopping for small gifts to take home to England."

Our own country's most eminent (so-called) food writer, M. F. K. Fisher, does not often compose recipes. Besides her gastronomical works, she has written fiction, poetry, and a screenplay. In one masterful short story, called "A Kitchen Allegory" and included in *Sister Age*, a food eccentric—a Mrs. Quayle—renounces all but seaweed and the like after once more unsuccessfully offering, instead of love, culinary delights to her estranged daughter and grandson ("Even the tiny boy ate almost nothing"). Her book *Two Towns in Provence*, which includes "Map of Another Town: A Memoir of Provence" and "A Considerable Town" (about Marseilles), is the subject of a laudatory poem by Raymond Carver published in his final collection, *Ultramarine*, and dedicated to her.

When reference is made to "anyone who wants to write about food," however, I believe it applies mainly to those like Lora A. Brody, author of *Growing Up on the Chocolate Diet: A Memoir with Recipes*, and Viviane Alchech Miner, who wrote (with Linda Krinn) *From My Grandmother's Kitchen: A Sephardic Cookbook*, whose books, no matter how "writerly," are intended to be used as cookbooks and are marketed as such. Yet while it remains uncommon for a novelist to single out a cookbook, even one as accomplished as David's or Fisher's, for literary praise, portrayals of cookbook authors in three current novels express an awareness that cookbooks today are increasingly "written."

At the start of Joyce Carol Oates's novel, *American Appetites*, the cookbook author Glynnis McCullough is at work on her third volume. This work is to differ radically from the previous two. Oates, who once gave a collector of favorite dishes of the literati a "recipe" calling solely for opening a can of Campbell's soup, has created a narrator who surely intends to be ironic when she informs us: "The first cookbook had seemed to Glynnis scarcely written at all, merely assembled, at the urging of . . . friends; the second was her publisher's idea; the third, though Glynnis's own idea, seems to her now overly ambitious. . . . It is the first of Glynnis McCullough's cookbooks to be more than a mere assemblage of recipes; it is—thus the frustration, and the fear!—the first of her books to be really *written*."

Nora Ephron's cookbook author, Rachel Samstat, the comically bitter voice of *Heartburn*, remarks of her volumes (*Uncle Seymour's Beef Borscht* is one; *My Grandmother's Cookies* another): "The cookbooks I write do well. They're very personal and chatty—they're cookbooks in an almost incidental way. I write chapters about friends or relatives or trips or experiences, and work in the recipes peripherally." Samstat even strews recipes throughout her novel. At times, she seems confused about whether she is writing just another cookbook *or* a novel, and her confusion seems to embody the state of food writing today. For Samstat, the distinction between her cookbooks and her novel cannot be easily made. She hopes readers are not disappointed by *Heartburn*'s relative lack of recipes (there are fifteen, including "lima beans and pears" and "Chez Helen's bread pudding," indexed in the back). She knows that recipes are what readers have come to expect of her.

Rachel confuses not only words with food, but herself with food at times: she refers to "the peanut-butter-and-jellyness of [her] life." In the same way, the cookbook author featured in Marge Piercy's *Fly Away Home* thinks of herself while in a bad mood as "mounds of mashed

potatoes," and after sex as a pleasing combination of honey and chocolate. "I'm cooked myself," she says to express how she feels in hot weather.

Piercy's Daria Porfirio Walker writes cookbooks with titles like *Cool as Cucumber Soup*, as well as the food column for the *Boston Globe*, and is the most traditional food writer—and housewife—of the three, to judge from her own description of her methods: "She recognized that the creation and modification of recipes and the figuring out of how to describe each process clearly as a cheerful little soprano aria had always had as a bass drone love for her family. This is how I cook, I Daria who love my husband Ross, who love my girls Robin and Tracy; this is how I feed them and keep them strong and happy. This gives pleasure."

At the heart of Piercy's book, however, is a husband who is not only an adulterer but a slumlord and arsonist as well. *Heartburn*, too, is about an adulterous affair, which takes place during a pregnancy, while a case of mistaken infidelity starts the fatal trouble in *American Appetites*. Beyond the pages of many a cookbook's syrup, these authors imply, there is turmoil in the American household. It is especially so when women engage in "competitive cooking," as Ephron calls it—that is, when they are forced to derive their sense of worth solely from household chores, from cooking in anticipation of "someone else's hunger" (a phrase of Fisher's). After all, in our fat-phobic society, food does not always "give pleasure." Food, substituted for love, can widely miss its mark, as Fisher's Mrs. Quayle found out. Food can even be deadly. (Lou, hired to set the fires in *Fly Away Home*, has an uncle who died of food poisoning.) And not all things culinary are blithe: think of butchery. Cutlery can be lethal; Oates's Glynnis wields a steak knife in a terrible argument with her husband. The weapon of choice for Ephron's Samstat is a key lime pie.

What is more, two of these novels' heroines have raised daughters who are anorexic, bulimic, or both. Bianca, Glynnis's daughter, "fussed over her mother's recipes and spent hours in the kitchen," though "she had very little appetite for the meals she had prepared" and in fact sometimes couldn't "keep it down." Robin, Daria's daughter, has been dieting since puberty, and "could only view her mother's professional involvement with food as a sin."

The irony of anorexia nervosa, of course, is that its victims are "food-obsessed." According to Joan Jacobs Brumberg, author of *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease*, "Unlike depression, where there is a true reduction of appetite, in anorexia nervosa, the patient is constantly aware of her hunger . . . dwelling on images of the very food that she fears." If you've ever been cooked for by an anorectic you'll know how right Jacobs is. I recall the kitchen of a twig-fingered cook who, in her preparations, had deposited in each serving dish a piece of paper with the name of the food that was to go into it, as if these letterings were the meal. That's what it looked like until the meal was served. In any case, words were the woman's meal; she never actually sat at the table, but kept fussing in the kitchen. Her only nourishment that evening was words of praise.

Today's anorectic is thinner than ever before, Brumberg points out, and predicts that the prevalence of this disorder, first named and identified in the 1870s, will persist if not worsen. "Today's anorectic is one of a long line of women and girls throughout history who have used control of appetite, food, and the body as a focus of their symbolic language," writes Brumberg, who even uses the term *food vocabulary*.

There is a third anorexic daughter in yet another contemporary novel about a professional "food star" (Corby Kummer's coinage), although this protagonist is not a cookbook author per se. He is Thomas Berger's Carl Reinhart of *Reinhart's Women*, fourth in the Reinhart series.

Reinhart, the divorced father of two grown children, is being supported by his daughter, Winona, who was once fat but is now a model. (She is also a lesbian, we learn in this novel of inversions, another example of which is Reinhart's financial position. Because he is not self-supporting, he finds himself in the economic predicament of many women.) Winona was "used" by a man when she was sixteen, "in her most extreme moment of obesity," according to Berger's narrator, who seems to imply that Winona's loss of appetite control left her vulnerable to attacks of all kinds. The svelte Winona has no interest in food. Nor does Reinhart's son, Blaine: "Blaine was wrinkling his nose in boredom. Reinhart realized suddenly that his son had probably never really liked food: there were people like that. For himself he could listen for hours to lists of provender."

Winona's lover, Grace, a food-company executive, gets Reinhart a job demonstrating cooking at a grocery store. ("After some deliberation Reinhart had chosen crepes suzette: a name known to all as the quintessence of Gourmetism." Known even if not tasted, that is.) Then Grace lands Reinhart a spot on the "Eye Opener Show."

Ephron's Samstat and Piercy's Daria are TV celebrities, too. (Julia Child is our most famous real-life example.) How ironic it is that TV is the ultimate a "food person" today can achieve. Cookbook sales soar. Yet TV audiences do not taste or even smell the food that TV chefs prepare. The TV cooking experience perfectly illustrates our society's

ambiguous attitude toward food: wanting it yet not wanting it; maybe we'd better just look.

You are not cooking carrots in general, but specifically these *carrots, in* this *pot, on* this *stove.*

—Deborah Madison (with Edward Espe Brown),
The Greens Cook Book

Occasionally, a novelist turns from fiction to recipes. Laurie Colwin's *Home Cooking: A Writer in the Kitchen*, a collection of essays, is exactly the kind of cookbook that Rachel Samstat would write. It's chatty and anecdotal, though the recipes are integral rather than incidental to its design. This truly is a cookbook, and proudly so. Having published novels and short stories, Colwin seems content to write in the cookbook genre for the length of one volume at least, though she can't suppress her skill as a writer of imaginative prose while doing so. From her chapter on flank steak: "My introduction to flank steak was a dreary one. I was invited for supper by a colleague who told me she was no cook, but that flank steak, according to the recipe of her sainted grandmother, was her one dish. Because I like to hang around in the kitchens of others, I watched while my colleague took a flat, blade-shaped piece of meat which she then rolled up and tied, like an old carpet."

Nor does this writer's passion for food come to us out of the blue, as did James M. Cain's recipes and food writing, for which, according to his biographer Roy Hoopes, he was perpetually trying to get assignments. Colwin's cookbook isn't out of character, because, unlike Cain's fiction, her other books are often illuminating about the symbolic roles that food and cooking play in modern life, particularly in the lives of women.

In *Another Marvelous Thing*, Colwin's female protagonist, nicknamed Billy, who is having an affair with Francis, is "indifferent" to food. "She hates to cook and will never present [Francis] with an interesting post-coital snack." Instead, they smear peanut butter on stale water crackers: "They were both ravenous and almost anything would have done." At a dinner party Billy gave, "it was clear that cooking bothered her." Vera, Francis's wife, on the other hand, is "an ace cook" who has been trained at a cooking school in France. Even so, she and Francis have a housekeeper who is "a marvelous cook." Vera does it only for fun.

In *Family Happiness*, dining-table scenes form a continuous series of tableaux, because, unlike many other modern American families, the extended family portrayed here still eats together regularly—Sunday brunch, for example, is a long-standing tradition. Polly Solo-Miller Demarest, a lawyer's wife who is having an affair with a painter, is the

book's main character; at her peak moment of emotional distress—unable to decide between husband or lover—she has an epiphany in a supermarket. She sees a couple of teenagers buying chocolate and bananas with which to make a pudding and "felt as if she had been pierced with knives, as if the boy and girl had been sent to rub her nose in the face of young married love, full of silliness and improvised meals."

Polly, like Alice Waters, does not make a habit of shopping in supermarkets. "There were people who actually bought their *vegetables* at the supermarket—Polly did not believe that anything in a supermarket could really be fresh. . . . Shopping in a supermarket was a sign of bad housekeeping. How could these people bring themselves to admit their flaws publicly?" Of course, Polly's whole life, up until that moment, has been a public performance.

Readers of *Home Cooking* know that Colwin, unlike Billy, loves food. Readers also know that Colwin loves words as much as food—even preferring the bread-baking lessons of Elizabeth David's *English Bread and Yeast Cookery* to those of a friend. Still, she doesn't want people to simply read her cookbook. Her ingredients and directions make it plain that her book is meant for real people who shop in supermarkets and—unlike angels, anorexics, or the dead—really do need to eat.

In all, I received five cookbooks for the writing of this piece; so far, I have cooked from only two. Though I found the writing more than congenial in both *Home Cooking* and *Simple Cooking*, I still have only read their recipes, not tried them. I found the edition of *Italian Food* too beautiful to risk soiling in the kitchen. I have made three of the less exotic dishes from the intimidating *Chez Panisse*: a warm goat-cheese salad, chicken with a garlic puree, and five small loaves of the Chez Panisse bread. On the other hand, I have made nine dishes from *The Greens Cook Book: Extraordinary Vegetarian Cuisine from the Celebrated Restaurant*, by Deborah Madison (with Edward Espe Brown). I have even made some of these dishes more than once.

These were, for the record—and this will give an idea of the fare the book offers: Roasted Eggplant with Garlic Puree; White Bean and Fresh Tomato Soup with Parsley Sauce; Yellow Split Pea Soup with Spiced Yogurt; Black Bean Chili; Potato Bread; Baked Polenta Layered with Tomato, Fontina, and Gorgonzola; Spinach and Ricotta Roulade; Peach and Blueberry Cobbler; and Blackberry Crisp.

Some of these are based on ancient recipes (the bread); the desserts are not unique. A roulade is not a *Greens* invention; nor is the concept of a vegetarian soup. Furthermore, I am not a vegetarian or a follower of Zen, which is clearly the authors' philosophic leaning. What, then, is the book's appeal?

The Greens is congenially written, but not anecdotal or autobiographical, except for a brief history of the restaurant, which opened in 1979 at Fort Mason on San Francisco Bay. The sentences are clean and often vivid, but not poetic. Of stinging nettles, for example, the authors write: "These prickly greens are usually volunteers in the garden that make themselves known with their sharp, surprising sting when you are trying to weed." And here is the beginning of the "Sandwiches and Bread" section: "There is something very satisfying about eating with one's hands. Even pizzas have become a knife-and-fork food, but sandwiches are still picked up, handheld, and carried places."

As for the book's directions, they are, well, direct. There is a striking absence of similes and metaphors (Rachel Samstat would approve). A pastry dough recipe goes: "Cut the butter into small pieces; then work it into the flour with two knives or your fingers until the small pieces begin to hold together." Thus, it manages nicely without either stock phrase, "the size of small peas" or "until it resembles cornmeal"—contradictory comparisons, anyway.

That absence of figures of speech distinguishes this book from the rest. While others promise that their icing will be "suave" and their steamed pudding "sincere," and even that, after one taste of a certain turkey stuffing, everything will seem "right again," *The Greens*, true to its Zen philosophy, promises only food.

Jeanne Schinto

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