A BOOK OF MEDITERRANEAN FOOD
ELIZABETH DAVID
FOREWORD BY CLARISSA DICKSON WRIGHT
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ELIZABETH DAVID (1913–1992) was brought up in an outwardly idyllic seventeenth-century Sussex farmhouse, Wootton Manor, and her interest in cooking may well have been a response to the less-than-stellar meals on offer there. During World War II she lived in France, Italy, Greece, and Egypt (where she worked for the Ministry of Information), and spent much of her time researching and cooking local fare. On her return to London in 1946 she began to write cooking articles, and in 1949 the publisher John Lehmann offered her a hundred-pound advance for *A Book of Mediterranean Food*. When it came out the following year, it proved a revelation to Anglo-Saxon appetites. David’s other books include *Italian Food* (1951) and *Summer Cooking* (1955; also published by NYRB Classics). She continued to be a student of her art throughout her life. Always an innovative force, she even persuaded Le Creuset to extend its range of cookware colors by pointing at a pack of Gauloises. “That’s the blue I want,” she said. Elizabeth David was awarded a CBE, made a Chevalier de l’Ordre de Mérite Agricole, and—the honor that pleased her most—elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

CLARISSA DICKSON WRIGHT is best known as half of TV’s Two Fat Ladies duo and cowrote that series’ cookbooks. Her other books include *The Haggis: A Little History* (1996) and *Food: What We Eat and How We Eat* (1999).
I was three years old in 1950 when Elizabeth David’s A Book of Mediterranean Food was published. Still, I have a very early memory of sitting on the floor by the bookshelves in my mother’s study and looking at the pictures that John Minton had so lovingly crafted. I had never seen the blue of the Mediterranean, but I have carried it from that book’s cover in my mind’s eye ever since. The fact that when I did see it it wasn’t like that at all is of no matter.

It is this vision of a land that existed solely in Elizabeth David’s imagination which has shaped our food, our dreams, and our thinking over the past fifty years. Those who rush to buy holiday homes in France or Chiantishire [as Tuscany has now been renamed] or those endless books that have only to mention purple lavender fields or baskets of lemons to make the best-seller lists, all are searching for a place that isn’t there except in the heart of this great food writer.

To Elizabeth David, the Mediterranean was about far more than food—it was her escape both mentally and physically from the restrictions of an English upper-class family in the chilly confines of Wootton Manor in Sussex. Born on Boxing Day, 1913, she came of good stock: her father’s family found their fortune in Wales in the mid-1800s and her mother was the daughter of a viscount, the granddaughter of a lord, and the niece of a countess. Later, Elizabeth was related by marriage to the cream of society—the Cecils, the Shrewsburys, and the Palmers—and the arrogance and self-confidence of her background comes out in all her writing.

She was autocratic; she didn’t suffer fools gladly and had all the precision of her age and class. You would never dare to speak
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to her of note paper if you meant writing paper, and this translated itself to the accuracy of her writing. Listen to this passage from A Book of Mediterranean Food and you will hear all the dismissiveness of the Edwardian high-born:

The meat of young kid is much appreciated all over the Mediterranean, especially in the more primitive parts such as Corsica and the Greek islands. It is hard to say why there is such a prejudice against this animal in England, and it is only the gastronomically ignorant who, the moment they go abroad, suppose that whatever meat they are eating is disguised horse or goat. The textures of these meats are quite unlike those of veal, beef, or mutton, and there is besides no call for a French or Italian cook to pretend that he is serving mutton when it is in fact goat.

In the same way, foreigners in the Middle East are often heard to complain that they are being served with camel instead of beef. If they had ever eaten camel meat they would soon know the difference.

A Book of Mediterranean Food was an act of courage on the part of its first publisher, John Lehmann. Postwar Britain was a gray, unhappy place, the scars of bomb sites a horrifying reminder of the recent hostilities. British food was probably at its lowest ebb ever, and the taste of Spam, dried egg, and Woolton Pie had soured the palates of its people. (This last, named after the Minister of Food, Lord Woolton, was a vegetable pie thickened with oatmeal and flavored with Marmite.) Most food was still rationed, and, except in the sinister streets of Soho, olive oil could only be bought in bottles marked “For External Use Only” in chemists’ shops.

How dramatic a risk Elizabeth’s first book was is evident from its very first recipe. Soupe au Pistou calls for French beans, tomatoes, vermicelli, garlic, sweet basil, Gruyère cheese, and
potatoes. Most of these ingredients were entirely unavailable at the time. Indeed, only the last would have been at all easy to purchase.

Several things stand out about Elizabeth David: her perfectionism, her immaculate use of English, and her exquisite prose. An avid and eclectic reader, she scattered her work liberally with quotations from Arnold Bennett (an after-hours lunch at the finest restaurant in the world), Robert Byron (an octopus- and snail-filled Greek feast), Tobias Smollett (on the abundance of fish in Nice), D.H. Lawrence (a celebration of Sardinian vegetables), and Alin Laubreax's The Happy Glutton, to name but a few. Then there is her passion for food from start to finish. The purity of the ingredients, the correct utensils, the exquisite presentation of the end result, all are reflected in Elizabeth’s instructions. In her recipe for Paella Valenciana, she urges, “The rice should be a beautiful yellow colour, and although moist, each grain should be separate. And if it is necessary to stir, use a fork, not a spoon, which might break the rice.”

So concise, but it says it all. Though her recipes are written for cooks (and sometimes require some background or a certain knowledge of technique), their ease, authenticity, and simplicity are the main reason that her work has stood the test of time. Were it not for A Book of Mediterranean Food's excellence as a recipe book, it would long ago have been relegated to the archives as a historical curiosity. I have been a professional bookseller now for almost fifteen years and never a week has gone by when I have not sold several Elizabeth Davids. Even in these days awash with volumes on Mediterranean food, customers will look through them all but buy hers because, as they say, she makes it seem so simple. They are right. I have seen recipes for Scallops à la Provençale that cover two full pages; this is Elizabeth’s: “Cut the white part of each scallop into two rounds,
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season with salt, pepper, and lemon juice, dust with flour, and fry them in butter for a few minutes, put in the coral and a little chopped garlic and parsley, and serve the butter poured over them” (see page 51). No would-be cook would get dinner-party phobias after reading that.

You must remember that at the time this book was written the British regarded foreign food as “filth.” Garlic was something abandoned in the Victorian past and Great Britain had managed to impose bad food on a good deal of the globe. Those who read Elizabeth David in the Fifties really couldn’t get hold of the ingredients unless they either demanded them or grew them themselves. Customer demand then spread and spread. One is now overwhelmed, even in supermarkets, by exotic vegetables and herbs as well as all manner of oils and vinegars—and garlic is omnipresent. Mediterranean food has become the dominant cuisine in most global cooking, olive oil the elixir of life itself, the tomato the definitive anti-carcinogenic. That vegetables often lack the flavor Elizabeth loved is not her fault. Nowhere in her books did she need to use the words free range or organic; agribusiness had yet to force their coinage. We now have that hill to reclimb.

I was at the auction sale of Elizabeth’s culinary possessions—not so much an auction as a purchase of sacred relics—and was the underbidder on Tom Conran’s behalf on the table where she did all her cooking and writing. I watched it go to Prue Leith for a huge sum, a scrubbed old kitchen table. Her bowl of wooden spoons, battered and scarred as one might expect, fetched £400. These bidders weren’t dealers; they were people who wanted to be able to say that they owned something that their heroine had used or even just touched. In fact, my most prized possession is her legacy to me, a copy of her favorite book, The Cookery Book of Lady Clarke of Tillypronie. Tucked into it is a draft of a page
from *English Bread and Yeast Cookery* (1977) so simply written that it keeps me straight when I’m writing recipes.

I didn’t know Elizabeth David well, but I remember the first time I answered a phone call from her I dropped the receiver. I told her it was like taking a call from God, and there ever after when she rang me she would announce herself with “God calling.” I only met her once, and you could see beneath the ravages of the years the great beauty she once was. At her memorial service at St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London in September 1992, the great of the food world stood and talked of her scholarship and her wit; they talked of the little blue bowl of black olives and the glasses of wine. But no one spoke of her cooking until an aging actor described how she had once prepared him the most perfect of omelettes. Only then could I weep for that woman who had changed all our lives.

—Clarissa Dickson Wright