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, David began to write cooking articles, and in 1949 the publisher John Lehmann offered her a hundred-pound advance for *A Book of Mediterranean Food* (also published by NYRB Classics). When it came out the following year, it proved a revelation to Anglo-Saxon appetites. *Summer Cooking* (1955) consolidated her position as the foremost food writer of her day. David 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.

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JUST after World War II, a handful of writers began waging a campaign against the staid Anglo table. James Beard glorified America and elevated home cooking. Julia Child made French cooking seem possible, even fun. Writing from Aix-en-Provence, M. F. K. Fisher’s words for ordinary things—a baguette, an omelette, a stewed chicken—made them luminous, so many sheathes of light in a wilderness of the mundane, so many simple answers to complicated hungers. Like Fisher, and stylistically completely unlike Fisher, Elizabeth David imbued the simple act of cooking and eating with the power of an art: it could change you.

This group of writers introduced the notion of life beyond duty, nutrition, and habit, suggesting instead the possibility of pleasure. Mid-twentieth-century food writers evoked an adventuring, exotic, intrepid world, a world in which Betty Crocker could yank off her apron and run off to Paris or Provence, to Morocco or India at any moment. Theirs was a world that threatened the domestic status quo. But its subversiveness was obscured by their celebratory prose, by how neatly their agenda—Live Better, Eat Gourmet—fit their times.

Their excitement of discovery paralleled the nascent globalism of the postwar era. Their image of a better quality of life appealed to a middle class on the rise in those prosperous times. Their genteel sensuality echoed the same, life-affirming yelp that fueled the baby boom. That the children conceived of this boom see themselves as founders, rather than stewards, of a Food Revolution suggests what has already been lost: memory.

Contemporary food writers—and yes, I’m one—tend to celebrate having good food as well as the education and privilege to appreciate it. The generation before us didn’t have; they sought.
The active process of seeking, the risk of flouting convention, the danger inherent in a life made up of fleeting pleasures is some of what can make food more than food.

In *Summer Cooking*, Elizabeth David creates an ambiance in which food can be art. Originally published in 1955, the book is largely set outdoors, consciously placed beyond the four walls of a proper dining room, apart from the progression of six courses served in affluent British households at that time. Picnics exist outside convention; maybe that is why Elizabeth David loved them.

She was reared on a country manor, and although her family’s fortunes were fading throughout her childhood, she was, still, brought up on the bland pabulum and strict decorum of the British aristocracy. In *Writing at the Kitchen Table*, David’s biographer Artemis Cooper writes about the girl’s awareness of a different life, something more robust and real and free, downstairs, and about secret meals that her nanny cooked over the fire in the nursery David shared with her four sisters.

Her relish suggested her discontent with manor life, her hunger to escape its rules and restrictions. There was significant hand-wringing when, at eighteen years old, after studying in France and Germany, David chose to work in London’s theater instead of marrying. Still, her family was not surprised; Liza, as she was called, was high-spirited, a rebel. She fell in love with an aspiring playwright and in 1939 borrowed against the principle of her small inheritance to buy a two-masted yacht with a motor in which the couple sailed the Mediterranean for several years. By the time the affair ended, David had sojourned in Antibes and Corsica, traveled the west coast of Italy, and settled in Alexandria, where she worked as a cipher clerk for the British Navy.

In her eight years abroad, David learned to appreciate good food. In Egypt, thanks to the cook who worked for her, she learned to prepare it. Even before marrying a British officer and
moving with him first to India and then back to England, Elizabeth David’s métier was pan-Mediterranean. This cuisine’s deep, simple, direct flavors, informality, and improvisational nature were inseparable from her decade of living dangerously.

*Summer Cooking* was a departure for David. Her first three books, *A Book of Mediterranean Food* (1950), *French Country Cooking* (1951), and *Italian Food* (1954), were fastidiously researched, as much culinary anthropology as they were cooking manuals, and they rocked the British to the very core of their long-ignored taste buds. David was a star by the time she began working on *Summer Cooking*, assured enough to create a more lighthearted, personal, whimsical book. Instead of recording foreign ways with food, she drew on her own experiences in foreign, sunny places.

David delivered a state of mind, rather than a specific place. In doing so, she distilled a spirit of cooking, something sensual, exploratory, idiosyncratic, and, ultimately, communal. The purpose of picnics, after all, is the gathering, the place, the time, the day, not the food. Poor food can introduce a dissonant note; good food can be the connective tissue. David’s recipes attempt to capture peak moments—the breath between ripeness and rot, the second between a glassy shard of blackberry water ice and a limpid puddle of sweetened berry juice—moments that can be imitated, but not duplicated.

Usually her recipes succeed, though never as unimpeachable formulae. David believed that her readers had common sense and a grasp of cooking fundamentals. She gave an impressionistic sense of a dish, calling in a recipe for Iced Russian Soup, for instance, specifically for half a pound of young beet roots and then instructing that they be cooked “in a little salted water for a few minutes.” David’s recipes wouldn’t make it by any food editor I know; today, recipes are expected to be an exact science (which they can’t, really, ever be).
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But cooking wasn’t a science to David; it was an art. Recipes today are created to be followed literally and slavishly, the culinary equivalent to paint-by-numbers. The recipes that David wrote nearly half a century ago are broad strokes on a canvas—she leaves the details to the cook, and for this reason, her recipes are neither dated nor dowdy, they are alive.

Contemporary readers who have become accustomed to following (and dependent on blaming the recipe should a dish displease) may balk at David’s recipes. They require the cook to engage, to reason, to improvise, to risk failure. Those willing to take responsibility for their cooking, however, may find a moment of intense liberation in using her blueprints as a starting point for their own improvisation. Eventually, they may even find their own voice in the kitchen.

And that’s exactly what Elizabeth David and her generation of food writers lobbied for. Food was, for them, a door into a wider world and their mission was to open it further, to beckon, to guide, to teach, to share, and to change. Her object, she wrote in the introduction to Summer Cooking, was to present “something fresh which provides at the same time a change, a new outlook...”

Changed individuals gradually amounted to a social shift. Prior to the postwar generation, only the elite could afford precious ingredients and the cooks to confect them, only the privileged could afford the travel and education and experience it takes to distinguish between fine food and the banal. In the mid-twentieth century, however, food writers stopped addressing the elite and began writing for the masses.

Fine food, they sang, is an accessible luxury; you may not be able to mine and polish diamonds, but you can cook a fine meal. Perhaps even more importantly, these writers were less interested in the talismans of precious food—the truffles and foie gras and caviar—than they were in ordinary dishes. They democratized good taste.
Julia Child did not become a household name by creating trembling towers of impossible-to-find ingredients, as today's TV chefs tend to do; she taught America how to make a decent baguette. In the kneading cooks began to sense the equation between effort and finesse, to know that the power to wrest the extraordinary from the ordinary lay in their own hands. Child was irrepressibly American in her practical can-do-ism; David was more British and also more literary: hidden, elusive, and, ultimately, as evocative as she was instructive.

Like Child, however, David changed the way a nation ate and thought about eating. She did not accomplish this by incubating admiration in the fashion of today's look-at-me food memoirists. Unlike M. F. K. Fisher, who writes about food as a way of writing about herself (as lyrically as Whitman had he focused on, say, omelettes instead of blades of grass), David writes about herself (almost begrudgingly, and as coolly as Anaïs Nin) as a way of writing about food.

One wants to share Fisher's life, to experience what she experienced, to be her friend. But one wants to be invited to lunch at Elizabeth David's, to eat what she cooked, and to talk about it, carefully. Of the mid-twentieth-century food writers, David was the least tolerant of criticism and, toward the end, was isolated in the brittle cage of her judgments.

But *Summer Cooking* came before that. It came before the word "foodie" was minted, before arbiters became feared and idolized, before good taste became professionalized, quantified, fetishized. Food was still an amateur's game when she composed her book of picnics and easy eating. Sometimes, after a twelve-hour workday, when I force myself to cook a decent meal, order my senses to pay attention, and find transcendence by the forkful, I envy Elizabeth David's life.

She wrote at the kitchen table early in the morning, then moved her papers aside and cooked lunch for a crowd every day. She did not hire professional recipe testers; she cooked and
measured her success by the duration of the meal, the velocity of the conversation. She probably did her own dishes!

I covet the accounts of these idylls, this romance, this time outside time. I don’t return to Elizabeth David to remember how to cook, I read her to remember how I wanted to live and why I learned to cook in the first place.

—MOLLY O’NEILL