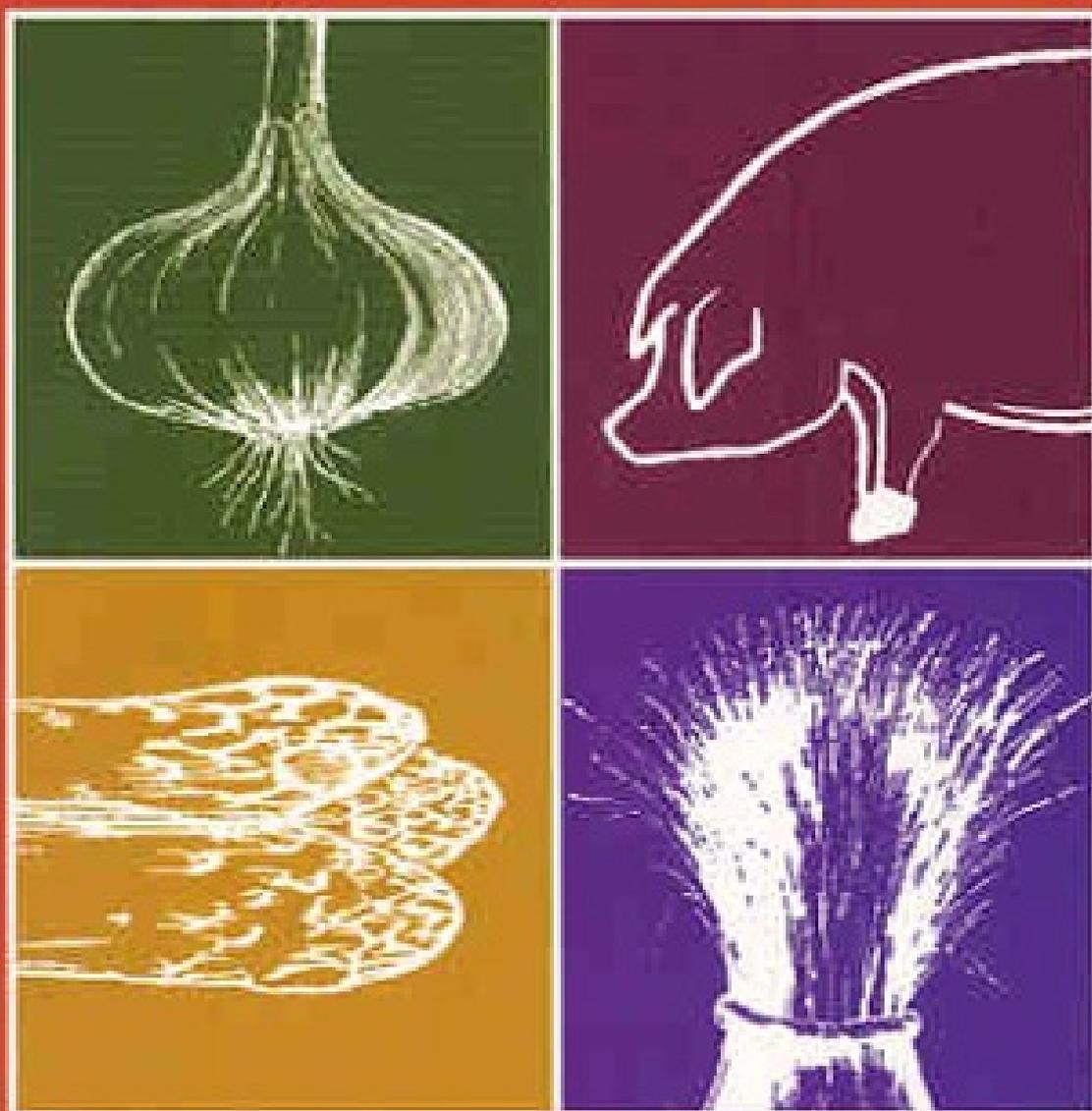
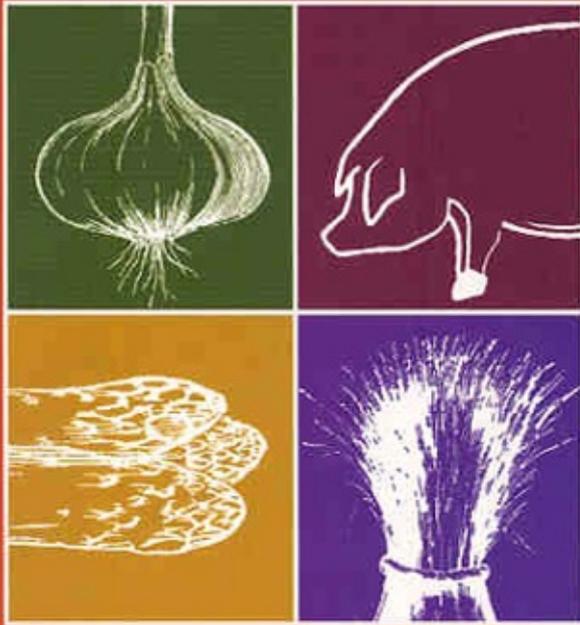


elisabeth luard



european
peasant
cookery

elisabeth luard



european
peasant
cookery

EUROPEAN PEASANT COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

GRUB STREET • LONDON

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the years many people from many countries have helped me in many ways with the preparation of this book, notably those who appear in person in the text. In addition to them I owe particular gratitude for patient assistance in cultural and culinary matters to Betty Molesworth Allen, Maurice Panton d'Amecourt, Bernard Augé, Elisabeth and Odbjorn Andreassen, Viviker and Richard Bernstrom, Tomas Bianchi, Mrs Vasili Frunzete, Alfred Grizel, Christian Hesketh, Vane Ivanovic, Frau Klein, Mitte Lhoest, Cecilia McEwen, Maureen McGlashan, Kiki Munchi, Ilhan and Ruya Nebioglu, May Pocock, Dr Astri Riddervold, Monica Rawlins, Erzbet Schmidl, Iolanda Tsalas, and Jacqueline Weir. Above all, my thanks to Priscilla White, who valiantly tested the recipes in my kitchen; to my inspiring and hardworking editor, Kate Parkin; and to my beloved companion at table, Nicholas. For new work included in this edition, I owe particular thanks to Dun Gifford of Oldways in Boston, Mass. And finally to the editor and publisher of this new revised edition, the estimable Anne Dolamore.

For my children Caspar, Francesca, Poppy and Honey, without whom there would have been no book.

This new revised edition published in 2004 by

Grub Street

4 Rainham Close

London

SW11 6SS

Email: food@grubstreet.co.uk

www.grubstreet.co.uk

Text copyright © Elisabeth Luard 1986, 2004

Copyright this edition © Grub Street 2004

Cover design by AB3 Design

Typeset by Pearl Graphics, Hemel Hempstead

First published in Great Britain by Bantam Press, 1986

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Luard, Elisabeth

European peasant cookery. –Rev. ed.

1. Cookery, European

I. Title II. Luard, Elisabeth. European peasant cookery

641.5'94

ISBN 1 904010 50 4

eISBN 978-1-908117-92-2

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn

CONTENTS

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[FISH AND FOOD FROM THE SEA](#)

[SMALL GAME](#)

[POULTRY AND BARNYARD](#)

[PORK AND STOREHOUSE MEATS](#)

[LAMB, MUTTON AND KID](#)

[BEEF, REINDEER AND GRILLED MEATS](#)

[BEANS, LENTILS, RICE, PULSES AND GRAINS](#)

[PASTA, SAVOURY PUDDINGS, PASTRIES, PIES AND DUMPLINGS](#)

[POTATO DISHES](#)

[VEGETABLES](#)

[HERBS AND FUNGI](#)

[OLIVES AND OLIVE OIL](#)

[EGGS, DAIRY AND CHEESE](#)

[BREADS AND YEASTED PASTRIES](#)

[SWEET PIES, TARTS, PUDDINGS AND PANCAKES](#)

[FRUITS, NUTS AND FLOWERS](#)

[BIBLIOGRAPHY](#)

[FOOTNOTES](#)

INTRODUCTION

This book had its genesis in a remote valley in Andalucia in the late 1960s, when the world was a different place. The Iron Curtain obscured the lives of much of Eastern Europe; Western Europe was still recovering from the effects of two world wars and the people of the Mediterranean littoral were still locked in what some might call a medieval way of life.

Where we—myself and writer-husband Nicholas, our growing family of three (soon to be four) small children—chose to make our home, Spain's ferocious civil war had left its mark on the land and the people. Franco, the old dictator, was still in power, limiting what the people might decide for themselves. In that part of southern Spain, modern life had not made many inroads on the self-sufficient community of subsistence farmers among whom we settled. Brought up a diplomat's stepdaughter in Spanish-speaking lands and confident that the Latin attitude to children would allow us to live more merrily than among the Anglo-Saxons, I had no doubts about the rightness of the decision. Where we lived as a family, I considered, was essentially my decision, leaving Nicholas, a regular but short-term visitor in the early years, until he took the decision that he could afford to earn the family living as a full-time writer, supplemented by my work as a botanical and wildlife artist. Nothing is ever so simple, naturally—but as an explanation, it'll have to do.

Meanwhile, the market stalls in the port of Algeciras among which, as a young wife and mother, I found myself and my basket one bright June morning in 1965 had very little in common with the shelves of the city supermarkets where I had been accustomed to shop. I was bewildered—but intrigued. A childhood spent in several distant parts of the world with my parents, foreign-posted diplomats, had given me an early appetite for street-corner food. This youthful enthusiasm had also left me with an unshakeable optimism that I could eat, and usually appreciate, anything that was palatable to any other human.

Algeciras market daily delivered the harvest of the countryside to the housewives of the town. Nothing was ever available out of season, and only the spice lady sold imported goods—the eastern flavourings for which the people of Andalucia had acquired an appetite during seven centuries of Moorish ascendancy—not the least of the legacy of the Muslim caliphs.

Bread—lozenge-shaped country loaves with a deep caramel-coloured crust—was sold from the back of a little van, the product of one of the many rural household bakeries which still threshed and ground their own wheat, raised the dough with leaven from previous bakings and baked in an oven fuelled with olive prunings and clippings from their own vineyards. There was cheese too, rounds no bigger than could be made with the day's milking of a single goat, turned with rennet made from the curd to be found in the stomach of a new-born kid—a sacrifice which could only be contemplated by

those rich enough to maintain a flock of goats, and which in a poorer household would be replaced with fig-tree sap, or an infusion of wild artichoke heads.

The vegetable stalls which formed the outer ring were piled with unfamiliar greenery: a heap of prickly thistle-rosettes—tagarnina—waving tarantula-like green extremities; bundles of fresh garlic, like ice-white onions; smiling pink segments of watermelon; purple-tipped artichokes tied in rosebud bunches. Between them little encampments of gypsy children presided over sacks of tiny snails with translucent bodies and inquiring pin-stalk eyes, baskets of wild mushrooms and bundles of slender wild asparagus bound with esparto grass. The fish vendors, raised above their customers on a line of white tiled stalls dripping seawater, were bellowing out their wares: octopus, squid, cuttlefish; monkfish, sea bream, bass, anchovies and sardines.

The poultry market was livelier still. There were bunches of chickens squawking on the ends of brawny arms, a blue-eyed goose, and a few mournful turkeys gobbling in one corner—no Andaluz housewife would have trusted a dead barnyard bird as far as she could chase it. The spice lady must have had fifty open sacks around her: almonds, six kinds of tea, bay leaves, dried garlic and paprika, cloves and cinnamon bark, thyme, rosemary, marjoram, coriander, poppy-seeds, liquorice twigs, pumpkin seeds, dozens more. Often she would be asked to make up a flavouring mix: a paper twist of the herbs to spice four kilos of snails, to prepare a side of pork in paprika lard, to provide the aromatics for ten kilos of olives. Later I learned to rely on her expertise myself.

Maria, my neighbour up the valley where I and my growing family settled, was my mentor in those first years. ‘Asi se hace, this is how it’s done,’ she would patiently explain as I struggled with the ink sacs in the cuttlefish, or attempted to cook the chickpeas without soaking them first. Very often she would come by with gifts of food for my children—honey from her uncle’s hives, the first figs, wrapped in one of their own leaves, from the tree in her father’s garden, oil biscuits which she had made after bread-baking day.

My family and I saw the seasons round in the valley. The children went to the local school, where they learned along with their letters how to trap and skin rabbits, how to stake pastures to hold the forest’s hogs, and how to mend a hand-drawn threshing sled made to a design unchanged since the Iron Age. With Maria’s advice and under her tutelage we acquired a donkey, a kitchen garden, and a household pig—the last, I stipulated, only if Maria helped me at its final hour. The pig thrived mightily on the scraps from my kitchen. Finally on a late October day deemed suitable, the moon being in the right quarter and the pig having been fattened to the correct weight on acorns from the surrounding cork oaks, Maria’s husband and brother-in-law arrived at sunrise to prepare for the dreaded event. Soon afterwards Maria, her cousins, and her mother, appeared to help with the kitchen labour. The children were packed off to school early, and all day we worked salting hams, seasoning sausages, stuffing black puddings, spicing chorizos. That evening, as she prepared the traditional celebration meal of chicharros—pork skin fried crisp, kidneys in sherry and garlic-fried liver which

follows a country matanza, Maria finally put the question which made me embark on this book.

‘Tell me,’ she said, her voice sympathetic as she leaned over the table and, for the fifth time, restored control of the sausage casing to my clumsy fingers. ‘I have been wanting to ask you ever since you and your family arrived, but I did not wish to seem inquisitive. Forgive me, but didn’t your mother teach you anything?’

From then on Maria became a surrogate mother in the old ways of the countryside to all of us. Seven years later, when we departed for the Languedoc to give the children a year’s schooling in France, she came down the hill to see us on our way. As we climbed into our crammed vehicle she handed a bundle in through the window. Inside was a bag of dried sunflower seeds, pipas, which the children had learned to crack between the teeth, chewing the tiny nut and propelling the shell through the open window in one smooth movement; there was too, a round of chorizo—home-smoked, rich and juicy—and a gigantic loaf pricked with the baker’s initials, a bread of the size normally baked for a cork-tree stripping gang on a two-week excursion into the hills.

‘There,’ she said. ‘I could not bear to think you might be hungry on your journey.’

So what and who is a peasant? To ethnologists, it’s an attitude of mind: the peasantry can be defined as those for whom agriculture is a livelihood and a way of life, not a business for profit. In other words, to be a peasant is not a socio-economic situation and carries no pejorative baggage. The very reverse in these affluent times, when the need to fill the belly—at least in the developed world—no longer occupies most of the population from dawn to dusk. These days, for most of us, how we live is a matter of choice, making the rural idyll of self-sufficiency (without sacrificing all the comforts of modern life) a thoroughly desirable vocation for those whose main concern is the health of the planet.

In Italy, the peasantry, *contadini*, are admired and valued as those who know and defend the reality of what it means to be Italian. In France, *paysan* is a term applied to a citizen as well a man who works the soil. The French have always been a nation aspiring to independent peasantry: Curnonsky, compiler of the *Larousse Gastronomique*, explained to his readers that a nation’s gastronomical level should be examined by tasting both the products of the best private kitchens and restaurants and the dishes from the kitchens of the peasantry. Somewhere in between, he says, lies the true level of excellence.

Few of us, however rural our lives, could claim to be self-sufficient, or would wish, given the choice, to do without at least some of the many conveniences of modern life. We travel on well-made roads in motorised vehicles, use hospitals and doctors, buy our clothes ready-made, fill our trolleys with imported goods in supermarkets. We live easily and cheaply and are, thankfully, not limited by the daily toil which killed our ancestors long before their time. We have plenty of time for leisure; abundance allows us to choose what we eat and when. As agriculturalists, we have machinery and a massive pharmacopoeia to assist us in our task; we have methods of preserving

perishable foodstuffs unknown to our great-grandparents as well as the wherewithal to transport them round the world in less time than it took our ancestors to walk a goose to market.

Amid all this plenty, there's no doubt we have lost a little along the way. We have lost, perhaps, the sense of the passing of the seasons, the limitations which encouraged culinary inventiveness—what to do with a glut of raspberries if not make jam? How best to prepare the first rush of young spring vegetables to give maximum pleasure after winter's long months of roots and cabbage?

The peasant crop is dictated by limitations: what the land will grow, the seasons, the weather. This is not to say that the diet is necessarily poor or monotonous, simply that it is limited by what can be grown, herded or gathered at any one time in any one year.

Abundance is strictly seasonal and must be preserved for those times when the fields and woods are bare. The store cupboard is of the utmost importance—stocking requires judgement, patience and skill. The peasant larder can afford such luxuries as home-reared foie gras, the finest hams, the morning's harvest of truffles, the best olive oil and the most fragrant herbs. Variety is harder to come by: eighteenth century farm labourers in Scandinavia as well as Scotland had agreements they should have to eat salmon no more than three times a week; oysters were the food of Britain's poor until the oyster beds gave out in the middle of the nineteenth century. One man's caviar is another man's potato.

In the valley of the Guadalmesi, the place our family called home for the childhood years, imported luxuries—sugar, tea, coffee—were limited by trade routes and vulnerable to shortages. People could remember times when these things were not available at all. Salt, essential for the conservation of food in winter, was easily come by since our market town was a fishing port and the boats used salt from the Cadiz salt flats to preserve the catch, which meant that people had salt for the preservation of the winter hams and sausages. Pepper and spices were used only when there was ready access through exchange and barter.

The Scandinavian dried cod trade, for instance, produced not only salt for the fisherman and wool for his wife, but also satisfied more surprising tastes: nutmeg to spice the Norwegian's favourite fish-puddings, and rice for the Swedes' Saturday night rice-porridge. A dish of spring cod, skrei, in the Arctic Lofoten Islands is always accompanied by red wine, rather than with Scandinavian home-brewed beer and aquavit. In exchange the peasantry of the Mediterranean has a wide repertoire of salt fast-day cod dishes—somewhat surprising when you consider there is no cod to be fished in the Mediterranean.

Bourgeois cookery—the cookery of those who live in towns—has other limitations. Price and perishability is an important factor when food has to be transported. The rich would eat dishes prepared with the prime cuts of beef or the choicest of fish—taking their pick according to their pocket; the poor would make dishes with the tripe and the cheaper cuts, the less dainty supplies. Kiwifruit cheesecake and tripe à la mode de

Caen is always bourgeois cookery—the tripe from the peasant household pig would go in the andouillettes, and the kiwi is the quintessential supermarket fruit. Where anything and everything is available at a price, ingredients are new and strange and not much understood, so chef's recipes have to be invented to accommodate them.

The third tradition of the European kitchen, haute cuisine—offspring of the medieval banquet and grandchild of the extravagant cooks of Rome—is the province of professionals. Its requirements are different from those of the home-cook, whether peasant or bourgeois. Display and presentation matter as much as content, as does the rarity and expense of the ingredients. Luxuries such as caviar, truffles and foie gras are treated not as themselves—simple and delicious—but an opportunity for a chef to gild an already glittering lily. Simple things are elevated by what a prudent housewife would consider profligacy—a reduction of a whole bullock, bones and all does not normally go into the preparation of a broth to sauce the beef.

Peasant cookery must of its nature rely on ingredients which can be obtained without money changing hands. Money itself is a crop like any other—necessary if paid to the landlord as rent, but among those who control their own acres, useful for the purchase of small necessities or luxuries; traditionally it's acquired by the sacrifice of good things not essential to the household's survival—eggs, butter, cheese, honey, the preparation or gathering of seasonal luxuries such as truffles or foie gras. Everyday things were good. A simple meal of cheese roasted over the embers on the hearth, a savoury broth simmering in the cooking pot on its tripod, a flitch of bacon from last autumn's pig smoking in a hollow in the chimney—until very recently these were not nostalgic pleasures, they were the stuff of daily life. Peasant cooking was always dominated by practical rather than economic factors. There are few peasant recipes for offal, since this was only available in quantity to the poor of the towns who had access to the leavings of the butchers shop or in shipvictualling ports as a by-product of the salting and barrelling trade. Sugar was an expensive commodity in all but Ottoman-dominated Europe until recently, so there are few high-sugar dishes. Peasant communities had no organised trade. Barter was the chief form of exchange, and there were no regular tradesmen to supply goods or services. Fuel in particular was precious. It needed energy to collect and was often in short supply. In consequence, cooking was usually done on a single heat source—one-pot meals are usual, though, for variety and elegance, they are often served as two or three courses—usually soup then vegetables with or without a little meat; in northern kitchens, you might find a cloth-wrapped fruit-stuffed dumpling suspended in the broth.

Possessions were scarce. The medieval peasant kitchen would have been equipped with little more than a boiling pot, a frying pan, and a kettle. As late as the 17th and 18th centuries the peasant house was only one room, plus barns and storehouse. The fireplace was the focal point, whether there was a chimney to extract the smoke or not, and there would have been one large table with benches set round it, the benches also being used for sleeping. Early mattresses were of heaped straw and were replaced later by home-produced feather bedding. The whole household gathered together at meal times and ate from a communal bowl with wooden spoons—children often took their

meals standing up. There were wooden boards for portions of bread, and a knife, often shared, for the meat. After 1800 sugar, coffee, and tea became widely available and affordable.

The limitations imposed by a single pot, a single heat source, local produce, and little or no access to imports, are all characteristic of peasant cooking and give it its particular identity. But in no sense does this mean that the ingredients were necessarily poor or inferior: salmon, oysters, crayfish, snails, excellent cheeses, superb truffles and fungi, and an abundant poultry and game larder were all available to local communities. Even the most sophisticated delicacies such as foie gras from the favourite table-bird of the peasantry, the goose, were as likely to be found in a French peasant's larder as in the kitchen of the Sun King. Each generation in a community might throw up perhaps one particularly inspired cook, whose innovations would be added to the repertoire of the immediate area. This has led to variations of local dishes which are peculiar to an individual neighbourhood and whose merits are fiercely contested—there are dozens of different recipes for the making of Spanish paella, for instance, each dependent on the local ingredients. There is, however, an underlying philosophy which governs all the recipes for a particular dish, and an understanding of this allows the cook to experiment and adapt the recipe to her own local produce.

The peasant larder varied according to climate and conditions. In northern Europe, Scandinavia, Scotland and northern Germany make good use of their sea coasts: salted, sometimes smoked, and pickled fish, including salmon, were and are important items of the region's diet, as is dried meat. Barley, oats and rye are the chief cereal crops. Central Europe is rich in wheat and dairy produce: cheese, bacon, potatoes, vegetables and the fruit of the vine are all plentiful, and this is reflected in the peasant cookery of Germany, Austria, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and northern France. The Mediterranean region, in particular Spain, Portugal, southern France, Italy, Greece, and Yugoslavia, has the advantage of olive oil, abundant vineyards and citrus fruit to add to good supplies of fish from the long coastline, as well as a temperate climate for the growing of a great many varieties of vegetables.

The ideal of peasant life is probably most nearly represented by the philosophy of the rural Spanish revolutionaries of the 1920s: communal, supportive, and hardworking, yet allowing the individual enough dignity, freedom, and leisure to develop intellectually and physically. A most difficult ideal to achieve. All those who have had first-hand experience of peasant existence hark back to the fundamental issue—survival. In the peasant world, the work is perpetual and the living is hard. Yet most insist that the way of life has its own rewards in the satisfaction of tasks well completed, of responsibilities to the land properly discharged. The earth must be husbanded, coaxed, and cared for, it cannot be exploited or it will take swift revenge. The old peasant kitchen habits of frugality were part of that husbandry—making stock out of bones, pickling and salting in times of glut, stocking the larder, using diet to care for the sick and the elderly, making good food out of few and simple ingredients.

This concern was reflected in real terms in the life expectancy of the peasantry such as

that of England in feudal times that, having survived the dangerous childhood years, were likely to live longer and in better health than their overlord who dined daily on large quantities of meat and fine white bread.

The ordinary diet of the famously long-lived Georgians, listed by F.P. Armitage in 1922, is quintessential peasant food—black bread, rice, wheat cakes, beans, raw green vegetables, cheese, milk, both fresh and soured, and fish, salted, smoked and dried. In poor communities which could not afford doctors, good health was clearly essential to survival and country-dwellers became extremely knowledgeable about the adjustments in diet necessary for those who were ill, or to combat seasonal maladies. Winter food was well-balanced for the winter months. Store-cupboards were stocked to restore seasonal imbalance. Traditional prejudices about what should be served with what were based on sound and practical grounds of health. If any one phrase can summarize the peasant cuisine it is precisely that—good health.

‘The diet of the European population at the beginning of modern times,’ says Diedrich Saafeld, writing of pre-1585 Europe in *The Struggle to Survive*, ‘can generally be described as simple and nourishing: it consisted chiefly of the natural products of the countryside. The population was still relatively undifferentiated. It is not easy to find records of preparation and meals, but ingredients are listed. This simplicity held until the middle of the 17th century, when improved communications meant items such as grain and such stores could be transported.’

The various grains—wheat, rye, and barley in particular—were usually milled and made into bread, sometimes kneaded with whey or milk to give added food value, sometimes mixed with eggs and butter and dried fruit for a special occasion. Most peasant farmers baked their own bread in their own ovens—or in the village communal oven. Flour was also used for thickening milk soups and vegetable broths. If there was no oven the milled grain might be eaten as porridge, noodles, or flat cakes and pancakes. During the week this cereal diet would be supplemented with milk products such as butter, curds and cheese, eggs and animal fats, with occasionally some fish and meat. Catholic Europe ate fish dried and pickled on fast days and during Lent. The rest of Europe, with the exception of Scandinavia, did not often eat it. Meat was usually cooked in the stock pot which hung permanently over the fire, and eaten either with a dumpling, cloth-wrapped and boiled in the broth, or with bread. Roasting was only for Sunday or special occasions.

Pre-modern (pre-1585) Mediterranean Europe came under the influence of two major Eastern invaders: the Moorish Muslims who occupied southern Spain from 711 until Ferdinand and Isabella’s campaign of 1492; and the Turks of the Islamic Ottoman Empire who dominated central and eastern Europe from the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire in the 13th century until the early years of the 20th century.

Both civilisations took a lively interest in the pleasures of the table, and both left their culinary mark on the populations they conquered. Among the skills and refinements learnt from the Moors by the Iberian peoples were the art of sweet making and the use

of almonds in sweetmeats—it was the Moors who planted Jordan almond trees in Andalusia. The Turkish skill in pastry making and the technique of layering fine sheets of filo pastry spread as far north as Austria, where the strudel dumpling became the strudel pastries which today keep such delightful company with that other Turkish introduction, coffee. Turkish dolmades—vine-leaves stuffed with rice and meat—travelled from the Bosphorous, via Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary (the Turks planted rice in the Danube basin) as far north as Scandinavia. Ask any Swede to name the national dish and like as not you will be told of meatballs wrapped in cabbage, kåldomar.

The New World connection changed everything. After 1492, an astonishing wealth of new ingredients began to arrive, funnelled in through Spain and their trading partnership with the great ports of Italy, and through the Italians, to the Ottoman Turks who controlled the Balkans. Today it is hard to imagine how Mediterranean cooks managed without tomatoes, peppers, aubergines and haricot beans for their stews and sauces. Or indeed how the Balkans fared without the maize, pumpkin and marrows which now fill their collectivised fields. Or how the Hungarians survived until the arrival, via the Ottomans, of their beloved paprika. Meanwhile, the potato, Europe's new staple foodstuff, which ensured the survival of a rural population in areas where nothing else would grow, took longest to achieve acceptance. Once established, being easy to grow and needing no more than a single acre and two weeks' labour a year to feed a household as well as the family pig, it fuelled Europe's population explosion of the 18th and 19th centuries. Delivering both larder-stores and leisure to a population which had none of these things before, it can be held indirectly responsible for the social and industrial revolutions which shaped the modern world.

Throughout Europe, by the 16th century the appetites of the increasingly prosperous townfolk had pushed the price of meat beyond the purchasing power of the peasant, leaving him with the products of his pig and his barnyard. By the end of the 18th century the population was increasing so rapidly that even the price of bread began to climb steeply. The peasantry had to find a substitute for the daily grain meal: the potato, undemanding of space and labour and thus the ideal poor man's food came into its own at last. The adaptable new foodstuff was cooked according to the custom of the country in which it found itself, to the extent that the modern traveller will find regional potato recipes a very good indicator of local culinary habits. The Scots made scones with their supplies, the Spanish fried theirs in olive oil, the Hungarians have a delicious paprika potato stew, the Germans made potato dumplings, the Italians made gnocchi, the English plain roasted or boiled their crop, the French made wonderful garbures and gratins with theirs, the Swiss liked theirs with melted cheese.

Such a rapidly acquired dependence on one major foodstuff did, however, leave the peasantry extremely vulnerable. In 1846-7 terrible weather conditions caused the failure of both the potato and wheat harvest, and brought in its wake the last great European famine. The peasants of Europe suffered great loss. In Ireland one million out of a total population of eight million died of starvation. Europe now began to import grain from the limitless granaries of the New World. Grain, unlike the potato,

has a very long shelf-life, is easily stored, and can feed both the urban populations and the domestic animals whose meat is still in such high demand in the cities. European farming was never the same again.

Eastern Europe lagged somewhat behind the rest in its development. By the 19th century peasant communities of the east were at about the same practical level as those of Western Europe had been during the 17th and 18th centuries. On feast days people still roasted whole animals, stuffed themselves on puddings, and washed it all down with copious supplies of home-brewed alcohol.

Britain was a special case: England began to lose her rural peasant population in medieval times, largely as a result of the land enclosures which proceeded unopposed after the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 and forced the independent peasantry away from the countryside. In Scotland the same dispossession continued with the Highland Clearances until Victorian times. In so far as the native British tradition of peasant cookery survived, it was in an amended form in the nurseries of the upper and middle classes.

Throughout Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries large town-based populations of landless workers continued to grow. High-yield farms were necessary to feed them, and the subsistence-farming peasantry, particularly sharecropping tenants, were rapidly squeezed out of their smallholdings by larger and often absentee landowners who farmed exclusively for profit. Only in the most isolated communities, such as those of southern Spain, Greece, southern Italy and Eastern Europe could the peasant culture withstand the economic pressures. Even so, the shift to the towns continued to depopulate large areas of previously marginally-viable farmland.

The traditions of European peasant cookery are immensely old. It has evolved, tried and tested, over hundreds—perhaps thousands—of years. Throughout its existence the patiently-gathered hard-won knowledge it incorporates has been passed on orally. Like all orally-transmitted traditions it is only as strong as the last link in the chain of communication. Today our predominantly urban-dwelling, industrialised population is obliged to rely on increasingly mechanised methods of food production: the standard American hot-dog now looks like something a chicken laid from an alternative orifice; it is difficult to associate the bread roll which encloses it with the great grey millstones turned by the harnessed power of water or wind which formerly ground the main ingredient into flour; or the mustard which spices it with the seed of those pretty yellow-blossomed flowers which bloomed in ancient meadows.

The modern-cook is inevitably distanced from the primary products of field and barnyard, dairy, piggery and kitchen garden—and the checks and balances of season and economy have disappeared. Most peasant meals would have been (and still are in those communities which survive) structured around a single dominant ingredient at a single moment—when the new peas were at their best, the pig had just been slaughtered, the hens were laying particularly prolifically. For this reason I have arranged this book around ingredients rather than in the more normal soup-fish-meat-

sweet divisions. This reflects the central importance of the raw materials—that in the peasant world, the ‘real’ world of climate and season, of mountain and plain, forest, meadow, and shoreline, with all their changing patterns and rhythms, it was not possible simply to go out and buy an ingredient if it was lacking, and that seasonal abundance was far more likely to dictate the composition of the meal than whim. Most of the recipes, therefore, include suggestions for the completion of the meal of which they are the centrepiece—the suggestions, equally, coming from the same ancient tradition of what was available, excellent to the taste, and nutritionally appropriate.

Apart from those leisurely foundation years spent in wild Spain and rural France, my practical research has taken me into markets and kitchens, larders and vegetable gardens, farms and vineyards, across Europe from the North Cape to the Golden Horn. I have been met everywhere with great courtesy and generosity, although sometimes with surprise that anyone should need to write down things which were so obvious. In those places where the demands of modern life have all but obliterated the traces of the old ways, even the most sophisticated of restaurant chefs still remember with nostalgic pleasure the dishes Mother used to make, and recall their own then-small fingers helping to rub suet or mould dumplings.

Such recipes and methods are best demonstrated, as my Spanish neighbour Maria knew well, by mothers to daughters, fathers to sons: the moment to pick the plum, the exact brining necessary for a particular ham from a particular pig fattened in a particular oak-wood. Even the ancient earthenware toupin, whose curve is precisely right for the beans of Soissons, is perhaps an essential part of the ‘true’ recipe. Yet in the course of my travels I became aware that there can be no definitive recipes, just as there are no definitive mothers and fathers. What I am sure of is that old and exemplary culinary traditions do exist which are passed on by good cooks, working within the boundaries of their own local produce, from one generation to the next. These are the ‘mother-recipes’ from which all European cookery springs—whether it be bourgeois or haute cuisine, fast food or fibre diets. For most of us in the developed world they are as integral a part of our past, and of what shapes and nourishes us today, as our literature and songs, our paintings and technology.

We cannot hang these gustatory heirlooms on the wall, or store them in our libraries. Their flavours can be copied by laboratory technicians—the taste of smoke, the fragrance of vanilla, the sharpness of lemon—so that few of us will know the difference. Our memories are fragile. Once we forget what a strawberry tastes like when allowed to ripen in the midsummer sun, the scent of a pot-au-feu left to simmer overnight on the hob—and such memories little suit those whose business is to supply us with pre-cooked food in microwavable form—they’re gone for ever.

FISH AND FOOD FROM THE SEA

Plentiful, unfenced and free, fish is the perfect peasant crop. Subsistence-farming communities with access to fishable waters have long made good use of this superb protein source, and for thousands of years, with one strange and notable exception, fishing has supplemented agriculture to fill the European family larder. The exception is Ireland, whose inhabitants only began to exploit fish as a resource comparatively recently—an almost inexplicable blindness to the riches of their surrounding waters which cost the Irish dear during the fearsome potato blight of the last century. Stews, soups, and frying pan cooking are the most common methods of preparation, and shore dwellers throughout Europe all have their favourite recipes. During the Middle Ages many a prosperous seaside town came into being as a result of the fishing industry. Amsterdam claims to be built, both metaphorically and literally, on herring bones. Ways to preserve what was essentially a seasonal harvest evolved gradually—the methods being dictated by climate and the availability of preserving agents such as salt or wind. The Mediterranean countries pickled with vinegar or brined their glut of fish; the northerly countries salted and smoked or wind dried theirs. The sea-going Scandinavians, last of the Europeans to be converted to Christianity and the Catholic rules of fast-day fish eating, were the first to turn their ocean treasure into a negotiable asset as they built up their salt cod trade throughout the Middle Ages. Each to his own.

BASIC PREPARATION

Scale, gut, and rinse, in that order, any fish to be cooked. Wipe the interior with salt to remove the blood. In the case of a large fish take care to cut round the anus and remove it. Always rinse your hands and implements in cold water after preparing the fish and there will be no trace of fishy smell on either. A fish 2.5cm/1 inch thick will take 2 minutes to cook in simmering liquid. A fish 5cm/2 inches thick will take 8 minutes to cook. A fish 7.5cm/3 inches thick will take 32 minutes—the required time increases in relation to the thickness of the fish and not simply as a matter of doubling-up.

PROVENÇAL FISH SOUP

Bouillabaisse (France)

The city of Marseilles claims the bouillabaisse for its own. And if the Greeks founded Marseilles, as its citizens maintain, then the origin of the ambrosial soup must, it stands to reason, lie in the kitchens of the gods. Venus herself is credited with the first hand on the soup pot. She is alleged to have brewed up the concoction one merry evening when she had a tryst with Mars and wished to put her blacksmith husband, Vulcan, to sleep during the assignation. A key ingredient in her recipe was saffron, long-held to be a soporific about whose powers Alexander complained, somewhat later in the human timescale, when he found his army slumbering on a crocuscarpeted

Turkish hillside.

The bouillabaisse is the fish soup carried to its ultimate. As prepared today in many restaurants of maritime Provence it has left far behind the uncertainties of the local fisherman's catch. No longer is the scented broth a blend of soup and stew, composed of whatever was wriggling in the bottom of the net after the saleable fish and crustaceans had been auctioned off. Nonetheless bouillabaisse in any of its forms remains a superb and authentic Mediterranean coastal dish, as variable as the catch itself, and depending for its flavour on what the cook's taste and the larder's stocks embellish it with. The name comes from the method of cooking, bouillon-abaisse, being a broth whose volume has been reduced, the process which concentrates the flavour.

For those of us dependent on cold water northern fish as the principal ingredients, bouillabaisse cannot be made exactly as Venus prepared it. Yet its ideal composition is not as rigidly circumscribed as the cooks of Marseilles would have the rest of us believe. The dish is undoubtedly ancient, but it is also undoubtedly adaptable. As a Mediterranean dish, it was introduced to the gourmets of northern Europe when French cooking became fashionable in London at a time when the chefs of Paris, escaping the fate of their *ci-devant* employers, were obliged to seek alternative employment across the Channel. So enthusiastic was William Makepeace Thackeray, author of *Vanity Fair*, he felt the subject worthy of a ballad, though the fishwives of Marseilles might have had trouble recognising the recommended species:

This bouillabaisse a noble dish is-
A sort of soup or broth or brew
Or hotchpotch of all sorts of fishes
That Greenwich never could outdo:
Green herbs, red peppers, mussels, saffron,
Soles, onions, garlic, roach and dace;
All these you eat at Terré's tavern
In that one dish of bouillabaisse.

Very confusing.

Fish considered appropriate in the dish's land of origin are:

Sea perch (*rascasse*—the only essential)
Sea bass (*loup de mer*)
Angler or monk-fish (*baudroie*)
Scorpion fish (*chapon*)
John Dory (*saint pierre*—marked with the thumb-print of St. Peter the fisherman)
Conger-eel (*congre*, *fiela*)
Red mullet (*rouget barbet*, *rouget de roc*)
Red gurnard (*galinette*, *grondin*)
Wrasse (*rouquier*, *roucou* in the patois)
Whiting (*merlan*)

Weever fish (vive)

Spiny lobster or crayfish or rock lobster (langouste)

All little shore crabs (crabes verts, favouilles, ériphies, étrilles de sable)

All manner of prawn, shrimp (langoustine, squilles, cigalles, crevettes)

Quantity: 7-8 participants is the minimum number for which to prepare a proper bouillabaisse, according to the great 19th century authority on Provençal cooking, J.B. Reboule. The rule of thumb is to allow a generous 300g/10 oz fish per person to be cooked in 600ml/1 pint water. The pot-herbs are those which come to hand in the Provençal vegetable patch, with the exception perhaps of the soporific saffron, a native of the other end of the Mediterranean.

Time: 50-60 minutes

2.5kg/5 lb mixed fish (at least 6 species, including rascasse)

3 medium onions, or 2 onions and 1 leek

3 garlic cloves

2 large tomatoes

Fresh fennel and parsley, thyme (dried or fresh), a curl of dried orange peel (fresh will do)

12 strands of saffron

½ wineglass (around 6 tablespoons) olive oil

3 litres/5 pints fresh water (half a bottle of white wine can substitute for an equal amount of water)

pepper and salt

7-8 slices day-old baguette (in Marseilles, the marette, a bread-stick specially baked for the purpose)

Rouille—the sauce

3 garlic cloves

½ teaspoon sea salt

3 red peppers (or pimentos from a tin, well-drained)

2 slices white bread (about 75g/3 oz)

Utensils: A large deep-sided cooking pot, several plates, and a draining spoon, and a