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EAT UP!

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Introduction

When our souls are happy, they talk about food.

Charles Simic

I often think about where food begins and ends. I don't necessarily mean the chronological beginning and end – the one-way march through time, from field to plate – although that certainly plays a part. I mean the whole picture. You're holding an iced ring doughnut in your hand – I mean the sticky edges where the doughnut meets skin, the long sweet history of beignets and crullers and cronuts, and the impulse to snack. I mean the science that turns heavy dough a deep orange hue when it hits the fryer, and the social currency of a doughnut box at work. Every mouthful of plain glazed Krispy Kreme ring or funfair cinnamon sugar doughnut is a bite of all of this – the human taste for sweetness, and a global doughnut love affair that's the making of us from the belly up.

Sometimes we lose all of this magic in the margins. Even though food is everywhere in our social fabric and in our culture, it's still squeezed into one thing or another. Diet gurus make food the sum of calories and carbs. Self-avowed foodies use food as a code for class. Restaurant critics polish food into a smooth, substance-less thing, while food writers like myself are guilty of constructing a fantasy food world

that sits outside of real life. All of these conflicting ideologies mean that food is, in many ways, more complex and controversial than ever. We're sat right in the middle of a smorgasbord that stretches from Nevada to Nauru – trifles and meatballs and spare ribs teetering all around, wine flowing from fountains, all of the earth's bounty at the end of our forks – and we're too conflicted to take a bite.

Somehow, the most elemental, easy, joyful thing we can do has become a chore and a source of anxiety, and we begrudge these blurry boundaries that encroach on us when we take the outside world inside us, and make ourselves from the inside out. Food is the point where our bodies merge with the vast universe outside, and that's scary. So, as a society, we've created whole industries fighting that fear: 'natural foods', nutrient supplements, industrial farming, organic produce – all of these radically different, often contradictory, ideas are designed to give us a sense of control over this wild, delicate planet, and the bodies we inhabit. We don't want to go hungry, we don't want to be greedy, we don't want to live too exuberantly, we don't want to be a kill-joy. We fret about our size and shape, and too often police the bodies of others. We accept the lie that there's a perfect way of eating that will save your soul and send you careering blithely through your eighties, into your nineties and beyond. Do what you want, we're told – but you'll die if you get it wrong.

I don't want you to feel this way. Food shouldn't be a bad boyfriend, dragging you down or holding you to ransom. It should nourish your body as much as it fuels your mind; it should pump life through your veins; it should waltz in sync with your mood and your appetite, sometimes blissful, often mundane, always a part of you. This communion with food doesn't need to be something magical. In fact, part of making peace with your appetite is acknowledging that it's not always pretty, and sometimes you will enter a fugue state halfway

through a packet of Cadbury Fingers and eat the lot and feel ill, and that's OK. Not every meal will be in some sunlight-dappled orange grove; sometimes what you need is a pasty by the side of the M4, and there's no harm in that.

I wrote this book as an antidote to all these confused, disjointed approaches to food. I don't want to tell you what to eat, how, when or where. There is no single 'right' way to eat, and you should be duly suspicious of anyone who tells you there is. What this book is about is everything that happens in the peripheries when we take a bite: the cultures that birth the foods we love, the people we nurture, the science of flavour and the ethics of eating. I've researched the tangled origins of some of our favourite foods, from waffles to Graham crackers, explored the place that we humans inhabit in the food chain, and looked at food anew through the lens of some of my favourite films. You can learn as much about food in five minutes of *Moonlight* as you can in five hours of *MasterChef*, and be nourished way more by Kelis's 'Milkshake' than a pint of Soylent.

I want you to eat the whole picture, because when you do that, food tastes better than ever. I want you to love yourself enough not to feed yourself dry sandwiches for dinner, or skip eating altogether. The way you feel about food sits hand in hand with the way you feel about yourself, and if you eat happily and wholeheartedly, food will make you strong. I want you to feel fine about the messiness of your illogical, impulsive appetite, and sometimes overeat, sometimes undereat, and still hold tight in your self-care. I want you to absorb as much of this big, weird world as possible. I want you to eat up.

The magic

Blackberrying

When I was eight or nine, my grandmother was living in a house in a sleepy Essex suburb. I often visited her with my younger siblings in tow, and we used to spend much of our stay in the garden. Granny's garden was her pride and joy, kept as neat as a guardsman's coat, the grass soft and verdant, shrubs blooming in bright colours. Granny kept order with a pair of garden shears, her eagle eyes, and a tub of slug pellets. When we went there during the summer, we were as carefully fussed over, preened and pruned as the roses and the rampant buddleia. I would stand in the sun, sipping orange juice and gripping the grass between my bare toes.

What I loved more than this garden, though, was the scrubby track that ran alongside it and out into the wood beyond. The track shrugged up against my grandmother's house and garden, its nettles, hollyhocks and tangles of thorns running shoulder to shoulder with the neatly coiffed gardenias and chrysanthemums, separated by the thinnest panels of a smart, stained wooden fence. When we walked along this track, I would linger over matted grey tufts of badger fur, an ant's nest, a pile of horse poo … these things were a thousand times more interesting than Granny's perennials.

A few hundred yards along this mud trail were the blackberry bushes. They scrambled up the roadside, along fences and over ragged stone walls, thick with thorns and clusters

of inky blackberries, some branches hanging low over the track, drooping heavily with fruit. One day, we traipsed along with old ice cream cartons and clustered around these brambles, pulling the fattest, darkest berries from the branch and throwing them, alternately, into our cartons and our mouths. Picking the perfect blackberry took some practice: the sweetest berries were the softest, and so the most likely to crush in your grip as you pinched them from the stem. You had to be careful, all the while whipping your hands back from the pricks of the thorns. Bright purple, sticky juice muddled with countless tiny cuts and grazes, which would sting hot all the way back home.

Once back from the abundant chaos of blackberrying, we washed our haul, tossed it with apple segments, sugar and cinnamon and covered it with a thick layer of sweet, nutty crumble. We baked the crumble during the heavy, languid hours of the afternoon. I can't remember what the crumble tasted like, in the end – whether the blackberries stained the topping with crimson juice, or whether the apples were blandly sweet, crisp or soggy. I have no idea whether we ate it with cream, or custard, or ice cream. What I can remember is the sting of those blackberry thorns, the herbal smell of dirt, juice and sap on my fingertips, and the precious warmth of a berry picked straight from a patch of midday sun.

I don't think it's any coincidence that one of my fondest food memories is one with roots spreading far beyond the kitchen table. There is so much more to eating than just eating. Eating is picking blackberries, or deciding to pick blackberries next week, or remembering blackberries you picked fifteen years ago. It is choosing a mango in the supermarket – one soft enough to hold a dimple when you press a thumb to its flesh – holding it to your nose, and taking a gulp of its heady scent. Eating is texting your housemate 'Let's get takeaway.' It's weighing up your options between the tarka

dal and the Keralan fish stew, and taking the time to squint your eyes, smack your lips and taste-imagine your way to a decision. Eating is feeding someone else. Eating is toasting spices in a hot pan, folding whisked eggs into a cake batter, slowly cranking the handle of a tin opener around a can of tomato soup. Eating is standing in front of the empty fridge, willing inspiration to come. Eating is folding down every page corner in a new recipe book.

In order to eat well, we need to eat with every part of ourselves. We see, feel, sense, taste, touch, predict and imagine food long before it ever arrives on our fork. Every one of these experiences is a kind of emotional, sensorial aperitif. Food shows on TV are particularly good at this kind of drawn-out, teasing temptation: watch Nigella Lawson glide around her kitchen and you'll notice all the exaggerated sensations, from the loudness of cake batter plopping into a tin or an avocado raspingly scraped from its skin, to the shimmering light, rich colours and slow-motion tactility of it all. Ina Garten might take a journey to the deli to choose some lox herself, taking us with her to see the glistening fish and experience the bustle of New York City, then back to the serenity of her country kitchen. The choosing, the sorting, the serving: from this comes a story.

Giving food a story means giving a simple meal the power to become a lifelong memory, whether that story starts with dipping a net in a rock pool or heaving a trolley around Lidl on a Saturday morning. It's about engaging all of your senses, and letting food, body, craving and daydream all bleed into one. I often think about blackberrying and about my juice-stained fingers and that eventual apple and blackberry crumble, and what always hits me is the blurriness of it all: the act of eating stretched out from bramble to plate; juice dying my fingertips blood red; and the smell of cooking crumble, and how these smells – both thick and sweet – became one and the same in my memories of that day.

This is all well and good, of course, until it comes to weaving it into the fabric of ordinary, hectic everyday life. Take the time to cradle a jar of Dolmio and really *feel* it in Asda and you'll be there in aisle 5 all day. Engage all of your senses and smell, taste and touch your way along the pick and mix counter in Wilko and security will have you nicked. I got shouted out of a shop in Italy by a *nonno* once because I didn't realise that touching the fruit and veg wasn't the kind of tactile, immersive Italian gesture of food thoughtfulness that I thought it was. '*I ganti! I ganti!*' the grandad hollered after me, while a gaggle of suitably be-gloved women tutted at me from the zucchini.

But chances are that no matter how blasé you think you are about food, you're piecing together a web of food stories and sensations every time you go to eat. Raising a glass with your mates, closing out the ruckus of the pub around you and bringing the dishwasher-warm pint glass to your lips for the first sip of beer: this is a food ritual. It turns a lukewarm pint into some kind of rousing, fortifying nectar. Choosing the fullest-looking cheese and ham sandwich from Boots, or eating an Oreo biscuit just so – these are the things that make food so much more than just fuel. We use our imaginations to bring new life to the saddest slice of lunchmeat, reviving it with some sharp pickle and good bread. We play with our food. We use every one of our senses. When the moment comes to finally eat, we taste more clearly than ever.

Kitchen therapy

With all this in mind, it should come as little surprise that cooking plays a vital role in the way that we eat. It's an extension of eating, really, and every moment we spend in the kitchen chopping, peeling, stirring and slicing deepens our connection with the food we eventually put in our mouths.

And it's not just our relationship with food that benefits from this kind of mindful cooking and eating – we can also go some way to healing our relationships with ourselves, soothing our daily stresses and anxieties and bolstering our mental health in general.

Researchers at the University of Otago in New Zealand published a study in 2016 that showed that young people who took part in some kind of everyday creative activity – whether that was crochet or cooking new recipes – fell into an 'upward spiral', with their well-being, creativity and enthusiasm higher than those who hadn't done these kinds of activities. Anecdotally, that resonates: for me, just taking half an hour out of the day to be in the kitchen cooking, experimenting, tasting and feeling can be enough to drag me out of the slump of my depression. The difficult part is mustering the enthusiasm to drag myself into the kitchen in the first place.

And there might be something specific to cooking, above and beyond the healing properties of creative activity in general, that supports mental well-being. It's something that even the mental health care establishment is cottoning on to: cooking therapy, where people are guided through the processes of cooking a nourishing meal with the help of a trained therapist, is increasingly accepted as an alternative therapy. One suitably trendy class in east London promised 'Breaditation' a couple of years ago, which is easy to scoff at if you've never channelled the pure unyielding rage of a bad breakup into kneading your bread dough. The idea is that cooking – done properly – can improve self-esteem, teamwork skills and planning, all of which are crucial components of a robust 'toolbox' for coping with mental health problems.

A lot of these therapies have their roots in mindfulness – a concerted sensory awareness that reconnects you with your body, and your food – but the benefits go beyond just a fleeting moment of calm. Mindfulness when eating means

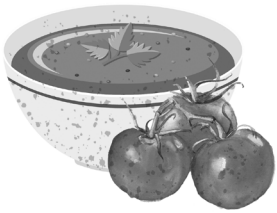
employing all of your senses, and *feeling* as much as you *think*. Rather than using that overworked, exhausted cognitive part of your brain, and thinking hard about the craft of cooking, and the finer details of the things before you on the plate, you ought to be smelling, tasting, feeling, listening and seeing. A plate of cheese and crackers becomes a scattered Mondrian, the crunch of biscuit will echo in your skull and the sharp salt hit of cheese will creep across your tongue. Often, mindful eating is a tactic used to encourage people to eat less ('Listen to your stomach,' they say, 'and you'll realise you aren't even hungry'), but you can't really use it as a tool. Mindful eating is something that will sometimes awaken a fierce hunger inside of you, and other times have you satisfied after a single square of chocolate. It's a way of putting your mind back into your body and, just for a moment, letting yourself be.

Of course, cooking can be stressful. The last dregs of your will to live go down the drain with your curdled custard. Your ego falls as flat as the birthday cake you just spent three hours baking. Your kitchen is a rat-infested, windowless cupboard in a house running off electricity stolen from the streetlight outside. All of these have been my failure stories at various points during my life. And that's without even touching on the drudgery – the heavy, awful boredom – of cooking the same old midweek meal, or the gut-knotting tension of cooking to impress, or the sabotage of clamped-shut mouths and angry tears when it comes to feeding children. Cooking can be the worst.

It doesn't help that the narratives around cooking for pleasure – as opposed to cooking for sustenance or money – are all rooted in bougie rituals of going to the farmers' market, travelling the world for recipe ideas or spending an eternity making cute jars of damson jam. We live in a time when food is more polarised than ever, a huge chasm yawning between 'thoughtful', 'foodie' cooking on the one hand, and

fast 'junk' food on the other. Those 'Breaditation' workshops – the preserve of wealthy cosmopolitan professionals – would be laughed out of the door by a baker who rises at 3am each day to earn a living. *Cooking* – that vital, everyday, normal thing – has been shoved to the sidelines by *cookery* – something ripe with connotations of craft and class. Because of this, we're inclined to think that making *salmorejo* is a more meditative act than piercing the film on a fish pie ready meal. Eating a lemon tart in Paris is imbued with more romance than an Eccles cake in a park café.

But the food narratives we create when we shop, cook and eat don't need to be exotic, expensive or rarefied. They shouldn't be estranged from the humdrum, ugly, familiar mess of everyday life. They don't even have to taste good. The important thing is giving yourself time to imagine your food, to touch, taste and smell the ingredients, and to really sink into the pleasure of eating. Take a few minutes to drown out the cognitive white noise of emails, to-do lists and stresses, and just cook. Focus on the coolness of a head of lettuce, and the sound of knife through crisp leaf as you cut a wedge. Shove your flatmate's dirty dishes to the corner of the kitchen so that you can sit and enjoy your spaghetti hoops in blissful, uncluttered calm. This kind of nourishment doesn't come with a price tag. Here are four kind-of recipes which will, I hope, make a fairy tale out of even the most humdrum meal.



Homemade tomato soup

You don't need to have personally grown and picked your own tomatoes, or bought them from some organic food store, for your tomato soup to soar. Gazpacho and *salmorejo* and Manhattan clam chowder all have their virtues, but you can find soup success far closer to home. The story starts in your local supermarket or corner shop, with a couple of tins of chopped tomatoes. Lay out your ingredients in front of you: the two tins of tomatoes, three cloves of garlic, the leaves from a bunch of fragrant basil, bottle of olive oil, some butter, caster sugar and salt. Turn on the radio, roll up your sleeves and turn off your phone: plant your mind and body firmly in the kitchen, and switch on all of your senses.

Drizzle two or three tablespoons of the olive oil into a large saucepan. Dip your finger in it, and taste how light and peppery it is, then set it over a low heat. Watch how the oil – at first thick, glossy and smooth – begins to loosen, running across the base of the pan and shimmering more sharply as it gets hot. Add two tablespoons of butter, and watch it slide and bubble into molten gold. Peel the garlic cloves (let your fingers take on the smell of the garlic – it is a joy!) and crush them into the hot oil and butter. Stir immediately, keeping the garlic moving and taking in great lungfuls of that garlicky hit as it softens from sharp and astringent to mellow, sweet and rich. Listen as it sizzles. After a minute or so,

add the basil leaves, pausing briefly to bruise one between your finger and thumb and hold it to your nose. Pour in the chopped tomatoes, add a teaspoon of sugar and 200ml of boiling water, put a lid on the pan, and simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. No need to blend this, but you're welcome to if you like a smoother soup. Season generously with salt – tomatoes really need this seasoning to come to life – and serve with crusty bread. Serves 2–3.