

In Pursuit of Flavor

Edna Lewis





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by Edna Lewis

with Mary Goodbody

Illustrated by Louisa Jones Waller

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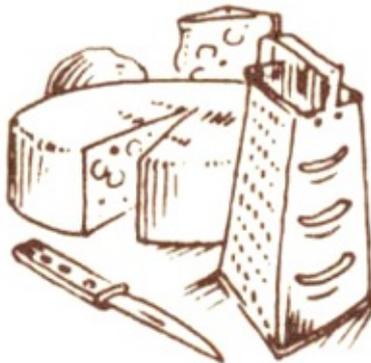
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Introduction



I learned about cooking and flavor as a child, watching my mother prepare food in our kitchen in Virginia. She took great care with the food she fed her large family and our assorted guests and I suppose I just naturally followed her example. In those days, we lived by the seasons, and I quickly discovered that food tastes best when it is naturally ripe and ready to eat.

I grew up in Freetown, a small farming community in Orange County, Virginia, which was founded by my grandfather and his friends shortly after his emancipation from slavery. Living in a rural area gave my mother the chance to cook food soon after it was picked. We also canned and preserved the fruits and vegetables from the gardens and fields. The pickles, relishes, chutneys, jams, and jellies added colorful balance to nearly every meal, their tart or sweet flavors offsetting milder ones.

I feel fortunate to have been raised at a time when the vegetables from the garden, the fruit from the orchard, and the meat from the smokehouse were all good and pure, unadulterated by chemicals and long-life packaging. As a result, I believe I know how food should taste. So now, whether I am experimenting with a new dish or trying to recapture the taste of a simple, old-fashioned dish, I have that memory of good flavor to go by.

There are so many ways to get the best out of vegetables; for instance, combining tomatoes (ripened at home if they are off season) with cymling squash, pumpkin with onion and bacon, cooking sweet potatoes with lemon, and boiling corn in its husk. I always keep a bit of country ham around, the way my mother did, or streak-of-lean, to perk up greens or to use as a complement to any number of dishes. The way you use herbs is important, I've found; some are better dried than fresh. How you cut them and when you add them to the pot make a difference. Cooking fish fillets or chicken breasts in parchment is a wonderful way to seal in delicate aromas; braising in a clay pot keeps meat moist. I've worked out a method for making an intense-

flavored stock by searing chopped-up bones and flesh together, then cooking them quickly. Bones always give flavor, and I often bake sweet-smelling fish with the bones in, as well as roasting fowl whole, or rabbit, or a suckling pig on occasion, each with its own dressing that sets off the taste of the particular meat. And when it comes to baking there are so many tricks I've discovered, such as using the right flours, making your own baking powder (to avoid that chemical taste), learning to *listen* for signs of when a cake is done, using bits of frozen butter for one kind of pie crust, pure leaf lard for another. These are just some of the techniques I have developed to get the best flavor from the foods we find today.

In recent years I have been heartened by the growth of farmers' markets all across the country, where farmers can sell their products to city people, who more and more are looking for fresh, organically grown vegetables, fruit, meat, and poultry. I have also witnessed promising changes in the ways supermarkets display and sell food. While I continue to believe that we refrigerate too many things and rely too much on the freezer, knowing when to use modern appliances to your advantage is important to a good cook. Every summer, for instance, I pick or buy as many ripe berries as I can find, certainly more than I can eat. It's no bother to freeze them and very easy to preserve them, which means I have the taste of summer far into the winter—a gooseberry sauce for some roast fowl or currants for a pie.

I have noticed that as people get older, they're apt to complain that food simply does not taste as good as it used to. I don't believe this has to be true, and that is why I have tried, in working out these recipes, to give you all kinds of suggestions to make food taste the way you remember it. For those who are too young to remember, I hope the recipes will be a welcome introduction to good food simply and lovingly prepared. One of the greatest pleasures of my life has been that I have never stopped learning about good cooking and good food. Some of the recipes here are old friends, others are new discoveries. All represent a lifetime spent in the pursuit of good flavor.



1

From the Gardens and Orchards

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WHEN I was growing up, we ate only what was ripe and fresh at the moment, which, as the spring and summer passed, changed from week to week. This meant that if you were not quick, you could miss a favorite summer treat and would have to wait all year before you could enjoy that good taste again. Beginning with the first spring thaw, we foraged for wild greens and a little later in the year hunted berries and nuts. We planted the garden carefully so that it produced a steady supply of vegetables during the warm months, and picked fruit from the orchards only when it was ripe and sweet.

In this chapter, I have tried to follow the seasons, beginning in the spring with a recipe for tender green peas and Vidalia onions. You will not find many recipes for fruits and berries here—they appear later in the book when I discuss jams, jellies, preserves, and desserts. What you will find are vegetables with good flavor that I think have stood the test of time or can be cooked so that their true flavor comes through. The recipes bring out these natural flavors, showing off each vegetable to its best advantage: sweet peas, eggplant, tomatoes, green beans, leeks, and other vegetables found in many gardens. None of the recipes calls for underripe (the “baby” vegetables so popular nowadays) or undercooked vegetables. I don’t think you get the true flavor of a vegetable if it is partially cooked. If a vegetable is meant to be eaten raw, then it should be raw, but if not, it should be honestly cooked.

I have tried to use vegetables in combination with others that are naturally ripe at the same time. If you eat a vegetable when it has been grown under all the right conditions, including reaching maturity at the right time of year, it tastes as good as can be. I think it is important to keep this in mind—which is why I am delighted that so many cities have established farmers’ markets where local farmers can sell their produce. At the farmers’ markets, not only can city dwellers buy farm-fresh fruit and vegetables—and often meat and fish, too— but also the small farmers have outlets for the crops they so lovingly grow and tend.

In New York, where I have lived most of the time, I go to the Union Square Greenmarket two or three times a week. I have gotten to know a number of the farmers and often strike up conversations with them about various fruits and vegetables. I recall talking to a young man who had bought land with

damson plum trees on it. He was not sure what to do with the plums and so he asked me. As I was explaining all the wonderful things you can do with the old-fashioned fruit, a lady standing nearby decided she would try some damsons, too. I know another farmer who grows twenty-five different varieties of lettuce and almost every week in the spring and fall, he brings a new kind to try. These lettuces are just delicious and have nearly always been picked the day before, or early that morning, before dawn, by the light of the tractor. He also grows old-time root vegetables such as salsify.

I have found all different types of potatoes at the Greenmarket. To me, nothing tastes better than a freshly dug potato from a summer garden. When it comes to autumn's sweet potatoes, I prefer the light yellow ones to the orange-fleshed ones called yams. The lighter ones are drier, not as sweet, and really taste good, although they disappear quickly in the fall, since not too many farmers grow them.

There is so much variety at farmers' markets you never tire of strolling among the stalls and trying different fruits and vegetables, comparing the flavor of one with that of another sold by a different farmer. Regardless of claims to the contrary, the produce is far superior to that sold at supermarkets—even supermarkets where the vegetables are displayed loose and pretty—because supermarket buyers are constrained to buy from large commercial growers through big distributors. I have never felt that a vegetable grown in an open field tastes as good as one grown in a small garden. Our garden, when I was a child, was a pampered piece of soil outside the kitchen window, nurtured with compost, ashes from the wood stove, and manure from the barnyard. A garden gets better every year—the weeds and plants are chopped up and turned back into the earth, compost is added, and sometimes natural lime, too, is mixed with the soil to sweeten it. The soil, so well cared for, naturally becomes deeper and richer every year.

Some herbs grown in a garden or a pot on the windowsill are much better than dried packaged ones, but there are a few I prefer dried—thyme, rosemary, and oregano, for instance. When I buy dried herbs, I always date the jar or box and store it in the refrigerator tightly closed. They get stale after a couple of months and ought to be replaced. I rely on a small group of herbs to bring out the good flavor of foods, herbs such as fresh parsley, chervil, basil, and tarragon. I always chop these herbs fine when cooking with them as the chopping releases their oil and juices and brings out their intense flavor. When I am garnishing with herbs, I just snip them with scissors over the dish or pot. This does not release their juices and so they never overwhelm.

I also use garlic a lot to enhance the taste of food. I do not believe that yesterday's crushed garlic is any good—always start with fresh garlic. How it is handled alters its flavor. For instance, if you are adding garlic to a marinade, I suggest laying a peeled clove on a plate and scraping the flesh so that it turns into soft mush. For some reason, this tastes stronger and sweeter than chopped garlic. When you are cooking chopped garlic, add it to the pan

after the onions are partly cooked and never let it burn. Its flavor will be ruined.

Beyond the garden is the orchard. When I was a child, nearly everyone had at least a few fruit trees, all bearing different fruit, ready to be plucked at their peak of ripeness for pies, preserves, or simply to eat on the walk back to the house. Small orchards are disappearing. They were planted by another generation for us to enjoy, and if you have the space, think about planting some fruit trees for the next generation.

And beyond the orchard are the fields and woods, where wild things grow—watercress, mushrooms, strawberries, blackberries, grapes, and nuts. Perhaps it is because of the natural, undisturbed compost that nurtures them year after year, or perhaps it is because they grow only where the soil, light, and humidity are right for them, but wild things never fail us. They always taste good, which is why if you see only a handful of wild nuts or a cupful of berries, you should pick them. They have a flavor nothing else has. If you transplant a wild plant to the garden it will never taste the same.

At the end of the book, I have provided a list of mail-order sources for open-pollinated and heirloom seeds—seeds for old-fashioned plants not seen in modern catalogues. There are also a few nurseries listed where you can find fruit trees not ordinarily found anymore. I suggest trying some of these seeds when you plant your next garden. Because they are not hybrids, you can save the seeds from the vegetables and plant them the following year, which will just add to the pleasure of the garden and will result, in my opinion, in better-tasting vegetables—which, after all, is what we are looking for in the first place.



Sweet Green Peas and Explorer Potatoes in Cream Sauce



Explorer potatoes are tiny, elongated potatoes with brown skins. They are so small they do not have to be peeled or even cut, and their texture is a little better than that of other small potatoes. Unless you grow them yourself they are difficult to find, but they are in some specialty stores in June, July, and August—which is when a lot of people like to eat potatoes anyway because they are so fresh.

I add chervil to this recipe because I love its flavor and never cook peas without it. Fresh chervil has the aroma of freshly mowed grass and a sweetness that improves the flavor of peas. I remember peas being much sweeter and tenderer when I was young, and even when I grow them myself nowadays they are not as good as they were. Frozen petits pois peas are as reliable as any for this recipe and many others.

Serves 4

3 cups shelled peas (about 3 pounds peas in pods)
1 cup tiny explorer potatoes
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon sugar
1 bunch chervil with leaves and stems
1 cup heavy cream
1 tablespoon butter

Rinse and drain the peas. With a knife scrape the potatoes clean and cook them in a saucepan of boiling salted water to cover. Remove them after 15 minutes, when they are not quite done. Plunge the peas into another pan of boiling water seasoned with the sugar. Add the chervil and do not cover. Boil rapidly until the peas are done and the hulls are tender. Drain, return them to the pan, and add the potatoes. Pour in the heavy cream and cook gently without boiling for 15 to 20 minutes, until the potatoes are tender and the

rest of the meal is being finished. Add the tablespoon of butter. Stir and serve hot, garnished with leaves of finely cut chervil.

Fresh Green Peas with Vidalia Onions

I have only known about these sweet onions for ten years or so, but ever since I first tasted them I have loved them. While Vidalia onions are available until November, they are most plentiful in May and June. The onions grow in the region of Vidalia, Georgia, where the soil is just right to produce a sweet-tasting onion; if the same seed is planted elsewhere, the onions are sharp. I think the flavors of sweet spring peas and sweet onions go together perfectly and this combination has become one of my favorite dishes—as nearly anyone who I have cooked for in the last few years knows quite well. The best time to cut the center from the steamed onions is after they have cooled. The onion may fall apart if you try to cut the center from it while it is hot.

Serves 4 to 6

to 6 medium Vidalia onions
pound fresh peas, shelled
tablespoon sugar
or 8 stalks chervil, with leaves
good tablespoon butter
cup heavy cream
It

Put about 3 inches of water in a 2-quart steamer. Peel the skin off the onions and score the bottom with an X, then place in the steamer. Cover tightly and steam over medium-high heat for about 20 minutes, until the onions are tender. Take them from the pan and let them cool on a plate before cutting out the centers with a sharp knife to make a cup for the peas.

Pour $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of water into the saucepan and bring to a rapid boil. Add the peas, sugar, and chervil. Cook, uncovered, until the peas are tender. Drain, remove the chervil, then add the butter and shake the pan to coat the peas evenly with butter. Stir in the cream and season to taste with salt. Place an onion cup on each plate and spoon a generous amount of peas into the center of each. Spoon a little more around the outside of the onions. Reheat before serving.



Sweet Green Pea Soup

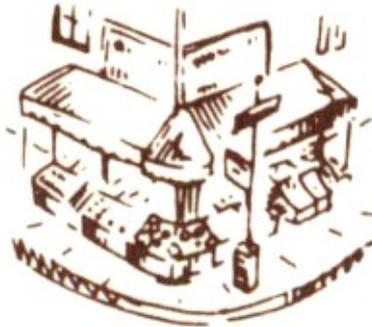
Soup made with tender garden peas tastes quite different from pea soup made with dried peas. It is not as thick and the blending of peas and chervil gives it a crisp, fresh flavor that holds up whether the soup is served hot or cold. I like to garnish the light-tasting soup with small dabs of unsweetened whipped cream.

Serves 4

½ pounds sugar snap peas in the pods
cups water
cup packed sprigs chervil
teaspoon sugar
teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
It
cup julienned romaine lettuce
cup unsweetened whipped cream (optional)

Rinse the peas, drain, and shell them. Heat the water to boiling in a large saucepan, and add the peas and shells. Stir in the chervil, sugar, and pepper, and cook briskly, uncovered, for 15 minutes, until the peas are tender. Cool the soup and pour it into a blender. Blend until liquefied, then push the soup through a sieve to hold back any undesirable pieces from the peas and the pods. Add 1 teaspoon of salt and taste for seasoning. Stir in the romaine lettuce and heat the soup, if you plan to serve it hot. If you plan to serve it cold, chill it until ready to serve. Spoon a little whipped cream in each soup bowl just before serving, if you like.

Creamed Scallions



Growing up, we would sow onion seed in the garden and then thin a lot of them out before their bulbs got too big. We chopped them up, sautéed them in bacon fat, poured in heavy cream, and ate them for breakfast. This recipe is not quite as rich as that, but uses scallions in a way that tastes just delicious. In my opinion, they are an underused vegetable and taste almost as good today as they did years ago. I buy scallions that are about the size of a pencil but if they are a little thicker they still taste good.

Serves 5

about 30 medium scallions
5 tablespoons cold water
1/2 cup heavy cream
1/2 teaspoon chopped garlic
1/2 tablespoon finely cut parsley, for garnish

Clean the scallions by removing the roots and a bit of the tops. Put the water in a heavy pan with a cover along with the scallions. Cook, covered, until the scallions become tender but remain green, about 5 minutes. While the scallions are cooking, put the heavy cream in a shallow 8-inch skillet along with the chopped garlic. Boil the cream hard enough to reduce it to 5 tablespoons of sauce. Remove the scallions to a warm, flat dish, spoon the reduced cream over them, and sprinkle with the parsley. Serve hot.

