

EDIBLE NATION

HOW TO COOK A LIFE: MFK FISHER

BY HEIDI YORKSHIRE

KEEP OUT. CROSS FIRE. RIFLE RANGES.

The sign was unequivocal, but no one, it seems, kept out. During the last years of M.F.K. Fisher's life, an increasing number of the reverent and the curious ignored the warning, bouncing down a rutted one-lane road to a little pink-and-white stucco house with a shingled roof. There, they shuffled respectfully into the presence of a reed-thin, gray-haired woman with a crackly voice and piercing wit, recording her words, noting her thoughts, and making her thoroughly uncomfortable with their praise.

On the eve of her 82nd birthday, Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher had become, much to her surprise, an institution. But the greatest food writer of all was not a food writer at all. Her books are filled with stories, not recipes; her ingredients are people and emotions, not flour and sugar. Food is a metaphor for human passion, and writing about meals a way to illuminate relationships, hopes, and

desires. "Her subject matter matters not at all," said Jack Shoemaker, former editor-in-chief of North Point Press, the Berkeley firm that re-published many of her books during the 1980s. "North Point was interested in her as a literary stylist. She writes exquisitely well, and only secondarily about food."

From 1970, Fisher lived in the Valley of the Moon, a few miles north of the town of Sonoma, on a ranch owned by her friend David Pleydell-Bouverie, an architect who designed and built her house. When I rang her bell, we were ushered into her bedroom office, a long, narrow room with a wood stove at the center of one wall. Red-painted bookshelves, crammed full, lined the alcove around the stove. The shiny black vinyl tile covering the floor imitated Spanish ceramic. Near the door stood a nondescript wooden desk, heaped with papers; at the other end of the room was a hospital-type bed, with two mobiles slowly twisting above it. The brown summer pastures radiated heat, but the room was cool.



Photos by Christine Alicino at www.christinealicino.com

M.F.K. Fisher was eating her breakfast—“My two weekly eggs,” she said, “poached.” She sat in a big brown armchair in the center of the room, her back to the arched window that framed the mountains to the east. In a floor-length orange velour robe that zipped up the front and bright red socks—no shoes—she looked jaunty and regal. Her hair was cut short, and her brows penciled into the same skinny arches she wore all her life, though the arch on the right brow was a bit wobbly. There was a dab of jade green eye shadow at the corner of each eye.

Her mobility was limited by Parkinson’s disease, fading eyesight, and other age-related infirmities, but Fisher’s mind ranged as far as ever, from recollections of the France and Switzerland of her youth to her rage over pesticide use in the Sonoma Valley. Opinionated and feisty, she was generous with praise for authors she admired, but not above dishing dirt—off the record—about a certain prominent food writer whose pretensions, Fisher believed, exceeded her talent. Perhaps trying to find a comfortable position, she moved constantly as she spoke, reaching an arm straight up in the air, leaning her chin or cheek in her cupped hand, shifting from hip to hip in the big chair.

So many friends and admirers crowded her calendar that she invented a two-week “vacation” the previous summer so she’d have an excuse to decline their offers. What she didn’t say was that she never left home, but used the quiet time for work. Though she seemed to love the company, she was ambivalent about the praise. Fisher pointed to a carton overflow-



ABOUT M.F.K. FISHER

July 3, 2008, marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of writer M.F.K. Fisher, whose vivid, impeccably detailed memoirs and essays are among the treasures of American letters. Her first book, *Serve It Forth*, was published in 1937, yet for decades her works were cherished by a relatively small number of readers. W.H. Auden once called Fisher “the best prose writer in America,” but she remained, in her own words, “a secret little cult figure,” largely because much of her writing is about the transcendent pleasures of eating.

When much of Fisher’s work first appeared, she was relegated by many to the menial category of food writer. Being female and beautiful didn’t help her get taken seriously, either; a 1942 *Newsweek* review of one of her books describes her as “a blonde gorgeous enough to eat.” Even so, a staunch group of admirers, including editors at *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, continued to recognize the value of her work. Eventually cuisine was elevated to high art, women’s voices were allowed to be heard, and M.F.K. Fisher was unofficially appointed patron saint of the foodie generation. She became—though she shuddered to hear it—famous.

I discovered Fisher’s work in the early 1970s, thanks to my first mother-in-law, a librarian, who also introduced me to the plea-

tures of A.J. Liebling and Craig Claiborne, among others. (I’m still grateful to Connie for sharing her love of food and books, though my marriage to her son has been history for close to 30 years.) The profile below, which has been updated, came about when my editor at a now-defunct magazine suggested that I ask Fisher for an interview. I was shy about phoning someone I admired so much, but when I finally got up the nerve, the great lady could not have been more cordial. “Sure, honey,” Fisher said, “Come on over!”

I showed up at her house on August 15, 1989, accompanied by the man who would become my husband. Though Joe was also a journalist, we had never worked together; still, when he heard who I was going to interview, he refused to be left behind. It was lucky he was there: Fisher, a passionate character even in her eighties, clearly loved men, and flirted like crazy with Joe throughout the interview. I suspect it was a much livelier conversation than we would have had if I’d come alone.

Fisher died in 1992, just shy of her 84th birthday. Appreciation for her work has continued to grow, proving that many readers see the truth of her observation: “There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine is drunk.”

ing with envelopes given to her at her 80th birthday party in 1988.

“See that red box over there?” she asked. “It’s filled with 180 people’s birthday greetings to me, and I have not yet opened them. I wrote them all and said thank you very much, but I’m too scared to open them.”

Why?

“Because they’re sort of ego trips, all of them, you know. They’re very personal, very embarrassing to me. It’s embarrassing to hear what they think of me, because I know what *I* think of me.”

Which is?

“Not very much,” she said. She didn’t seem as if she wanted to be contradicted.

“With some people I just feel awed that they see things in me that I don’t see in myself at all,” Fisher continued. “I know they’re mistaken, but now and then I know they’re not mistaken. They see what they see, so therefore it must be me, even if it’s not me. It’s not my fault. I don’t pretend to be anything I’m not.”

Everywhere in the room were reminders of her stories. In a niche by the bed stood a line-up of the carved wooden *santons*, Provençal folk-art figures of saints, that she wrote about in her book on Marseille. A photo panorama leaning against the bookshelves showed the view from the French mountain cabin she described in her story “The Oldest Man.”

Propped against the wall was a half-ruined painting that Fisher bought in a junk shop in Zurich in 1936 or so. The painting, which gave Fisher’s book *Sister Age* its name and is described in the introduction, brought me up short. Fisher said that everything she wrote was “strictly true, every word of it.” Somehow, though, I’d always “believed” her stories the way one “believes” a good work of fiction; I’d never thought that it was possible to write of real things with such pristine clarity. Others have felt the same confusion; Jack Shoemaker of North Point Press said he collected her stories for years under the impression that they were beautifully crafted fiction.

M.F.K. Fisher was born Mary Frances Kennedy in Albion, Michigan, on July 3, 1908, the first child of fourth-generation newspaperman Rex Kennedy and his wife Edith. Her father—who had threatened to name her *Independencia* if she’d been born a day later—purchased the Whittier Daily News in Southern California when she was four and moved the family there. In her memoir, *Among Friends*, she wrote of a California now lost, of Whittier lush with orchards and climbing vines, and of Laguna Beach when the Pacific Coast Highway petered out along the shoreline cliffs. “I sweated blood over that book,” she said. “I have an unusually good memory, I think. I decided I was going to write it as it was, not as it must have been.”

Fisher married three times: to Al Fisher, her companion during student days in Dijon in the early ‘30s; to painter and novelist Dillwyn Parrish, called Chexbres in her books, with whom she spent idyllic years in Switzerland before his suicide; and to publisher Donald Friede, whom she divorced after giving birth to two daughters. “I was astonished when I found I could and should earn my living as a writer. It scared me silly,” she said. “I found out the hard way, by having children and having to support them.”

She chose to write memoirs not because she felt a need to tell the world her life, but because “it’s the only thing I know. I realized that I would have to write about myself all the time, because I’m the person I know best.”

“It’s sort of an odd, exposed feeling, but I never did it to be exposed,” she said. “Some people say you should never write a diary unless you want someone to read it. I’ve never agreed with that. I’ve always kept diaries going, two or three at a time. Different parts of me, you know. I wouldn’t want anyone to read them, but my only way of being me is to write it, I guess. Not for publication, ever.”

As we talked, a New York scholar who had just finished a month in Sonoma studying Fisher’s writing came in to say good-bye, and to ask if she’d pose for a snapshot with him. She transferred into her wheelchair and moved into the kitchen/living room. Worn area rugs covered parts of the floor; a lap rug was folded at the foot of a mustard-colored chaise lounge, one of several comfortably dilapidated pieces of upholstered furniture that clustered in the middle of this large room. Hundreds of cookbooks filled the shelves, but near the kitchen were only Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, *The Joy of Cooking* by Irma Rombauer, and Fisher’s own anthology, *The Art of Eating*, which includes several recipes.

“When I cook I like to consult Julia, Mrs. Rombauer, and Escoffier or *Larousse Gastronomique*,” Fisher said. “You’ve got the zucchini, so you see what they all do, then you do it your own way.”

M.F.K. Fisher liked to cook for herself, but she hadn’t done it for years. She was clearly infuriated by her body’s failings. “I can’t read at all now. It’s very frustrating. My voice shakes, it wobbles, or it goes very high. I’m of an equable nature, usually. But it is very difficult, because I can’t read and I can’t write and I can’t talk and I can’t walk.

“I’m fragile, I’m not frail, if you know the difference. Fragile like steel,” she asserted. “I should have died several times, but I haven’t yet. I’m not meant to die yet.”

She paused.

“I will. I look forward to it actually, because it’s the last great thing I don’t know about. The problem is, I can’t write about it. That is frustrating, because I’d want to know about it and then tell somebody.”

What will she leave behind?

“The books will be around for a while, probably. You can never tell. I might be forgotten immediately, or there might be a recrudescence, and 50 years from now I would be worth more than I am now.”

Like Elvis Presley?

“Exactly.” She laughed.

On the shaded patio, she selected a giant wicker throne as the best spot for a photo with the young man from New York. Settled, she tilted her chin and eyed the camera with the same composure with which she once posed for Man Ray. She looked at the grove of trees below, by the highway, and said that we should see how beautiful they look in the afternoon light. And she said, “Now that you know the way, you can come back.”

Over more than 20 years as a writer, Heidi Yorkshire has had some exciting opportunities, but none better than the chance in 1989 to meet one of the writers she admired most, M.F.K. Fisher. Based in Portland, she was the wine columnist for The Oregonian and has written two books on wine, Wine Savvy and Simply Wine. She contributed travel and food features to Bon Appetit, Travel & Leisure and many other magazines.