THE DINNER TABLE

OVER 100 WRITERS ON FOOD

SELECTED BY

ELLA RISBRIDGER & KATE YOUNG



An Apollo Book

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To our mums, Deb Paton and Nikki Risbridger, for their shared and constant commitment to the family dinner table.

(Turns out it's our favourite place to be.)

CONTENTS

Introduction		xi
Dodie Smith	*I Capture the Castle*	1
Dan Saladino	*Hadza Honey, from Eating to Extinction*	2
Salamah bint Saïd	*Memoirs of an Arabian Princess From Zanzibar*	11
Samuel Pepys	*The Diary of Samuel Pepys*	25
Rachel Khong	*All You Have Eaten: On Keeping a Perfect Record*	32
Preti Taneja	*We That Are Young*	47
Madhur Jaffrey	*Madhur Jaffrey's Ultimate Curry Bible*	53
William Makepeace Thackeray	*Vanity Fair*	61
Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner	*The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*	69
Sathnam Sanghera	*Empireland*	75
Monica Ali	*Brick Lane*	81
Sarah Waters	*Tipping the Velvet*	84
Laura Goodman	*The Joy of Snacks*	85
Michael Chabon	*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*	88
Naomi Alderman	*Disobedience*	97
Claudia Roden	*The Book of Jewish Food*	106
Alissa Timoshkina	*Salt & Time*	123
Tatyana Tolstaya	*Aspic, from Aetherial Worlds*	127
Héctor Abad Faciolince	*Recipes for Sad Women*	131
Virginia Woolf	*Mrs Dalloway*	134
Angela Carter	*Elizabeth David: English Bread and Yeast Cookery*	136

INTRODUCTION

Consider this an invitation to dinner.

Not just dinner, though: a dinner party, and ideally – if we've done this right – the best dinner party of your life.

You know those evenings where it all just works? Where the food is great, and the candles never go out, and the music is neither too soft nor too loud, and the talking goes on late into the night, and nobody wants it to end? The kind of night with both beloved old friends, and their sparkling new friends, and maybe those friends will soon be your friends too? The kind of night where you want to join every conversation you overhear? And there's always another course of exquisite little bits, timed just right so you're never too full to nibble on another corner of something plump and salty and sweet and spicy and delicious, and every bite seems to suggest another perfect bite to follow?

The kind of night where the wine is just the right temperature, and never harsh, and nobody's ever drunk, just maybe a little contentedly tipsy, and there's a basket of breads that seems to endlessly replenish itself with soft white rolls and sticky-sweet rye and plump little pitta and crisp fluffy focaccia, and there's butter and brown butter and garlic butter and extra-virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar and maybe other things to dip too? Soft labneh or swirly tahini or some kind of vivid green salsa verde? And none of it should go, but all of it somehow *does* go, this joyful clash and mishmash of cuisines and cultures and ideas and people and sauces and spices and flavours and friends? And it all somehow works? And there's maybe fairy lights, or stars, and the big gold moon, and the sound of the sea? A warm breeze through the fig trees? The crackle of the fire; the scent of coffee; the promise of breakfast to follow: the sun on the terrace (or the lawn or the balcony or the fire escape), and something perfect under a shining silver cloche, or wrapped in a white linen napkin, or eaten, with your fingers, at the top of the mountain?

No, us neither, but that's what we're hoping for. Ideally.

This book is the dinner party we'd throw, if we could invite everyone whose words about food we've ever loved. Or, at least, around one hundred of those people. Call it a selection box, if we're not already too deep in the first metaphor: a grab-bag of favourites, friends and surprising new

additions spanning five continents and two thousand years. We'll meet a Japanese princess, eight hundred years ago, elegantly expressing her taste for 'iced plums'; a literary 1920s New Zealander with aspirations; the recipes and memories of a free Black woman in 1850s America; and a tribe in Tanzania who teach us how they still hunt for golden honey. A rockstar makes kimchi and grieves in middle America, and a South American poet writes a recipe for solving sorrow on 'afternoons of fine, persistent rain'. A hapless cook turns her soup blue with string-tied leeks; two women who have loved the same man become a family side by side at the sink; a single man remembers his lover while he cooks an egg for breakfast. Samuel Pepys buries his Parmesan cheese to save it from the Great Fire of London. There's a marmalade festival, and markets heaving with peaches, and a garden halfway up a mountain laden with peas practically just bursting from their perfect green pods, and Sylvia Plath living – not dying – by her recipe cards and her *Joy of Cooking* ('blessed Rombauer') and her tomato soup cake.

There is borsch that tastes like home, and crosses borders. There is Jack Kerouac, crossing state borders himself, and eating ice cream. There is a young Henry James. Virginia Woolf is here, and – somehow – also *there*, splitting herself across opposite sides of the table. There are broken hearts, and perfect solitude, and marriages. There is washing up, and the morning after.

Some of these people and pieces you will know already. Amy March and her limes are here, of course, their stinging sourness vivid 150 years on. You'll perhaps recognise Nigella Lawson on mayonnaise and literature; her perfect metaphor about confidence and surety and things that are 'meant to be difficult' finds its way into our bowl whenever we thicken egg yolks with oil. If you can't recall (as though you were there in the kitchen yourself) what Mrs Cratchit puts on the table on Christmas morning – if you don't remember the stuffing issuing forth from the goose, the gravy 'ready beforehand in a little saucepan', the round perfection of the pudding – we're confident you'll at least know the warmth of the scene as presented in *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. If you love food writing as we do, then we know you'll be able to picture Laurie Colwin, alone in her kitchen with her eggplant.

Some of them, we hope, will be new to you: a collection of 1980s readers, for instance, who wrote in to *The Sun Magazine* with their

thoughts about washing up. Some of them may be familiar, but in new guises: Maya Angelou, not in memoir mode, but in the kitchen, baking with her young son. You'll find poets you're familiar with, and ones you probably aren't. You'll find excerpts from novels that sit on your shelves with well-cracked spines, and novels you'll head out in pursuit of as soon as you've had a taste.

We planned this book as if we were putting together the seating plan for the world's most extravagant dinner party. The individual pieces have something to say to their neighbours on either side: you'll find that old friends will introduce you to new friends. This means you can dip in and dip out, read one piece or twenty, start where you like and end where you like (but we hope you won't be able to put it down). It's how we put much of the book together, in satisfying little runs of ideas: Sei Shōnagon's *Refined and elegant things*, her 'pretty child eating strawberries', sent Ella off to Genevieve Taggard and to Christina Rossetti. Rosetti's 'Goblin Market' sent Kate back into the kitchen, to reach for the Mrs Beeton on the highest shelf, to find her 'Pretty Dish of Oranges'. And then of course there were oranges: oranges in *The Groundnut Cookbook*, John McPhee's orange juice in Penn Station, Olivia Potts' musings on capturing seasonal citrus in jars. And once there were jars it was impossible not to turn to Shirley Jackson and the preserves in Constance's kitchen, to the pickle factory in *Midnight's Children*, to Amy March and her limes, to making kimchi for the market in *Pachinko*, and so on and so on and so on.

The Dinner Table is a glorious celebration; a wedding without a couple to steal focus; a table constructed with a single noble purpose: the most delicious meal we could imagine offering you. We sat at the dining room table with tiny sticky slips of paper, each labelled with a key player we knew we wanted at the table, and we shuffled and moved them around until we felt everyone was perfectly placed. We couldn't imagine the party without Diana Henry, Madhur Jaffrey, Jane Austen, Jimi Famurewa. But who sits where? Who might like who? Should we pair a writer with a stranger or a friend? What placement should be avoided – unless we're really all in for a pistols-at-dawn duel?

As at any dinner party, chemistry is key; the ingredients have to be just right, the whole thing a delicate balancing act. Here, that meant that we wanted non-fiction writing to follow fiction, classic literature to bump up against contemporary memoir, poetry and journalism to sit side by side.

We wanted the aching sincerity of one piece to be cut with lightness and fun in the next. We wanted to know that a wide spectrum of feelings about food were encapsulated. Food is deeply prosaic, so sewn into the fabric of our days that it risks becoming inconsequential. Most writers end up writing about food at some point; even the absence of food is a way of writing about food. But we wanted the food here to feel tangible, to come right off the page and onto the centre of the table as it does in our lives: at once intimate and expansive, both undeniably personal and something we love to share.

The two of us talk about food for at least two hours a day, and think about it for at least another eight: What did you eat? How did they do it? How did they do *that*?

This book, then, is also the product of a half-decade of collaborative thinking about eating. Most of the time, we are on the phone when we cook. We are always propping the phone up against the toaster while one of us runs to grab another cookbook from the shelf, to check something, to argue with somebody, to figure out just what is the best way to XYZ or ABC. Our text thread is peppered with links, screenshots and confident assurances that the attached is something the recipient will love, that will change the way we see an ingredient or think about a cuisine or cook dinner that night. We are always talking and reading and cooking and thinking about and eating food, and that means we are always talking and reading and cooking and thinking about and eating food writers.

We hope you enjoy eavesdropping on the writers we've collected together, on our beloved favourites. We haven't forgotten to save you a place. Fill your plate with everything you fancy eating, pour yourself a glass of something you love and pull up a chair.

Ella and Kate
2023

I CAPTURE THE CASTLE

Dodie Smith

Born in Lancashire, **Dorothy Gladys 'Dodie' Smith** wrote her first play at the age of ten, and spent her teenage years in small stage roles with the Manchester Athenaeum Dramatic Society. After a successful career in London, writing for the stage, Smith moved to the US with her husband during the Second World War. Homesick for England, she wrote her first novel, *I Capture the Castle*, in 1948; Smith's other most famous novel features a very large number of Dalmatians. She died, back home in England, at the age of ninety-four.

We had real butter for tea because Mr. Stebbins gave Stephen some when he went over to fix about working (he started at the farm this morning); and Mrs. Stebbins had sent a comb of honey. Stephen put them down in my place so I felt like a hostess. I shouldn't think even millionaires could eat anything nicer than new bread and real butter and honey for tea.

HADZA HONEY *FROM* EATING TO EXTINCTION

Dan Saladino

Dan Saladino is a journalist, presenter and producer. His decade and a half of work on BBC's *The Food Programme* introduced him to many communities and individuals who work with rare and endangered foods. *Eating to Extinction: The World's Rarest Foods and Why We Need to Save Them*, his first book, is a rallying cry for us to consider our future food security and the impact of food homogenisation. It won multiple food book prizes, as well as the 2022 Wainwright Prize.

Lake Eyasi, Tanzania

It was April, the rainy season. Short downpours had brought pockets of colour to the greens and browns of the East African savannah as small delicate flowers bloomed. Nectar was becoming abundant and, with it, honey. I was with a group of Hadza hunters, a scattered population of just over one thousand people. The tribe has lived in the dry bush of northern Tanzania, near the shore of Lake Eyasi, for tens of thousands of years, perhaps hundreds of thousands of years. Now, fewer than two hundred Hadza live fully as hunter-gatherers, making them the last people in Africa to practise no form of agriculture. The group I was with had walked far away from the camp and deep into the bush, led by a young man named Sigwazi. As he walked, he whistled.

This wasn't a melodious tune, more a series of angular ups and downs on a musical scale, each passage finished with a high-pitched twirl. To my ears there was no obvious musical pattern to follow but something in

the bush was paying close attention to this whistle. Noticing movement above the trees, Sigwazi broke into a sprint, weaving through the scrub and around baobab trees as he continued the whistle. A wordless conversation was under way, an exchange between a human and a bird. Sigwazi looked towards the flutter of activity in the canopy, and there perched on a branch was an olive-grey bird the size of a starling.

Barring a few flashes of white on its tail, the bird looked plain and unassuming, but after a few more whistles from the hunter, it revealed itself to be exceptional. 'Ach-ech-ech-ech' came its reply to Sigwazi's whistle, signalling that a deal was on. The bird had agreed to lead the hunter to honey hidden among the branches of the giant baobabs. These trees are as wide as they are tall, living for up to a thousand years, fed by a root system so deep that they can access water in periods of extreme drought. Finding a bees' nest concealed among the baobab's tall branches can take a hunter-gatherer several hours as they need to inspect tree after tree; with the assistance of a honeyguide, it takes a fraction of that time. The bird's scientific name captures the talent perfectly: *Indicator indicator.*

Somehow, over hundreds of thousands of years, the two species, humans and honeyguides, found a way of sharing their different skills. The bird can find the bees' nests but can't get to the wax it wants to eat without being stung to death. Humans, meanwhile, struggle to find the nests, but armed with smoke can pacify the bees. Theirs is the most complex and productive of any partnership between humans and wild animals.

To reach the most isolated Hadza camps from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's largest city, involves an eighteen-hour drive by jeep. Their home is set among a patchwork of shrubs, rocks, trees and dust, a landscape occupied by humans for at least 3.5 million years. Looking out across the horizon of Hadza country, it's possible to see human history in microcosm. Just a few miles north is Laetoli, the site where a group of our distant ancestors walked through wet volcanic ash and left behind the earliest known human footprints. Even closer is the Olduvai Gorge, the place where some of the oldest stone tools and hand axes have been discovered. Within walking distance is the saltwater expanse of Lake Eyasi, where human skeletons, 130,000 years old, have been excavated.

The Hadza are no proxy for our Stone Age relatives; they are thoroughly modern humans. But their foraging way of life is the closest we have to that of early *Homo sapiens*, and the Hadza diet offers the best insight into the foods that fuelled our evolution. I watched the Hadza follow trails that were impossible for me to see, and read the earth as if it was a much-loved book, knowing exactly where golden Congolobe berries were ripest and Panjuako tubers were at their thickest, where long-snouted bush pigs were likely to feed and when the squirrel-like hyrax might gather. They picked up on sounds I didn't notice and paused to feel changes in the gentlest of breezes so they could approach animals undetected. It was still a month until the dry season, when the large game congregate around water, making them easier to find. For now, the easiest way of finding meat was to dig it out from underground, which is why earlier Sigwazi had lured a porcupine from its den beneath a baobab tree. The offal (the heart, liver and kidney) were eaten on the spot, cooked for moments on a makeshift fire, but the carcass was carried back to camp, and shared among the rest of the group. Meat, however, isn't the Hadza's favourite food. Honey is, which is why the conversation with the honeyguide is so valuable.

The collaboration between human and bird was chronicled by Portuguese missionaries in the 1500s, but it took until 2016 for outsiders to understand the conversation more fully. When a team of scientists walked through the savannah playing loops of different recorded sounds, they discovered that the attention of the honeyguide wasn't caught by just any human sound – the birds were listening out for specific phrases. In the case of the Yao people of Mozambique, this was 'brr-hm …', whereas in northern Tanzania the birds responded to the twists and twirls of the Hadza's whistles. These calls are passed down from one generation of hunter to another and, in each case, the researchers found, repeating the traditional phrases not only doubled the chance of being guided by a bird, but also tripled the chance of finding a bees' nest and honey.

What makes this even more remarkable is that the honeyguide is a brood parasite; it lays its eggs in other birds' nests. More brutal than the cuckoo, the chicks use their sharp-hooked bills to dispatch their rivals as

they hatch. How the bird learns the skill of conversing with the Hadza we still don't know. One theory is that, just like the hunters, they are social learners; they watch and listen to their more experienced peers. It's possible this inter-species conversation predates the arrival of *Homo sapiens* and reaches back a million years or more to our ancestors' first use of fire and smoke. This idea is part of a compelling argument that it was honey and bee larvae, as much as meat, that made the human brain larger and helped us to outcompete all other species. Meat eating gets all the glory, the argument goes, because stone tools used in hunting turn up in the archaeological record, while evidence of eating honey does not. But there are plenty of other clues. Our closest relatives in the animal kingdom – chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans – all eagerly gorge on honey and bee larvae, nature's most energy-dense food. And in the earliest rock art discovered, inside caves in Spain, India, Australia and South Africa, there are depictions of honey collecting dating back at least 40,000 years.

But perhaps the most persuasive evidence of honey's importance to human evolution is the diets of the world's few remaining hunter-gatherers, including that of the Hadza. One-fifth of all of their calories across a year comes from honey, around half of which is the result of help from the honeyguide bird. The other half the Hadza can find themselves, as it comes from various species of bee that nest closer to the ground. Some are tiny, gnat-like and stingless, and produce a type of honey that is highly perfumed and delicately tangy. The Hadza find these nests by inspecting trees for the tiny needle-sized tubes used by the bees to get inside the trunk. This type of honey, called *kanowa* or *mulangeko* in Hadzabe (the Hadza's language), comes in modest, snack-like portions, and is gathered by chopping into the colonised section of tree. But on this occasion Sigwazi and the honeyguide wanted more. Together they were going to find the honey and wax of the larger (and more aggressive) *Apis mellifer*, the African honeybee.

Sigwazi watched as the bird he had attracted with his whistle hovered above one of the baobabs. This signalled there was honey; now it was time for Sigwazi to start climbing. He was short (five feet tall at most),

wiry and slim. I figured his physique was the reason he was the member of the group chosen to climb the tree, but I came to realise it was more a question of bravery. Sigwazi was the one least concerned about disturbing a bees' nest, being stung or, worse still, falling thirty feet to the ground. He handed his bow and arrow to a fellow hunter, stripped off his ripped T-shirt and frayed shorts and removed the string of red and yellow beads from around his neck. By now almost naked, he started to chop up fallen branches with an axe and sharpen them into thin sticks. Baobabs are so soft and sponge-like that hunters can drive these pegs into their trunks with ease to create a makeshift ladder up towards the canopy. Swinging back and forth, Sigwazi made his way up the baobab, forcing a new peg in above his head as he climbed, clinging on, balancing and hammering all at once. As he neared the top of the tree another hunter climbed up behind and handed him a bunch of smouldering leaves. With these, Sigwazi closed in on the nest and immediately launched into a mid-air dance punctuated with high-pitched yelps. Bees were swarming around the honey thief and stinging as he scooped his hand into the nest and pulled out chunks of honeycomb. These rained down on the other Hadza hunters as Sigwazi tossed them below. They cupped their hands to their mouths and started to feast, spitting out pieces of wax as they ate, leaving behind warm melting liquid that tasted both sweet and sour, bright and acidic like citrus. As I joined them I could feel writhing larvae inside my mouth and the crunch of dead bees. The honeyguide bird perched silently nearby, waiting for its share of the raid once the crowd of hunters had gone.

When the rest of the honey was taken back to the camp, women gathered armfuls of baobab pods, each one the size of two cupped hands. With bare feet, they brought their heels down to open the pods with a crunch. Inside were clusters of kidney-shaped seeds coated in a white powdery pulp which tasted like effervescent vitamin C tablets. The seeds, pulp, water and a little honey were placed into a bucket and stirred into a whirlpool with a stick. When everything settled, it looked like a thick creamy soup. Each sip fizzed in the mouth. This, I was told, is a food Hadza babies are weaned on.

*

Someone who had watched this exact scene long before me, as a 23-year-old Cambridge student, was James Woodburn. In 1957, to complete his PhD, he travelled to Tanzania in search of Africa's last hunter-gatherers. He followed two Italian ivory hunters tracking an elephant herd. Near Lake Eyasi, after the animals were killed and the tusks removed, Woodburn watched as Hadza hunters appeared out of the scrubland and into the clearing to take away the mountain of meat (elephants are the only big game that Hadza don't hunt – they say their poison is not strong enough to kill them). Woodburn followed the hunters back to their camp and spent the next two years living alongside them. To survive Hadza country without Hadza skills, he brought in supplies of rice and lentils to add to the small amounts of wild food he managed to forage for himself.

Woodburn learned to speak Hadzade (his language skills had been honed as a military interpreter), and gained new insights that brought the Hadza to wider attention in the 1960s. This included work carried out with paediatricians, which showed how exceptionally well nourished Hadza children were compared with their contemporaries in nearby farming communities. During the six decades that have followed, Woodburn has returned to Hadza country on a regular basis, staying with the tribe, studying their way of life and recording how it has changed over time. Luckily for me, my visit to Hadza country coincided with one of his.

'They have stayed as hunter-gatherers because it is a life that makes sense to them,' Woodburn said as we sat by a campfire, the last of Sigwazi's porcupine crackling as it cooked, 'they regard it as a wonderful life.' It's a way of life that's endured, he believes, largely because of the autonomy it brings; no Hadza has control over another, a fact made possible because of the abundance of wild food around them. Apart from the very young and the very old, everyone in the camp is self-sufficient, each skilled enough to feed themselves, even children as young as six. 'Once this way of life stops making sense to them,' Woodburn said, 'it finally comes to an end.'

When Woodburn first met the Hadza, the outside world had stood at a distance. The foragers still didn't know which country they lived in and their knowledge of what lay beyond Hadza country came largely from encounters with neighbouring tribes – the Iraqw, the Datoga and the Isanzu. With these pastoralists and farmers, the Hadza traded meat, skins and honey for millet, maize, marijuana and metal (to make axes and arrowheads). Other things they knew about the outside world had been passed down the generations, including stories of abductions of their forebears. Tanzania was at the centre of the East African slave trade until the middle of the nineteenth century, which was why the Hadza, until recently, always ran from strangers who appeared in the bush. But in the mid-1960s, there was no avoiding the world outside. Following independence from Britain, the Tanzanian government, encouraged by American missionaries, attempted to settle the Hadza in villages by force. Hunter-gatherers from remote bush camps were taken away in trucks to purpose-built villages, escorted by armed guards. Many became ill from infections and died. Within two years, most of those who had survived returned to their camps and to foraging. Efforts to settle and convert the Hadza, not only to Christianity but also to agriculture, have continued. And yet, against the odds, their hunter-gatherer way of life – the life that makes sense to them – has persisted. Now, though, a new set of forces is bearing down on the Hadza. Agriculture is spilling over into their land and products made by the global food industry have reached the camps. Woodburn said he hadn't forseen the scale of these pressures on the Hadza. No one had.

*

One-third of the Earth's land surface is now dedicated to food production – a quarter of this for crops, three-quarters for grazing animals – and farming's expansion into the wild is continuing (nearly 4 million hectares of tropical rainforest are lost each year). Agriculture is reaching into parts of the world once thought impossible to be farmed. Among them, Hadza country. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, tens

of thousands of hectares of land used by the Hadza was converted by outsiders into pasture for livestock or to grow crops each year. Along with it went some of the Hadza's access to wild foods, including giant baobab trees that take hundreds of years to grow. Supplies of nutritious baobab pods were depleted, and so were sources of honey. In 2012, after years of campaigning, the Hadza were awarded rights of occupancy over 150,000 hectares of land, but this still didn't stop the problem. Neighbouring tribes faced with water shortages caused by irrigation and climate change moved cattle closer to the Hadza's camps and waterholes. The cattle ate the vegetation that brought in game and disrupted migration routes which meant there was less for the Hadza to hunt. Across the whole of Africa, two-thirds of the continent's productive land is now at risk of becoming degraded, half of this severe enough to lead to desertification. The biggest cause is overgrazing of livestock.

The Hadza are ill-equipped to stop this encroachment; they have no possessions, no money and no leaders. They're skilled hunters but they avoid conflict. Instead of confronting tribes arriving on their land, they moved deeper into the bush. But even here, farmers edge ever closer, expanding pasture and planting sorghum and corn, though there's barely enough water to irritate crops. The Hadza have to contend with the effects of climate change too; they see its impact in the lack of water, disappearance of edible plants and decline in nectar and therefore quantity of honey they find. To survive, many rely on food from NGOs and missionaries. The last hunter-gatherers in Africa are being pinched from all sides.

*

A thirty-minute drive from Sigwazi's honey hunting, we reached a crossing point where different tribes gather to take water from a newly installed pump. Here, they also visit a small mudbrick hut lit by a single light bulb that hangs from the corrugated roof. Inside, from floor to ceiling, are shelves stacked with cans of sugary sodas and packets of biscuits. We were hours from the nearest city, an enormous wilderness

lay between us and the nearest road, and yet some of the biggest food and drink brands in the world had made it this far.

In the place where our ancestors first evolved, sugar in plastic bottles is replacing the sweetness of the food that helped to make us human, honey. Scientists who monitor birdlife in the savannah describe melancholy scenes of birds swooping down, calling 'ach-ech-ech-ech' in the hope of a reply, as their interaction with humans becomes rarer. The conversation between the two species, thousands, possibly millions of years in the making, may soon fall silent.

Encircling the mudbrick hut were newly planted fields of corn. I felt I could have been watching a film in which hundreds of thousands of years of human history was being played on fast-forward, from wild to farmed and from foraged to processed, bottled and branded.