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Opening Extract from...

Healthy Eating for Life

Over 100 Simple and Tasty Recipes

Written by Robin Ellis

Illustrated by Hope James

Published by Right Way

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Healthy Eating for Life

Over 100 Simple and Tasty Recipes

Robin Ellis

Illustrated by Hope James

RIGHT WAY

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Praise from Those Who Have Enjoyed Robin's Dishes

Carmen Callil, publisher and author:
'This is the kind of great book that teaches you how to cook as you go. Read, cook, eat and be healthy, a marvellous Mediterranean combination for happiness. Robin Ellis is a truly great cook. Here he is at his delicious best.'

Brian Cox, Scottish actor:
'Of course I am biased! Robin is a very old and dear friend! Even so, he is simply one the best cooks ever. Why? His cuisine is always a delicious culinary paradox, strong and delicate with an exquisite balance of flavours. One of the truly great treats of my life is a meal prepared by Robin – with the commitment, love and detail of a great actor preparing for a classical role. Once tasted, never forgotten!'

Donald Douglas, actor:
'His cooking is superb! Wonderful flavours, textures and presentation. His cookbook is a must for those who love their food, but also like to stay healthy!'

Lindsay Duncan, actress:
'Robin is the perfect cook to have as a friend. He loves food, cooks superbly and likes nothing more than sharing his food with as many people as he can get round a table. Generosity is at the heart of good cooking and Robin cooks to give pleasure. It always works.'

Louise Fletcher, Academy-Award winning actress (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*):
'To have Sunday lunch at Robin's and to go home with his recipes is the perfect southwest France Sunday. Oh, let there be many more Sundays in the kitchen with Robin.

'Robin's cooking and Robin's recipes: simple, fresh and simply glorious.'

Romaine Hart, former cinema-owner (Screen on the Green/the Hill/ Baker Street):
'Robin's cooking did what five different medications failed to do: bring down my high blood pressure. I suffered a stroke and no medication brought my blood pressure below 177/70. After staying only one week with Robin and eating his delicious meals, it came down to 120/59.'

Sir Derek Jacobi, actor (Emmy, BAFTA, Olivier and Tony Awards):
'I can highly recommend Robin's delicious recipes, some of which I have had the pleasure of sampling at his table in France. The recipes have all the richness of classical Mediterranean cooking. Enjoy yourselves as I have with this mouth-watering cornucopia!'

Michael Pennington, actor and author:
'Robin Ellis has the gift of writing recipes that you can taste as you read them. Absolutely delicious.'

Eva Marie Saint, Hollywood legend, Academy-Award and Emmy winner:
'Robin Ellis is a superb chef! His cookbooks, filled with delicious and healthy recipes, have become my best friends in our kitchen.'

Imelda Staunton, actress:
'How can food this good – be this good for you!'

Timberlake Wertenbaker, playwright (*Our Country's Good*):
'I've used Robin's recipes again and again. They're elegant, delicious, imaginative and easy to use.

'The Basques are great cooks and giving a dinner in the Basque Country is scary. One also eats very late so no one wants anything too heavy. I always use one of Robin's recipes and end up with nothing but compliments and a demand for the recipe.

"'An English woman who can cook tuna!" someone said to me in complete astonishment. Of course, the recipe was Robin's.'

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Introduction

'The easiest and most pleasurable way to eat *well* is to cook.'
(*New York Times*, 2013)

'No one is born a great cook, one learns by doing.'
(Julia Child, American cook, food writer and legend)

Eating healthily is an aspiration everyone can share – though it's not always easy to follow if the person believes that '*healthily'* is synonymous with '*tastelessly'*!

This person might bite the bullet, so to speak, adopt a diet, perhaps, to lose weight for a limited time, but revert to old habits when the target has been reached. Then the cycle begins again. Diets don't work in the long run.

The idea behind this book (and my earlier book *Delicious Dishes for Diabetics*) is to demonstrate that cooking these relatively simple recipes affords you a way of eating *healthily* that ***can*** be *tasty* – so tasty in fact that there's little temptation to return to the old habits.

Being willing to cook is a big help when making changes to the way one eats. (Julia Child admits she didn't start to cook until she was thirty-two – she just ate! Then there was no stopping her.) Even for those who aren't regular cooks, these recipes are easy to follow and an encouragement, I hope, to everyone to have a go – at cooking and eating them.

Healthy Eating for Life – a slow start

Meredith, my wife, spent her childhood in a northern suburb of Chicago. She remembers shocking her grandparents when they asked her where she'd like to go for her eleventh birthday dinner. '*McDonald's!*' she said firmly – head office in Chicago – the ever-expanding fast food chain. She, in turn, was disbelieving when I told her I had never been to McDonald's, never eaten a Big Mac or a cheese burger!

I grew up in 1950s London; for us convenience/fast food was fish and chips wrapped in newspaper with salt and a shake of the malt vinegar bottle – the smell of deep fried batter wafting over the stalls of the local Odeon or Regal cinema.

Those were the days. I was eating doughnuts oozing jam and cream and covered in sugar at morning break in school. Meredith was given sugar sandwiches – wedges of white bread with butter and white sugar as the filling – to help her recover from night-time attacks of croupe (a viral infection of the larynx, common in children). The austerity of the war years which left people hungry but, oddly, healthier was over.

It was time for treats – even Mr Powell, our kindly dentist in Putney, had a bowl of sweets on hand to help soothe nerves – and keep him in business!

That was more than half a century ago. We met in 1986… by which time we had both evolved/progressed towards healthier tastes.

Over the next decade I had the time to indulge my passion for cooking. I was working mainly as a voiceover actor in the sound studios around the Soho district of London. After sessions, I would shop in Berwick Street market and at nearby Italian delicatessens; then ride my old Raleigh boneshaker bike back home with a basket full of goodies and cook my heart out.

Our 'way of eating' was southern European/Mediterranean style – *La Cucina d'Italie* in the main – strong on olive oil, lots of vegetables, fruit, meat, fish and wine. Inspiration came from heroes like Elizabeth David, Marcella Hazan and Anna del Conte.

Social eating was sitting round our large pine table, with friends, in the expanded kitchen, which quickly established itself as the heart of the house.

For years Meredith and I ate reasonably healthily, we thought. So it came as a shock just before the millennium and six months after moving permanently to France to be told there was a good chance I was pre-diabetic.

Pre-diabetic?

Oh no! Surely not, I have no symptoms and I feel fine.

But I knew enough to realise that if it turned out to be true, lifestyle changes were on the cards.

My mother had died of a heart attack related to her thirty-year struggle with type 1 diabetes at the age of sixty-seven.

Change is always a challenge and in terms of eating habits hard to stomach, so to speak.

Why bother? It won't make any difference, like changing deckchairs on the Titanic. *We're all going to die anyway!*

When the diagnosis, type 2 diabetes, was confirmed and to help me dodge the problems my mother had faced, I had to make adjustments.

Out went the 'whites' – processed versions of everyday staples – white pasta, white rice, white bread. Instead wholewheat pasta, brown basmati rice, whole rye bread, became our staples and we now prefer them. (The glycemic index (GI) – explained on page 180 – helps as a guide.)

I say *we* because Meredith eats for the most part the way I do, though she is not diabetic.

It's surprising how quickly *dreaded change* can become the norm. We don't feel deprived – the changes we've made are relatively few and represent healthy choices for anyone.

Though for those with less immediate need – making changes may be more difficult. Not impossible though…

I'm reminded of a song in *My Fair Lady*, the musical version of Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. Henry Higgins, confirmed bachelor, speech therapist and general stick-in-the-mud, sings *I've grown accustomed to her face* in a state of ecstatic disbelief that cockney sparrow

Eliza Doolittle could capture his heart so completely. At the end of the song, he is not simply *resigned* to change, he's luxuriating in it.

Change is not only possible – it can even be preferable!

Healthy Eating for Life – not a prison sentence

'Healthy Eating for Life!' What's this?

Sounds like something handed down by a crusty old judge – a life sentence of eating humble pie for past sins.

'Prisoners at the bar, you have sinned most grievously, eating too much of the wrong stuff for too long. Bad habits must be punished! I therefore have no alternative but to sentence you to: HEALTHY EATING – FOR LIFE. Take them down.'

Ouch! But NO! Emphatically **No**!

This book is not promoting a diet of worms, grapefruit or any of the strict rule-ridden diets that are so guilt-inducing and hard to stick with.

It's a book for people who love good food and enjoy cooking it or at least are willing to try. All manner of food, cooked in all manner of ways, encompassing a balanced diet, avoiding extremes.

It is not a manual. I am not a nutritionist. If it teaches, it is only by example.

It favours eating in *a mindful manner* – a phrase for which I have to thank Meg Henkels. Meg was one of the brave pioneer attendees at my first cooking workshop. The description, like a tasty dish, hit the spot.

Cooking Empowers – and is the Key

When you cook you're in control of what you eat. The fact that I liked to cook helped me negotiate the early days after the diagnosis with more confidence; it would be more problematical for someone not able or not keen to cook.

Cooking is not a mystery only to be understood by the trained and ordained few, though many of the cooking shows on TV might lead you to think that.

There are exceptions, but so few of them are about encouraging us to get into the kitchen, break a few eggs and make omelettes.

These shows are mainly aired and viewed as light entertainment. Cooking as a contest, professional or amateur – the *turn-on* is the competition, not the cooking.

We can sit back and watch *them* do it – and then send out for a takeaway!

It's true some people hate to cook and there is not the same family cooking tradition in the Anglo-Saxon world as in the countries that border the Mediterranean, where even if the pressures of modern life threaten a break with the past and takeaways are taking over (McDonald's are popping up here like autumn mushrooms), 'Grandma's' cooking is firmly in the collective unconscious memory. Talking about food here in southwest France is as compulsive as talking about the weather and considered as legitimate a subject for serious conversation at dinner as politics or religion, and usually safer!

Cooking is a daily ritual for me, sometimes a chore, but more often a pleasure. One that involves shopping in our local markets – seeking out and buying produce from the same people each week, as the seasons pass; this is one of the delights of living here for me. Lining up the ingredients, preparing them for the pot, grill or oven; then carrying out the recipe. Step by step – it's an integral part of my everyday life.

Not everyone has the time I know, but simple food is not hard to cook and nor are the recipes in this book – that's the point.

Julia Child again:

'You don't have to cook fancy or complicated masterpieces – just good food from fresh ingredients'.

Try the Red Bean Chilli (page 88) for example – straightforward and explosive in taste. Or the Salmon Fillets Baked in Spinach (page 112) – elegant and quick to make.

If I can do it, anyone can.

The thing is to get started…

Go on – break a few eggs!

The Mediterranean Way

My first taste of the Mediterranean *way of eating* was an egg cooked in olive oil in Lloret del Mar on the Costa Brava in Spain in 1953. It went into the memory bank as a 'wow!' I was twelve and olive oil was only available in chemists in the UK, used essentially for medicinal purposes.

I quickly understood from many trips abroad in the following formative ten years that olive oil is the foundation of the way food is prepared in countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, and that this way of cooking and eating reflects a way of life, albeit one that is in retreat from the forces of mass marketing and globalisation.

The basic values survive, though, and not only round the table.

Shops in Barcelona and Madrid close in the middle of the day as their owners take their long lunches and siestas. *La passeggiata* – the little stroll – still survives all over Italy as families enjoy an early evening amble before dinner, down the Via del Corso in Rome or round the Piazza del Campo in Siena. In our department in southwest France, the Prefect recently decreed that supermarkets stay closed on Sundays. There's still a sense that people are enough in control of their lives to take a break and reflect. To *live* mindfully in fact, as well as aspiring to eat that way!

Key Ingredients in the Mediterranean Way of Eating

The main elements of the Mediterranean way of eating are:

- Eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables
- Eating whole grains, brown rice, wholewheat pasta and legumes
- Seasoning food with herbs and spices (so less salt is required)
- Including nuts and seeds (dry roasting brings out the flavour)
- Reducing the amount of red meat in the diet
- Eating fish or shellfish at least twice a week
- Limiting dairy products (use low-fat versions)
- Cooking with olive oil rather than butter (I usually use extra virgin olive oil)

Don't forget to *taste* food as it cooks, to judge the seasoning and the doneness. *Sample* the simmering tomato sauce to see if it's concentrated enough. *Test* the green bean to see how much longer it must cook. *Bite on* the strand of spaghetti, to make sure it's done to your liking.

Be careful when handling fresh chillies as they can sting. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling them.

A pair of tongs is essential and a small wooden tasting spoon is nice too.

I always use organic vegetable stock cubes in my recipes.

American readers should follow the cup measurements (see conversion chart on page 180) when measuring volumes of liquid since UK (not US) pints are used in the recipes.

Bon appétit – Buono apetito!



1
Soups

All the soups in this section are vegetarian, except for the Chicken Broth and the Smoky Cauliflower Soup, where I'm going to try substituting smoked paprika for the smoky bacon one of these days as an alternative.

There are surprising soups like Courgette/Zucchini, and Brussels Sprout, plus a silky Mushroom Soup that is really just, well, mushrooms!

My soup of the moment is Pasta e Ceci – winter comfort soup par excellence – seasonally matched by a Tuscan White Bean Soup. Both are substantial and warming, evoking steaming bowls by the fireside. Pumpkin Soup is another.

Chilled Curried Apple is a simple summer soup and a conversation starter: What soup is this?

Soup makes a tasty light supper – in keeping with the whole thrust of the book – to encourage healthy eating.

Pasta e Ceci (Pasta and Chickpea Soup)

Serves 4

This thick comforting soup has been eaten in Italy since Roman times. There are many variations but a constant flavour is rosemary.

450 g/1 lb cooked chickpeas – tinned or bottled
6 tbsp olive oil
1 carrot – chopped fine
1 stick of celery – chopped fine
1 small onion – peeled and chopped fine
4 garlic cloves – peeled and pulped in a mortar with 1 tsp of salt
pinch of cayenne pepper (optional)
a sprig each of rosemary and sage
1 tbsp tomato concentrate
750 ml/1½ pints vegetable stock
Parmesan rind (optional)
180 g/7 oz small tubular pasta
salt and black pepper
olive oil to swirl in each bowl

1. Purée two-thirds of the cooked chickpeas in a food mixer.
2. Heat the olive oil in a large pan and gently sauté the carrot, celery and onion until they soften – about 10 minutes.
3. Add the garlic, the cayenne if using, and the herbs, mixing them in for a couple of minutes.
4. Stir in the tomato concentrate and cook for a further couple of minutes. Stir in the chickpeas and the vegetable purée. Add the stock and the Parmesan rind if using and bring the soup gently to the boil. Add the pasta and stir well, making sure the purée doesn't stick to the bottom of the pan. Season and simmer until the pasta is done – adding more water if it gets too thick. Serve hot with swirls of your best olive oil.

2
Starters and Light Lunches

Lunch here is often an omelette made with two eggs and a sprinkling of Parmesan, accompanied by a green salad with some roasted pumpkin or sunflower seeds, fine slices of sweet onion and a simple dressing. Makes me hungry writing that!

Stuffed red/yellow pepper halves are another standby. The filling is mashed-up tuna made more interesting with chopped black olives and capers.

Shakshouka – difficult to say with your mouth full – is the lightly spiced Tunisian egg and pepper mix; delicious and new to me.

A plate of Percy's Peppers, topped with a poached egg and some tender green beans on the side would make a pretty picture and the perfect light lunch.

Celery au Gratin

Serves 2 as a main course, 4 as an accompanying vegetable

At the time of writing it's Oscar time of year, so categories are on my mind. Celery often features chez nous; sometimes in bit parts – literally – as one element of a soffritto, the finely chopped mixture of vegetables known as *mirepoix* in French, or in a supporting role as a dipping stick for sauces like anchoïade, hummus or guacamole. Here it comes out of the shadows and into the spotlight to take the lead, the eponymous role even, with a strong supporting cast. It can be assembled beforehand, overnight even, and popped in the oven shortly before you are ready to eat.

750 g/1½ lb celery (weigh after separating the sticks and discarding the damaged outer ones) – cut into short pieces
25 g/1 oz smoked bacon – as much fat as possible removed and chopped small
1 onion – peeled and chopped
2 cloves of garlic – chopped
1 tbsp olive oil
3 large tinned tomatoes – chopped
1 level tsp cayenne pepper
sprigs of thyme and a couple of bay leaves
salt
2 tbsp dry white wine
12 juicy black olives – stoned and halved
3 tbsp Parmesan cheese – grated

1. Steam the celery until it's tender and set aside. (Alternatively, simmer it in half a litre/1 pint of stock.)
2. Sauté the bacon, onion and garlic in the oil until they start to colour.
3. Add the chopped tomatoes with the cayenne pepper, herbs and a pinch of salt. Cook these gently for 5 minutes.
4. Add the wine and cook for another couple of minutes to let the wine evaporate.
5. Add the olives and cook for a couple of minutes.
6. Turn off the heat and add the celery, turning it over thoroughly in the sauce.
7. Heat the oven to 220°C/425°F/Gas Mark 7. Spread a layer of the celery mix over the base of an ovenproof gratin dish. Season and sprinkle over some Parmesan. Repeat the process – seasoning and sprinkling cheese over each layer. Finish with a layer of Parmesan. Place the dish on the highest shelf in the oven, checking it after 20 minutes. The gratin should come out sizzling with a pleasingly charred look. Let it rest for 15 minutes.

Melting Tomatoes with Rosemary and a Parmesan Topping

Serves 4

The combination of olive oil, rosemary, garlic and Parmesan is comforting and delicious. Served with a piece of wholewheat/rye toast, dribbled with olive oil, a poached egg and a simple salad, this makes an easy light lunch or supper.

2 cloves of garlic – peeled
2 stems of rosemary leaves – chopped fine
salt and pepper
2 tbsp olive oil
10 medium ripe tomatoes – cut in half
3 tbsp grated Parmesan cheese or more if needed

1. Preheat the oven to 200°C/400°F/Gas Mark 6. Put the garlic and rosemary together with a good pinch of salt and a few grindings of the peppermill in a mortar. Pulp the garlic and rosemary with the pestle. Add the olive oil and stir to make a rough paste.
2. Cover a shallow oven tray with foil and brush it with oil. Place the tomatoes on it cut-side up. Using a teaspoon, smooth a little of the garlicky paste on each half tomato.
3. Place the tray on the top rack of the oven and cook for about 20–30 minutes – the tomatoes should have softened and collapsed somewhat.
4. Take them out of the oven and place a small pile of Parmesan on each tomato half. Put the tray back in the oven for about 15 minutes, until the cheese has browned on top.

3
Salads

A catchall word *salad* can include almost anything these days, except chocolate cake perhaps! If pressed for a preference, I'd say green leaves and/or summer vegetables are required. The ingredients of the Greek Salad on page 49 – simple, seasonal and very fresh – sum up the Mediterranean way of eating. It helps to be eating them with a view of the sea and a glass of Greek wine – retsina for me – but it's not essential. The traditional peasant Panzanella (overleaf) is a winner when tomatoes are at their ripest.

Panzanella – Tomato and Bread Salad

Serves 4

Rough country bread that's a couple of days old is best for this classic Italian summer salad. It's better to wait, too, until the tomatoes are ripe; their sweet juices will meld with the oil, vinegar and seasoning for the bread to soak up. You could also add black olives, anchovies, capers, tuna and mozzarella.

½ loaf of bread – crusts removed, torn into bite-size pieces
2 cloves of garlic – sliced wafer-thin
10 ripe tomatoes – peeled, quartered, the quarters halved and the juice saved
1 medium cucumber – peeled, quartered lengthways, seeded and diced
3 tbsp parsley – chopped
175 ml/6 fl oz olive oil
2 tbsp red wine vinegar
salt and pepper

1. Put the bread in a favourite bowl. Add the thinly sliced garlic. Add the cut-up tomatoes and their juice, the diced cucumber and the chopped parsley.
2. Make the dressing by whisking together the oil, vinegar, salt and pepper. Pour this over the salad and mix it in well but gently.
3. Leave it for an hour for everything to meld together.