



How to Cook a Wolf

M.F.K. Fisher

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M.F.K. Fisher's guide to living happily even in trying times, which was first published during the Second World War in the days of ration cards; includes more than seventy recipes based on food staples and features sections such as "How to Keep Alive" and "How to Comfort Sorrow.".

How to Cook a Wolf Details

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From Reader Review How to Cook a Wolf for online ebook

Muna says

MFK writes perhaps the best prose I've ever read. It doesn't hurt that she writes almost exclusively about food, one of my -- and anyone else who has the faintest conception of true human dignity and joy -- favorite subjects.

Nor does it hurt that she used the term "rich-bitches" perfectly in print in 1963 to describe the menacing and mundane upperclass: "One of the saving graces of the less-monied people of the world has always been, theoretically, that they were forced to eat more unadulterated, less dishonest food than the rich-bitches."

Her advice on eggs and calf heads is unmatched. Her advice on vegetable loves and how to lure the wolf are beyond that -- untouched by all others.

Kristianne says

MFK Fisher's book seems uncannily appropriate to my days of unemployed living in America. She was writing about the scarcity of war-time America, but we've become so accustomed to our country's overextended reach into military engagements abroad that war is not what comes to mind first as the cause for the wolf's snuffing at the door. Rather, we bat the word "recession" around freely, and though it lacks the humility of the word "poverty," it lacks also the pride of Fisher's war effort. We've been encouraged to go about as normal and maintain our spending habits, as though, if we ignore the wolf, he'll stop his huffing through the keyhole.

Fisher's book is full of humor and thoughtfulness and some great common sense that we could all adopt in our kitchen. I made a version of her potato bread last week and this morning made her family gingerbread and when I was roasting some vegetables the other day, I remembered to slip some apples into the oven as well. Tips like these don't lose potency over time.

Dandi says

"A biochemist once told me that every minute an egg is cooked makes it take three hours longer to digest. The thought of a stomach pumping and grinding and laboring for some nine hours over an average three-minute egg is a wearisome one, if true, and makes memories of picnics and their accompanying deviled eggs seem actively haunting."

This book contains some dubious advice and sadly requisite 50's racism and internalized misogyny, but if you found the above passage amusing in any way, you'll have a grand ol' time reading it.

Jennifer Cooper says

I wish I could have been friends with MFK Fisher. This book is full of her strong opinions, down-to-earth suggestions, and fantastic dry wit. Good stuff.

The book was originally written as a practical how-to for people who had to cook during the shortages and food-rationing of World War II. This edition was updated after the war, in 1951. Now, you may think that sounds like the set-up for a particularly grim book, but you'd be wrong. She is generally undaunted by the limitations that war-time cooks faced. She stays cheerful and even makes jokes about what must have been a very bad situation. In her revisions, she admits that some of her suggestions aren't at all appetizing, but this just makes the book more interesting.

The book has chapters on all the normal cook-book-ish things (breads, soups, poultry, fish, desserts). It also covers less common topics like how to stay alive and relatively healthy when money and good food are extremely limited, how to feed your pets most economically, to how to prepare REALLY extravagant meals when food isn't so hard to come by.

I like to read cookbooks, but I think this book would also be good for people who aren't that interested in food. It is interesting as a historical document, and it is interesting because of Fisher's wonderful writing style.

Hilary Hanselman says

Practical advice on the art of eating whether you're facing the economy of war or not

J.C. says

"Vegetables cooked for salads should always be on the crisp side, like those trays of zucchini and slender green beans and cauliflowerets in every trattoria in Venice, in the days when the Italians could eat correctly. You used to choose the things you wanted: there were tiny potatoes in their skins, remember, and artichokes boiled in olive oil, as big as your thumb, and much tenderer...and then the waiter would throw them all into an ugly white bowl and splash a little oil and vinegar over them, and you would have a salad as fresh and tonic to your several senses as La Primavera. It can still be done, although never in the same typhoidic and enraptured air. You can still find little fresh vegetables, and still know how to cook them until they are not quite done, and chill them, and eat them in a bowl."

After reading that half paragraph early in the book, I fell in love with M.F.K. Fisher. She might be the very best writer I have ever read (you should know that I have not read very many of the "great" writers of history, so take my opinion with a grain of salt, and a dash of pepper!) and that feeling is based on reading a cookbook! From 1941!

The book was written in 1941, specifically for World War II home makers looking to cut expenses and to live a more frugal existence as a means to help the war effort. MFK attempts to create a cook book that is

gastronomically fulfilling in the face of this rationing philosophy.

It is not your standard cookbook. There is a real tasty recipe for gruel in here. Ever wanted to know how to cook an entire sheep's head? M.F.K. has got you covered. Throwing out the juice from canned vegetables? M.F.K. has a few better ideas for that juice.

The only problem with this book is that in 1952, M.F.K. went back to it and added some more stuff. In the 1952 edition, these additions took the form of footnotes. In the most recent edition, the publisher made the choice to incorporate the footnotes into the text and differentiating them with [brackets so that everything could be incorporated together but changes from each edition would still be distinct. It was a bit disjointed on the page and somewhat frustrating to read].

This probably wasn't the best M.F.K. Fisher book to read having never read her before, so I don't know if I should recommend it or not. I was introduced to M.F.K. in another book called Provence 1970, that might be a good place to start if you have any interest in her. Here's my review.

Abby Hagler says

How to Cook a Wolf is interesting because I know that my mother was a bad cook. Thus, when I learned to cook, I also learned to be a bad cook. Fisher's book is full of tips and tricks for saving money by budgeting, having a simple grocery list, and cooking in quantities that conserve on heat expenses, as well. From this frugality comes a kind of happiness. We rediscovered this in the slow food movement. Currently, all the hip young people are trying to get away from the processed, the ready-to-eat, the chemically-laden snacks and additives that characterized an entire childhood, an entire education in cooking.

At least, this was the case for me. I grew up in the middle of the Midwest in a town about an hour from any large markets. We were relegated to wilted veggies, eating the bruises of fruits, and eating lots of our own farm-grown meats. Hamburger Helper was a staple in every household. As kids, we often talked about which was our favorite. And I learned to cook Kraft-boxed recipes. I had no concept of an onion. I knew nothing of salt, or sugar, or the desires of foods as their being cooked.

Fisher presents such logic in this book (even in her asides and revisions). For me, she reinvented the use of beer, rum, and port for flavor and health benefits that oils can't deliver. She uplifts fresh, farm-grown vegetables as the major expense. She reminds us to save the water from potatoes to make a stock. That soup does not come from a can, and cannot condense itself, let alone a meal lacking an appropriate sauce to tie it together.

As a young cook, writer, and budgeter, I was surprised how drawn into this book I was - both for the recipes and my need to re-learn cooking. It's not that this book was ahead of its time being written in 1940 with a definite consciousness about rationing and war. In fact, I was raised in the 1980s, an era that had forgotten war and struggle. Our food produced habits of quick disposal, easy come and easy go with money and meals. I appreciate this book for reminding me of how the times have once again changed, and I admire it for how helpful it is for my generation as well.

Cat says

Fisher is a delightful prose stylist, and her advice for surviving in the midst of a wartime crunch on supplies resonates in a contemporary ecologically-minded, waste-averse context. Plus, the recipes are a blast, and she's very witty. I love her bracketed asides, commenting in the 1950s on the original text of the 1942 edition. Fisher is not just telling readers how to skimp and save--also how to mix cocktails, fantasize about luxurious cooking no longer within their means, and to feed pets cheaply but healthily during wartime. The epigraphs Fisher chooses for each chapter are also very charming. One of my favorite lines (of hers) appears in the introduction: "there can be no more shameful carelessness than with the food we eat for life itself. When we exist without thought or thanksgiving we are not men, but beasts."

Tuck says

originally written to help folks stretch their money and choices for food/cooking during wwii, but updated in 1951 (korean and cold war, usa just cannot go on without wars right?) fisher is both smart and downtoearth in her funny stories and recipes keeping the wolf from the door. her short answer to the wolf is it better watch out or she'll cook it too.

Heather Baird says

I am new to Fisher's writing, and instantly a fan. It's lively, biting and intelligent. Several times throughout the book I'd lose myself inside a single sentence of her prose. I wasn't expecting so much beauty and wit inside a wartime ration cookbook.

"Probably one of the most private things in the world is an egg until it is broken".

"One way to horrify at least eight out of ten Anglo-Saxons is to suggest their eating anything but the actual red fibrous meat of a beast."

So much of this book is still relevant today, and could teach many of us the practice of true economy. "How to Keep Alive" is a favorite chapter of mine, and quite literally gives instruction on how to stay alive without any food or money. As a desserts writer I'm re-reading the chapter on sweets - "How to Comfort Sorrow" - and baking my way through the recipes (the chapter is quite thin, so it's not a grand undertaking). Dessert was less often enjoyed then because of the expense, but Fisher recognized its value - a comfort in trying times.

Rose says

Not exactly a cookbook, but a book about cooking and eating, and the philosophy thereof. MFK Fisher is some one I would have dearly loved to know.

Sylvester says

Not my usual thing, reading about food or cooking - but Fisher is an amazing writer, I only wish she'd taken to novels. Her power of description and subtle irony are very entertaining and kept me going in spite of my disinterest in the subject matter. Fisher is smart as a whip - here are some of the chapter titles, to give you a taste of her wit:

How to be Sage Without Hemlock
How to Catch the Wolf
How to Distribute Your Virtue
How to Boil Water
How to Keep Alive
How to Rise Up Like New Bread
How to Be Cheerful Though Starving
How to Carve the Wolf
How to Be Content With a Vegetable Love
How to Have a Sleek Pelt
How to Comfort Sorrow
How Not to Be an Earthworm

That last is my favorite. Anyway, she rocks. The book is dated as all heck, and some of the ideas in it are sheer madness = all part f the charm!

Jac says

looking for ingredients... any suggestions?

Amy says

I found this at my favorite used book store and it has a permanent spot on my kitchen shelf up at the cabin. This is a reprint of the 1951 edition, which was created by the author adding marginal annotations to the 1942 original. That only makes it *better* to my mind. Many of these notes are along the lines of "*What the heck was I thinking?*" and I can almost imagine a wry grin inserted here or there. She's also added in tips what to do once the war rationing is over...I can't find the exact passage, but she bemoans the butter substitutes that emerged saying she'd rather have a little of something good than a lot of an inferior product...and if you need to make this dish during times of shortage, then by all means follow her initial advice. But if you have a plethora at hand in times of abundance, then the has her advice for that too.

I've always liked her cookery books for the exploration of food as an art, touching on the mixing of flavors, the importance and addition of colors, and textures to a meal. I cook like that- knowing my flavors and tastes- the aromas and how they blend....that is such a part of the meal.

Some of the recipes are dated, and not to our style of eating today, but still interesting to read. There's a killer gingerbread recipe that I want to try, too. It's good writing, good reading, and I imagine good food....whether there's a wolf is at your door or not.

Given the state of the economy, there may be a need to learn how to cook a wolf!

Lobstergirl says

Part cookbook, part Hints from Heloise, *How to Cook a Wolf* is M.F.K. Fisher's chatty, scatterbrained wartime guide for citizens hampered by food shortages or just lack of discretionary income generally. There's no actual wolf-cooking, which disappointed me: the wolf is just a metaphor for hunger. Some of her tips are a little bizarre:

Hayboxes are very simple...bring whatever food you want to a sturdy boil, put it tightly covered on a layer of hay in the inside box, pack hay all around it, and cover the box securely. Then you count twice as long as your stew or porridge or vegetables would have taken to cook normally, open the haybox, and the food is done. It is primitive, and it is a good thing to know if fuel is a problem for you.

...in a souffle, add one cup of puffed cereal to the three separated eggs, and you will have food for four people.

Someone named le Vicomte de Mauduit informs that "meat puddings should be served between the months of September and April; during the months without an "R" in them meat pies should replace them."

Some tips have the whiff of wartime menace:

The best way to have fish for supper, in most places, will be to go out along the river or in your dinghy at the tide's change, if you can get past sentries and avoid the mines, and catch some mudcats or a few bass on your own hook.

Some are positively Dickensian. From the chapter "How to Keep Alive":

The first thing to do, if you have absolutely no money, is to borrow some. Fifty cents will be enough, and should last you from three days to a week...If you must pay for the stove, it will probably cost about ten cents for the current or gas. That cuts you down to forty cents...buy about fifteen cents worth of ground beef from a reputable butcher...about ten cents worth of ground whole-grain cereal...Spend the rest of your money on vegetables...slightly wilted or withered things a day old maybe. Otherwise buy the big coarse ugly ones...It does not matter if they be slightly battered: you will grind them into an odorous but unrecognizable sludge.

Assemble the veggies and meat. Cover with water, bring to a boil, simmer for an hour, stir in the cereal, cook another two hours or longer "if possible." Cool and keep in a cold place, like a cellar, if you have no icebox. You can dine on this for days and stay "in good health and equable spirits."

If fuel costs are your biggest worry, buy meat containing bones. Bones conduct heat and your meat will cook six minutes faster per pound. Also, put a couple empty tin cans in the center of your burning fire; they will retain a lot of heat that otherwise would go up the chimney.

Two of the scariest recipes are "Aunt Gwen's Cold Shape" - 1 calf head, quartered, 1/2 cup lemon juice or 1 cup white wine, herbs; and Mouth Wash: 2 ounces borax, 1 quart hot water, 1 teaspoon tincture of myrrh, 1 teaspoon spirits of camphor. Add pink coloring if your children demand it.

There are actually a few recipes I want to make: the bacon chowder, sausage (or sardine) pie, a (gulp) baked tuna casserole, and a tomato soup cake. Seriously. A cake with a can of tomato soup thrown in. I have to know what it tastes like.
