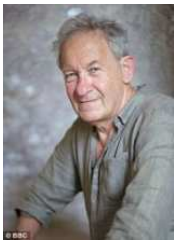
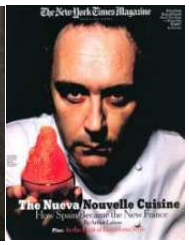
WN *Inspiration*

World Nutrition **Volume 5, Number 4, April 2014**

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association
Published monthly at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/

Jane Kramer on Claudia Roden
Food explains worlds

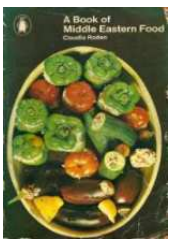




Jane Kramer
European Correspondent, *The New Yorker*









'Claudia Roden is no more a simple cookbook writer than Marcel Proust was a biscuit baker'. This is what historian Simon Schama (top, left) says. She is the president of the Oxford Symposium, founded in 1981 by the encyclopaedist of food Alan Davidson and the authority on French culture Theodore Zeldin (top, next to left). This annual meeting of scholars including sociologists, anthropologists, historians, food writers and chefs, is concerned with all aspects of food, and of nourishment in every sense. She is a renowned cook. Her meticulously researched recipes and stories, such as those for Imam Bayildi ('The priest fainted', above middle), in her 1968 *Book of Middle Eastern Food* (below, middle) reveal the central place of food systems and culture in the development of civilisations. She is revered and loved by great chefs such as Ferran Adrià (above, next to right). This *Inspiration* is written by the *New Yorker* European correspondent Jane Kramer (above, right). Claudia as a girl (below left) is with her parents and brothers in Cairo, and next, as a young woman in London where she has lived since the 1950s. The covers are of two of her 20 books, including that on *Jewish Food*, a labour of love for 16 years, published in 1997. Now (as pictured right) she is one of the most learned and celebrated living food writers, and certainly the most sensuous, subtle and beloved. She is also a guardian of traditional and long-established food systems and dietary patterns.

Box 1

Claudia Roden on the food of Spain

Here Claudia introduces her book The Food of Spain: A Celebration, published in 2011.

My grandmother, Eugénie Alphandary, spoke an old Judeo-Spanish language called Ladino with her friends and relatives in Egypt. They were descended from Jews who had been expelled from Spain in 1492. Their names – Toledano, Cuenca, Carmona, Leon, Burgos – were a record of the cities their ancestors had come from. Their songs about lovers in Seville and proverbs about meat stews and almond cakes were for me, as I was growing up in Cairo, a mysterious lost paradise, a world of romance and glorious chivalry.

When I travelled to research my 2011 book *The Food of Spain*, traces of the old Muslim presence – Arabesque carvings, blue and white tiles, a fountain spouting cool water in a scented garden – evoked memories of the Arab and Jewish world I was born in. At the sight of an old minaret I imagined hearing the call to prayer. The way people cooked, the ingredients they put together, their little tricks, their turn of hand, were mysteriously familiar. A word, a taste, a smell, triggered memories I never knew I had.

It took me five years to finish the book. I loved dipping into people's lives and listening to their stories. I understood everything they said and they understood my mix of Italian, French, Ladino and Spanish. It was pure joy to eat seafood *paella* on the Valencia coast, *cocido* in a little restaurant in Madrid, suckling pig in Segovia, cuttlefish in their ink in the Basque country, and duck with pears in Barcelona, and to drive through extraordinary landscapes dotted with castles, monasteries and churches.

Claudia Roden was born in Cairo. She has lived in London for sixty years, and she carries a British passport, holds respectably British left-wing views, owns a big house in Hampstead Garden Suburb, and has written eleven books, including *A Book of Middle Eastern Food*, *The Book of Jewish Food*, and *The Food of Spain*.

She was born at the heady end-of-empire moment when the British controlled Egypt, but the markets of Alexandria and Cairo belonged to the Arabs, Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Copts, and Jews who lived there. Meals, for the upper classes, were a serious, almost erotically exhausting pleasure. She left Egypt at 15, for a boarding school in Paris, and, after a few years of returning for summer holidays, didn't eat in Cairo again for a quarter century.

She comes from two old Syrian Jewish merchant families, the Doueks (her father, Cesar) and the Sassoons (her mother, Nelly), which had moved their operations to Cairo in the 1890s, following the cotton trade that opened with the Suez Canal. Two generations later, Gamal Abdel Nasser seized the canal and began expelling Jews and foreigners. Nelly and Cesar Douek arrived in London in 1956. Claudia and her two brothers had already been in the city for two years studying, and on Friday nights the Doueks' house in Golders Green would fill with people of all ages passing through London on their way from Paris or Milan or Geneva to Mexico City or Los Angeles or Barranquilla – wherever the émigrés of the latest Sephardic diaspora had chosen to restart their lives. They spoke French, the language of choice among the Cairene

bourgeoisie, slipping in and out of Arabic or English or Italian, depending on where they had lived, and where they were living now. Some of the old women spoke Ladino, the Hebrew-Castilian language of the Spanish Jews at the time of the expulsion of 1492. Claudia calls it 'the language of women's secrets.'

The women, without servants to cook for them, would sit and gossip in Nelly Douek's kitchen, and Claudia began to watch and listen. She says that the first thing one woman would ask another was: 'What recipes do you have?' They exchanged recipes, and sometimes argued about recipes. Was the *kibbeh* better in Aleppo or Damascus? Were the pastries better in Alexandria or Cairo? It was clear to her that families like hers, who had left their lives behind in the Middle East, had managed to carry one thing to the West with them – the taste of the food they ate at home.

She started writing down their recipes. 'Even now, whenever I cook I think about how I got the recipe, who gave me the recipe, what their story was.' Her 'famous orange cake', a rich Sephardic confection of eggs, sugar, oranges, and ground almonds, was 'Iris Galante's, one of the Aleppo Galantes. She was the grandmother of my brother Ellis's first wife. I watched her cook. She had a little handwritten book, and I said, "Can you give me a recipe?" I got a *windfall*. The first recipe was *pastellicos*, from Salonika. That's a little pie, with minced meat or cheese and onions. The French writer Edgar Morin called it the heart of the heart of Salonika'.

She spent the first ten years of her married life in London collecting and testing the recipes that became *A Book of Middle Eastern Food*. 'I had found a *melokhia* recipe in Elizabeth David's book on Mediterranean food, then a few Middle Eastern recipes. Elizabeth said, "This is the tip of the iceberg. Somebody has to take this much further". So I went to the British Library. "Are there any Arab cookery books?" I asked. There were not. I wrote to Muslim friends in Egypt, and asked *them*. The only cookery book they could find in Cairo was an old British quartermaster's book, and it was all cauliflower and cheese, macaroni and cheese.

'So I went to the embassies here and talked to the people waiting. They asked me, "Do you want a visa, or a passport?" and I said, "No, I'm here for recipes".' She turned out to be a natural scholar. Simon Schama wrote that 'Claudia Roden is no more a simple cookbook writer than Marcel Proust was a biscuit baker'. Her Middle East is an act of imagination, a domestication of memory. To create it she prowled the stacks of obscure archives. She read historians, anthropologists, Arabists, folklorists, philosophers, poets, for information and inspiration. 'I got so interested in the history of food, and I was making all those medieval dishes, and it blew my mind – the idea that through food you could describe or reconstruct a world.'

She ended up reconstructing several worlds: 800 recipes, and a trove of folk tales, proverbs, stories, poetry, and local history. When she finally sat down to write, it was in a clear, humorous, elegant voice that she hadn't known she had, a voice that could keep you up, nights, reading.

Box 2

Geoffrey Cannon on Claudia Roden

Extracted from his column of May 2012

The best conference I helped to organise was held in London in the late 1980s. At that time I was secretary of the Guild of Food Writers, of which the presidents were the broadcaster and writer Derek Cooper of the BBC Radio *Food Programme*, followed by Colin Spencer, for a long time columnist for *The Guardian*, an authority on vegetarian food and culture. Derek and Colin were dedicated to the enjoyment of life especially through food and drink. The meeting was organised jointly with the UK Nutrition Society, where all the professors (and some food industry luminaries, but let's not digress) hung and hang out.

The Guild and the Nut Soc shared responsibility for the day's conference and its speakers. Guild member Prue Leith, then owner of a restaurant by Hyde Park's Serpentine styled as a big tent, did the celebration business. The event was a soaring success, because of the synergy between the two organisations, and why it did not become regular is a mystery to me. During the conference and over supper, some of the top profs were conspicuously star-struck by the leading food writers – not me, I add hastily, I refer to the writers who were also television personalities. It was sweet to see MD PhD FRCPs asking for autographs 'for their children'.

The star of stars was Claudia Roden. Half the dinner parties I organised, shopped for and cooked with my son Ben in those days were out of her *Book of Middle Eastern Food.* She was presenting a television series around that time. What was most striking though, was the erudition of her talk, so softly spoken. Listening to her it was apparent that the best way to understand the history and culture of the whole Mediterranean littoral was through knowledge of the 4,000 evolving years of its food systems, and enjoyment of its food and drink. Throughout that time the Mediterranean food systems (there are several, overlapping and all generally harmonious) were established in what are now Spain, southern France, southern Italy, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Crete, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Tunis.

Nutritionally, Mediterranean food systems as developed from the earlier historic and also prehistoric times have much in common, as we know from accounts of 'The Mediterranean Diet'. As well as this, they have nourished Mediterranean societies in a much broader sense. The governance and the ways of life of the peoples of the Mediterranean were delineated, almost defined, by the food and nutrition systems of those times, from the period of first recorded history, and certainly before then too, until fairly recently.

When food supplies became unsustainable, empires fell. Territories were conquered because of the fertility of their soil. Some of the most meticulous science ever, took the form of plant and animal breeding. Aristotle was an agronomist. Family farms and also great estates based on the land and its produce became founts of knowledge and wisdom usually in tune with manual work, the rhythms of the seasons, the crops that grew best. And with all this, social and family life was based on all that was involved with the getting of food and the preparation of family and social meals, and occasional feasts.

In the Mediterranean, food was not incidental to life. It nourished those societies. Claudia Roden changed my mind and heart that day. From then on, I saw the world differently and as a richer place. Listening to her was a spiritual experience. And so I came to live in Brazil, which is another story, except that long-established food systems survive here too.

When her book on Middle Eastern food was finished, she went to Foyles and copied the name and address of every cookbook publisher in sight. It was 1967, the year of the Six-Day War, and the Middle East, as she puts it, 'was not at all popular just then.' She ended up at a small house with an editor who, she was delighted to discover, had been born in Turkey. The book was a sleeper. Its reputation spread in England and then to the Middle East, where there were soon so many pirated printings that you could find it in kitchens from Cairo to Beirut and Damascus, and even Riyadh. Jill Norman, the cookbook editor at Penguin, then bought the rights to and published the paperback edition. 'It walked off the shelves,' Jill told me.

In 1980, Roden began thinking about her book on Jewish food. *The Book of Jewish Food* was a singularly daunting project – a history of Jewish life and settlement, told through the story of what Jews ate, and where, and why, and how they made it. It absorbed her for the next sixteen years. There was, of course, no way to write the story without including the food that most Jews in the world once ate, and many still eat. Jill Norman told her to remember that those people knew nothing about Sephardic food, and that the contrast was what was interesting. 'Little by little, I got interested.' She told the story of Ashkenazi settlement as it moved eastward from Germany through Poland and into Russia, and then turned back across what WH Auden once called beer-and-potato-culture Europe, with its joyless, wintery kitchens.

And in the process she managed to collect some 300 surprisingly good Ashkenazi recipes. A few – her Shavuot cheese blintzes; her Hungarian-Jewish goulash – could even be considered worthy of a Sephardic kitchen. But two-thirds of the recipes are Sephardic, and they describe a world that once stretched from Spain to China, and now reached westward to the Pacific. Claudia told me, 'When Jewish people are there, and you meet them, there is always a cuisine.' The book is a kind of archive. People look to it for the "authentic' recipes of Jewish settlement, and Roden tends to believe in the idea of authenticity.

This means that "you can't invent with new ingredients' – unless new ingredients are all you have. She thinks cookbook critics tend to forget that between the 'big change' of the 1500s, when the produce and animals of the Americas first reached Europe and the Middle East, and the revolution in transportation, travel, and communication of the post-1939-1945 years, there was very little variation in the food that ordinary people who were rooted in one place ate, and the way they prepared it.

She travelled in Spain for five years for her 2011 book on Spanish food. One of the things she likes is that Spanish food is still so regional and its culinary history so particular – 'a little Visigoth, and the Moors and the Jews and the clergy and the French, and the New World, and what the rich took from it, the chocolate, the game, and what the poor took, the vegetables and the beans and the corn.'.

In the food of Andalusia, where the Moors ruled for 800 years, you can still taste Spanish Islam. In the food of Aragon and Castile, where the courtiers in Ferdinand's entourage were as often as not Catholic converts, or *conversos*, you can still taste

Spanish Judaism. She told me that before the Inquisition the Jews in Spain used olive oil for cooking, the Muslims used clarified butter, and the Christians used pork fat. After the expulsion, everyone switched to fat, and the *conversos* hung hams in their houses the way they hung crucifixes and rosaries – onspicuously, fearfully, hoping to convince Inquisitors on the prowl that Spain belonged entirely to Christ.

She discovered that Sephardic desserts, like her orange-and-almond cake, had survived in Spanish convents, brought by novices from *converso* families, and that the rice puddings of the Middle East had somehow, over the centuries, made their way to northern Spain, and even to Asturias, which had been effectively cut off from the rest of the country by the Picos de Europa range until the 1960s. She was curious about the influence of the local monasteries, because Spain's religious orders had been in large part responsible for the development and refinement of traditional Spanish cuisine – much more so than the aristocracy or the upper classes, which had been eating 'Bourbon food' since Philip V inherited the Spanish throne in 1700, and moved from Versailles to Madrid. 'The monasteries were the centres of gastronomy here. They had money and land and their own peasants. Some of the great Lenten recipes came from them'.

One afternoon in late May, I asked Claudia what she meant by 'authenticity.' We were about to leave for Asturias, and were sitting at her kitchen table, debating the relative merits of five or six scribbled recipes for a Catalan *romesco* sauce (a rich purée of almonds, hazelnuts, tomatoes, sweet dried Spanish peppers, garlic, bread, and saffron) while waiting for the beans to cook for an Asturian *fabada* (white beans, chorizos, blood sausages, and saffron) and for the squid to defrost for a Catalan *chipirónes en su tinta con fideos* (squid, vermicelli, onions, garlic, white wine, parsley, and tomatoes).

I wanted to know which of the *romesco* recipes looked to her to be the most 'authentic'. They were all from good Catalan cooks, cooks she knew and trusted, and yet they were quite different. One recipe said to use one tomato, another said ten. One recipe said to fry the peppers and garlic, another said not to. In the end, Roden chose the recipe with the most nuts, adjusted it slightly, turned on the food processor, tasted the result, and pronounced it 'my best so far.' To me, it was perfect. 'Most good things just happen,' she said. 'I don't proceed in a very organised way. I choose what I like, I trust my taste. I tell people, "Well, what else do you trust but your own taste."'

Editor's note

In *Inspiration* we link to key documents that help explain the reasons to be inspired. Here, this is the full text of Jane Kramer's New Yorker essay, extracted and edited above. Contributors are invited to celebrate the person who has most impressed them. The choice can from any time in history. It need not be about nutrition or public health, but it should be offered as inspiration to *WN* readers. Please also include one or more supporting documents in pdf form. Send suggestions for *Inspiration* to wn.network@gmail.com.