Foreword

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Of all the lush food descriptions in M.F.K. Fisher's writing, the one that remains most vivid in my mind is that of the tangerines that Fisher once roasted on her radiator and then chilled on the windowsill in her pension in Strasbourg.

"Peel them gently," she instructed.

Do not bruise them, as you watch soldiers pour past and past the corner and over the canal towards the watched Rhine. Separate each plump little pregnant crescent. If you find the Kiss, the secret section, save it for Al.

After you have put the pieces of tangerine on the paper on the hot radiator, it is best to forget about them. . . . On the radiator the sections of tangerines have grown even plumper, hot and full. You carry them to the window, pull it open, and leave them for a few minutes on the packed snow of the sill. They are ready.

. . . I cannot tell you why they are so magical. Perhaps it is that little shell, thin as one layer of enamel on a Chinese bowl, that crackles so tinily, so ultimately under your teeth. Or the rush of cold pulp just after it. Or the perfume. I cannot tell.

Fisher's entire relationship to cooking and writing and eating is contained in these few short paragraphs. On display is her relish of the pleasures of eating, her extraordinary alertness, and most notably her trademark casualness about homemaking and cooking. There were no thoroughly equipped kitchens or lavish meals in her realm. If her radiator had to serve as a stove, so it would.

Throughout her adult life, Fisher seemed to yearn not for the comforts and order of her upper-middle-class upbringing in Whittier, California, but for the challenges of settling into a new home. Though we like to think of Fisher in three settings—growing up in Whittier, then abroad in France and Switzerland, and finally, in her later years, at Last House on the Bouverie Ranch in Glen Ellen, California—she was actually a vagabond. While she occasionally had reasons to relocate—divorces, family illness, the Depression—Fisher was restless and moved with alarming frequency, living in more than twenty places in all. In Provence alone, where she lived five times, twice with her daughters, Anne and Kennedy, and three times with her sister Norah, she stayed in at least a handful of homes.

I've often had the impression that she reveled in the hardships of a place. Only a few times in her life did she have a kitchen with four walls. And when a kitchen was too small to contain the food she would cook in it, she acted like a poet who must jacket herself into the constraints of a sonnet, and would make still lifes of fruits and vegetables, setting them on tables and windowsills, letting her kitchen expand, if not physically then psychically, into other parts of the house.

Not all of Fisher's kitchens were undesirable, as Joan Reardon notes in her careful and revealing examination. In the one at Le Paquis in Switzerland, where she lived with Dillwyn Parrish during what was probably the happiest period of her life, there was lots of light, a stove, room

for hanging pots and pans, even a root cellar. "In winter, the couple entertained in front of the fireplace," Reardon writes, "and invited their guests to serve themselves from the large casserole simmering on the stove and from the salad bowl dominating the sideboard." But more often than not, Fisher's kitchens were spare, ragtag affairs. One was so cold, she had to dress in a fur coat and gloves to cook in it.

Fisher had a fondness for improvisation, which, along with her affection for inadequate workspaces, is a quality found surprisingly often in great food writers. When Elizabeth David was growing up, her nanny would often use the nursery hearth fire to soften gooseberries in sugar and to warm mushrooms, gathered from a nearby field, in cream. David once wrote in the *Smallbone of Devizes*' catalogue that "what you can cook on a stove in a passage or on a staircase landing, or over a gas ring or small open fire, is fairly surprising. Granted, the will to do it, plus a spirit of enterprise and a little imagination, are necessary elements in learning to cook. You have to have a healthy appetite, too, and not worry too much over the failures or shortcomings of your kitchen and its equipment." After the war, one of David's kitchens had a table that covered the bath: she had to clear the table and remove it from its perch to bathe. Likewise, Laurie Colwin once had a tiny apartment kitchen with no sink. She did the dishes in her bathtub and dried them on a rack set over her toilet.

But Fisher chose to cook in so many different poorly appointed kitchens, across so many years, that her galley slaving seems a conscious choice. In part it was surely a self-denial born of her tame, disciplined WASP upbringing, but I suspect she was also doing penance for her rebellious sensualism, corseting her desires.

Then, too, not having a refrigerator or an oven also has certain practical benefits. It built in parameters for Fisher's meals. Without an oven you cannot bake cakes and many desserts. With one burner, you are lim-

ited to a single cooked dish. And if you only have a few plates, how many courses can visitors expect? Her tiny kitchens streamlined her menus and created the conditions for heroic accomplishment: praise is always given to those who can produce a decent meal from a single burner.

She cooked with a survivalist's economy, a style her older daughter, Anne Parrish, called "unfashionably simple and good." She would often prepare one cooked dish and a salad and accompany them with roasted chickens, bread, and dessert, all bought at the store—a smoke and mirrors feast.

Most cooks would find themselves in tears without a working stove, but Fisher embraced her circumstances with enthusiasm and fortitude. In *The Gastronomical Me*, she wrote fondly of cooking in her apartment in Dijon, shortly after she was married to Al Fisher: "It was the first real day-to-day meal-after-meal cooking I'd ever done, and was only a little less complicated than performing an appendectomy on a life-raft, but after I got used to hauling water and putting together three courses on a table the size of a bandana and lighting the portable oven without blowing myself clear into the living room instead of only halfway, it was fun."

There is a lesson in this for us now: today's kitchens have become palaces of aspiration. They are so enormous that they occasion both infinite possibility and unattainable expectation. There is promise in a second dishwasher—the promise of large parties. And there is melancholy in its disuse.

Anthony Bourdain wrote that "food respects confidence, and abhors uncertainty." Fisher might not have thought much of Bourdain and his bluntly gritty views on food and cooking, but she would have grasped his point instantly, as we do when we read her. Never was something as plain as a tangerine treated with such confidence, such utter certainty. A kitchen is just a small place to think about food.