



# The Taste of Country Cooking

*Edna Lewis*

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## **The Taste of Country Cooking** Edna Lewis

In recipes and reminiscences equally delicious, Edna Lewis celebrates the uniquely American country cooking she grew up with some fifty years ago in a small Virginia Piedmont farming community that had been settled by freed slaves. With menus for the four seasons, she shares the ways her family prepared and enjoyed food, savoring the delights of each special time of year:

- The fresh taste of spring—the first shad, wild mushrooms, garden strawberries, field greens and salads . . . honey from woodland bees . . . a ring mold of chicken with wild mushroom sauce . . . the treat of braised mutton after sheepshearing.
- The feasts of summer—garden-ripe vegetables and fruits relished at the peak of flavor . . . pan-fried chicken, sage-flavored pork tenderloin, spicy baked tomatoes, corn pudding, fresh blackberry cobbler, and more, for hungry neighbors on Wheat-Threshing Day . . . Sunday Revival, the event of the year, when Edna's mother would pack up as many as fifteen dishes (what with her pickles and breads and pies) to be spread out on linen-covered picnic tables under the church's shady oaks . . . hot afternoons cooled with a bowl of crushed peaches or hand-cranked custard ice cream.
- The harvest of fall—a fine dinner of baked country ham, roasted newly dug sweet potatoes, and warm apple pie after a day of corn-shucking . . . the hunting season, with the deliciously “different” taste of game fattened on hickory nuts and persimmons . . . hog-butcher time and the making of sausages and liver pudding . . . and Emancipation Day with its rich and generous thanksgiving dinner.
- The hearty fare of winter—holiday time, the sideboard laden with all the special foods of Christmas for company dropping by . . . the cold months warmed by stews, soups, and baked beans cooked in a hearth oven to be eaten with hot crusty bread before the fire.

The scores of recipes for these marvelous dishes are set down in loving detail. We come to understand the values that formed the remarkable woman—her love of nature, the pleasure of living with the seasons, the sense of community, the satisfactory feeling that hard work was always rewarded by her mother's good food. Having made us yearn for all the good meals she describes in her memories of a lost time in America, Edna Lewis shows us precisely how to recover, in our own country or city or suburban kitchens, the taste of the fresh, good, natural country cooking that was so happy a part of her girlhood in Freetown, Virginia.

## **The Taste of Country Cooking Details**

Date : Published August 1st 2006 by Knopf (first published 1976)

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# From Reader Review The Taste of Country Cooking for online ebook

## Lauren Rauk says

A great cookbook and historical account. The recipes are more interesting because of the stories about farming and community. Good tips and mouth-watering ideas.

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## Kyla says

An already cherished gift from a great friend - reads like a novel, the best, most comforting novel you can imagine. I would read every menu aloud just to hear the words - blackberries and cream, ham biscuits, watermelon rind pickles, Tyler Pie, a thermos of hot coffee...I am going to find Freetown, Virginia and have a memorial picnic for Edna Lewis one day, I swear

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## Alexandra says

This was such an interesting cookbook. There is so much history behind the recipes and the meals. I like how the book was broken into seasons, then into meals. It was interesting to see how much food was served at each meal. I did find some recipes I'm hoping to try. If you're looking for healthy, this is not the cookbook for you! But it's still a good read.

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## Meghan says

I don't normally list cookbooks on Goodreads, but this one is perfect for reading curled up in bed - full of enticing recipes, it also reads as a memoir of Edna Lewis's childhood and an ode to the food ad customs of Freetown, a farming community of freed slaves in VA.

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## Carol says

My husband walked by the other night and asked what I was reading. "Oh, just a cookbook" I answered. "What for?" he said with raised eyebrows and added, "When was the last time you cooked something from a cookbook?" He had a point. "Well, this one's really interesting. I've always wanted to know how to butcher a hog". That sent him on his way shaking his head.

To tell the truth, my husband was right. I read lots of cooking magazines and cookbooks and yet make very little beyond the usual meals I've cooked the last forty-seven years. What he doesn't realize is, cookbooks are read for more than the recipes. They are oral histories of lives lived, our connection to family through food and celebration and storytelling at their finest.

The Taste of Country Cooking by Edna Lewis, reissued with a foreword by Alice Waters, is a gem. This is one of those times that I wish I knew how it got on my reading list as I'd love to thank the source for the recommendation. Lesson learned.

Edna Lewis was born in 1916, the year my own dear father entered this world. This is probably where their commonality ended though their Christmas stockings held similar treats. The foreword penned by Alice Waters begins

*"Miss Edna Regina Lewis was born in Virginia in 1916, in a bucolic, out-of-the-way settlement known as Freetown, which had been founded by her grandfather and other freed slaves after the emancipation of 1865. She enjoyed a childhood that could only be described as idyllic, in which the never-ending hard work of a farming and cooking both sustained and entertained an entire community. In 1976, with the publication of this lovely, indispensable classic of a cookbook, she brought her lost paradise of Freetown back to life. Thanks to this book, a new generation was introduced to the glories of an American tradition worthy of comparison to the most evolved cuisines on earth, a tradition of simplicity and purity and sheer deliciousness that is only possible when food tastes like what it is, from a particular place, at a particular point in time."*

Now, thirty years later, this anniversary edition may once again offer readers a glance into a time past. A time when food, was not packaged, shipped and purchased at a chain grocery store but was planted, grown, raised and cooked from scratch using recipes handed down from generation to generation. Not fast food, but meals that took hours to prepare on wood stoves by the women of the house with hard work pride and love; the original farm to table.

After an introduction that gives us a brief history of Edna and her grandfather's farmland the cookbook is presented in four seasons, each with their harvests, feasts and stories.

It would be impossible to share all that delighted me and most likely you'd pick something different anyway. Here is a sample of each season.

Spring - *"Coffee or Java (as we called it)"*

*"The smell of coffee cooking was a reason for growing up, because children were never allowed to have it and nothing haunted the nostrils all the way out to the barn as did the aroma of boiling coffee. The decision about coffee was clear and definite and a cook's ability to make good coffee was one of her highest accomplishments. Mother made real good coffee but some mornings my father would saddle the horse and ride more than a mile up the road to have his second cup with his cousin Sally, who made the best coffee ever."*

This brings back memories of the first coffee I brewed for my husband and his uncle prior to our marriage. It's a miracle he married me.

The description of Carmel Pie, with a history of more than one hundred and fifty years was a specialty of the Freetown Ladies and one that Edna calls haunting.

Pan-fried Shad was a favorite meal of Spring, as shad is only available around May in Virginia just as it is here in Connecticut. I prefer it sprinkled with a bit of pepper, topped with lemons, wrapped in foil and grilled. Somehow we missed Shad season this year and need to wait a whole year to enjoy it again.

Summer

*"The busy season of harvesting and canning brought many delights at mealtime: deep-dish blackberry pie, rolypoly, summer apple dumplings, peach cobbles, and always pound cake to accompany the fruits or*

*berries that would be left from canning."*

A delight of summer would be turtle soup. My uncle used to make this and though I did like it I'll stick to that pound cake recipe Edna provides.

#### Fall – **Race Day Picnic**

*"Beautiful Montpelier, nestling in the Shenandoah Valley, surrounded by an oak forest, was the most perfect spot to have a great fall picnic lunch. Everyone would be dressed in the latest fashions to attend the races, even the handsome guest horses wearing the colorful silks of their stables."*

#### Winter - **Christmas**

*"Around Christmastime the kitchens of Freetown would grow fragrant with the baking of cakes, fruit puddings, cookies, and candy. Exchanging gifts was not a custom at that time, but we did look forward to hanging our stockings from the mantel and finding them filled on Christmas morning with tasty "imported" nuts from Lahore's, our favorite hard candies with the cinnamon-flavored red eye, and oranges who special Christmas aroma reached us at the top of the stairs."*

One last thought.

Edna and her sisters loved liver pudding. It is the one recipe I have no desire to try.

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### **mark monday says**

A unique experience! So much more than a cookbook, *The Taste of Country Cooking* is a sweetly contemplative and often elegiac travelogue through Lewis' life as a girl in Freetown, Virginia, a farming community founded by freedmen including the author's grandfather. It is hard to do justice to the moving quality of the writing, which manages to be both matter-of-fact (the post-butchered preparation of a hog carcass is described quite clearly) and lyrical (portraits of her mother cooking, the smells of fruits and slow cooking, her long summer days with her many siblings, a child's wonder at life's busyness and bounty). Lewis structures the cookbook by season, describing the high points of each and how the changing of seasons impacted farming life and the food that came to her table. Sections and subsections start with recollections about each time of year, as well as key events such as Sheep-Shearing Day, Wheat-Harvesting Day, Sunday Revival, Race Day, Emancipation Day, and Christmas Eve. Many of the individual recipes include snippets of history about this or that vegetable and how they came to her community, or how a certain cut of meat tastes compared to other cuts. She describes life on this Freetown farming settlement as an almost utopian place of hard work, plentiful food, generous friends and family, a strong sense of community, and a true partnership with nature. This was an immersive experience and I soon came to live in this special place and time.

And it was just that for Lewis: a very specific place and time: her past. At the age of 16, after the death of her father, she struck out on her own to New York City where she worked in many different jobs (including three hours as a laundress), became something of a bohemian and socialite as well as an ardent radical, eventually married Harlem communist spokesman Steve Kingston, and formed a 50/50 partnership with the fabulous international antiques dealer John Nicholson. And so through the late '40s to the mid-'50s, she was chef and partner at what would become the renowned and very *au courant* author-magnet named Cafe Nicholson. Many years later- with a number of stops and starts along the way - she in turn authored a series of cookbooks that eventually positioned her as one of the foremost authorities on Southern cooking. Edna Lewis passed away in 2006 at 90 years of age. In 2014, she was commemorated in stamp form by the U.S.

Postal Service. I came to learn of her recently, on episode six of Top Chef's 14th season.

All that said, perhaps the many remembrances and pictures of life in Freetown painted by Lewis have such an elegiac quality to them because she spent a mere one-sixth of her storied life in that setting. *The Taste of Country Cooking* is a splendid cookbook, of course, but it is also a portrait of a bygone life and an era long past. Fond wistfulness suffuses this lovely and poignant book.

Sad to say, it is unlikely that I will make many of these recipes because I really feel that the flavors that Lewis so beautifully describes will only come after using ingredients fresh from garden and field (or - during winter months - from the bounty that comes from home-canning), meat from animals that roam free on a country farm, food foraged or hunted or fished within the forest and streams surrounding her community farm, and then cooked over wood-burning stoves and hearths. That said, there were still a good number that seemed doable, including:

- > *Skillet Scallions*
- > *Lentil and Scallion Salad*
- > *Scalloped Potatoes* (featuring beef broth rather than dairy)
- > *Pan-fried Oysters*
- > *Virginia Fried Chicken with Browned Gravy*
- > *Pan-fried Chicken with Cream Gravy*
- > *Chicken Gelatine* (recipe looks more tasty than its title!)
- > *Blueberry Sauce*
- > *Caramel Pie*

But as delicious as they may sound, the recipes are scarcely the point of *The Taste of Country Cooking*. This is a book about nature and a certain community and times past. I had a wonderful experience getting to know my new friend Edna, traveling with her back to her youth and through some of her earliest, most precious memories.

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### **Carissa Hanson says**

Lovely!

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### **Liza says**

Delightful

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### **Terry ~ Huntress of Erudition says**

Oh my goodness, I just opened this cookbook and I think I will enjoy reading it cover to cover - even make

some of the recipes for our quiet 4th of July BBQ at home...

This is the best way, if extremely worky, to make the best tasting food.

This is a story about a farming community that worked together to raise the kids and tend the fields, animals and gardens used to make the food for each family and the entire community.

Sounds like a wonderful utopian existence, except that it is really a lot of constant hard work and everyone must do their part.

I wish I could cook like that - I will try to incorporate some of the techniques into my own meal prep, though.

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### **Maija says**

Oh, my, my, just lovely. Like dessert, this book is perfect for reading in bed and dropping imaginary everyday-cake-crumbs on the sheets. A lovely story about eating locally and sustainably before it was made trendy by Whole Foods. I had severe family jealousy for a bit (although my family always ate quite well, too - in a small rural town, we often ate canned jams from local blackberries & the like).

I got this from the library, but I will definitely be looking for a used copy at the next bookstore I enter.

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### **Evelyn says**

Edna Lewis brings the reader into the world of her childhood, growing up in "Freetown" a farming community founded by former slaves. Her descriptions of the Freetown way of life are an astonishing mix of the pragmatic, idyllic and ecstatic--

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### **Carrie says**

This is a really wonderful book. Edna Lewis grew up in Freetown, a town that was founded by emancipated slaves. I believe she's first- or second-generation free person. She talks fondly about the farm her family ran, and about her time with family members, friends, and neighbors. She writes fantastically.[return][return]The book is organized by the season. Don't be scared off by the fact that a lot of the sweets call for lard. One can substitute Crisco or similar shortening if lard is not available. [return][return]I can't speak to the recipes but they look very authentic. My grandparents are farmers and many of the recipes feel so familiar to me. There are green beans with ham, chipped beef gravy (and chipped pork gravy), watermelon rind pickles, and lots of cakes, pies, greens, vegetables, meats, etc. Ms. Lewis talks about the seasons and how her family prepared for each. In the winter was the hog butchering--she describes it in great detail. It made me ask my 81-year old grandmother what she remembers about hog butchering, and her account was very, very similar to Edna's. I like to read this book and think of my grandparents way back when they first were farming, and their parents before them. So much tradition has been lost to convenience. [return][return]I loved reading the memoir part best of all. I look forward to reading her other books. What a great service Ms. Lewis has done by writing her memories down.



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## Juli Anna says

A classic for a reason. Frankly this food is so rich and meat-heavy, that I don't plan on making any of the recipes, but Lewis's authorial voice is resplendent as she plies her way through the stories of her childhood with humor, poetry, and depth. A true joy to read through.

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## Carol Bakker says

This is *Little House in the Big Woods* for adults. Edna Lewis writes through the seasons, demonstrating how to make scrumptious food without the newest, oldest, or next best kitchen appliance. Honestly, she made meringue made with a fork!

Look at the cover photo. That winsome smile compels me, that face makes me want to name Edna Lewis my friend.

I haven't cooked from this book yet. Lard, a common ingredient, is something I swore off a few years back. (But who knows? How many formerly reviled foods are now pronounced good? ::confused exhale::)

Edna's way of cooking is so old —so primitive, in a way— that it's *en vogue* today. Whether you call it slow cooking, farm to table, eating locally, eating seasonally, or sustainable agriculture, that's the kind of meal preparation you get. All the stories are a bonus!

*Ham held the same rating as the basic black dress. If you had a ham in the meat house any situation could be faced.*

*There were high points of the summer that made your work rewarding. One was the day you picked the first ripe tomato.*

*Although there were no exceptions of our **usual custom of sitting down together three times a day for meals**, during Christmas week we were free to return to the food safe as many times a day as we liked and my mother would never say a word.*

*Along in February, she would save all of her eggshells, line them up on the windowsill, place the seed of a green bean in each one, and add about a tablespoon of water. When sprouted enough she would set them, still in the shell, into a prepared row and cover them with soil on the first warm day of spring.*

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## Karen Witzler says

I knew this place and these flavors well; maybe not the homemade wines and the salsify, but these dishes and seasonal ways of being were still alive during my Deep South childhood in the '60's. Gravy? You don't know gravy until you've had ham and cream ...

