

# Food for Thought: These Books Really Cook

By Robert Templer

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Such is the world of food publishing. There is hardly a faded star, semi-retired movie director or washed-up model who hasn't written a cookbook these days and without exception they are worthless. It may be impossible to hold back this tsunami of celebrity inanity and hype but there are still people writing books on food that really enrich our understanding of this important area of our lives. Recent years have seen some excellent writing by the likes of Ruth Reichl ("Tender at the Bone") and Jeffrey Steingarten ("The Man Who Ate Everything"), but sadly there have been few books that have explored Asian cuisine in the same depth.

Charmaine Solomon's "Encyclopedia of Asian Food" (Periplus Editions, 1998). The culmination of 30 years of food research and 20 books, this is the Asian answer to the Larousse Gastronomique. Ms. Solomon, originally from Sri Lanka but now a resident of Australia, explains Asian food from abalone to zedoary (a root also known as white turmeric). The book contains 500 recipes that cover everything from regional variants of scrambled eggs to the complexities of cooking shark's fin. Ms. Solomon is particularly good at explaining spices, and her knowledge of food from South Asia is unsurpassed. The book is full of interesting tidbits. For example, since records were first kept in 1886, 6,925 people have died in Japan eating fugu, the puffer fish with a toxic liver. The problem is do-it-yourself fugu dissection, as there has been only one death in 50 years at a licensed restaurant.

## FULL TEXT

Not long ago Jane Fonda published a cookbook. While doing her time on the promotional circuit, she was lured into the kitchen area on a morning talk show and asked to whip up something from her book. As she peered in terror at the equipment in front of her, it became clear that she was as familiar with a kitchen as she was with the controls of a space shuttle. The former actress sheepishly confessed that these were recipes that her cook sometimes made for her.

Such is the world of food publishing. There is hardly a faded star, semi-retired movie director or washed-up model who hasn't written a cookbook these days and without exception they are worthless. It may be impossible to hold back this tsunami of celebrity inanity and hype but there are still people writing books on food that really enrich our understanding of this important area of our lives. Recent years have seen some excellent writing by the likes of Ruth Reichl ("Tender at the Bone") and Jeffrey Steingarten ("The Man Who Ate Everything"), but sadly there have been few books that have explored Asian cuisine in the same depth.

There are, however, some books on the region's food that are worth reading. Here's my selection of some of the best English-language books on food that are currently available:

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If you actually want to cook Asian food but don't know much about it, then I would recommend "The Complete Asian Cookbook," also by Charmaine Solomon (Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1992). This is another masterwork. It covers most of the cuisines around Asia but is particularly good on Southeast Asia, including Burma, a country that often doesn't get much attention for its food. So many books have become merely gastroporn with the intention being that you drool over the pictures but never follow the overly complex recipes yourself. Ms. Solomon's instructions are clear and practical.

The basic elements of Japanese food are now known around the world but there is so much to the cuisine that is confusing to the uninitiated. A simple but comprehensive guide can be found in Richard Hosking's "A Dictionary of Japanese Food" (Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1992). Mr. Hosking is a professor in Japan, where he has lived since 1973, and this pocket-sized book has the feel of a labor of love. He even did his own illustrations.

To get a sense of the history and meaning of the diverse Chinese cuisines, the best current book is "The Food of China" by E.N. Anderson (Yale University Press, 1988). This book explains the ecological and cultural background of Chinese food as well as the development of rituals and customs surrounding it. Intensely researched but eminently readable, this book is a lively examination of how a quarter of the world's people came to eat the way they do.

"It Rains Fishes: Legends, Traditions and the Joys of Thai Cooking," by Kasma Loha-Unchit (Pomegranate Artbooks, 1995), brings to life the past and present of Thai food and has detailed recipes and tips on techniques. There are illuminating chapters on chilis, coconut milk, squid and other essentials of Thai food. Ms. Loha-Unchit has a breezy, personable style and a deep, infectious passion about food.

People in Asia may not be mystified by their grocery stores, but given that many are now interested in other, sometimes unfamiliar foods from around the region, Linda Bladholm's "The Asian Grocery Store Demystified" (Renaissance Books, 1999) is a useful new book. It covers all types of foods found across the region and explains which are the best brands and how to cook them. There are useful sections on different types of rice and noodles.

One ingredient that ties so many Asian cuisines together is tea. "All the Tea in China" by Kit Chow and Lone Kramer (China Books and Periodicals Inc., 1990) tells readers about everything from the history to the health benefits of the beverage. (It prevents tooth decay and cancer). It also has details on 50 different Chinese teas, giving their histories and evaluating their tastes and medical advantages.

Finally, "Lord Krishna's Cuisine: The Art of Indian Vegetarian Cooking" by Yamuna Devi (Penguin Books, 1989). This monumental work -- it's more than 800 pages long and took a decade to write -- has 500 recipes that cover every aspect of Indian vegetarian cookery. It's a book that carries with it thousands of years of religious and culinary history and yet is practical and easy to follow. It has the sort of food that is rarely found in Indian restaurants but is worth the effort to cook at home. There's also a shorter "best of" edition of this book that is much cheaper.

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