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INTRODUCTION TO THE BISON BOOKS EDITION

Sara Dickerman

Most food writers, including me, have a reflexive tendency to wax rhapsodic about their ingredients. This is particularly true with fruit, with all its sweet and sensual associations—it's easy to go overboard. It is a flaw, I think, that emerges from the generosity of the kitchen. We cooking types are inclined to make the best of things, be they leftovers, supermarket standbys, or naturally insipid ingredients. Jane Grigson, however, wrote her *Fruit Book* without getting stuck in the honey pot of overly sentimental prose. The result is both a cookbook and a reference book, semi-encyclopedic, wholly idiosyncratic, and powerfully readable.

Married to the poet Geoffrey Grigson, and a translator herself, Jane Grigson wrote with an easy erudition, conjuring apt quotations and painterly allusions. She certainly did not hesitate to praise a food she found exemplary, but in a declarative, not cloying, manner. Of mangos, for example, she writes, “The flesh is an even deeper orange than you might expect, and of a slightly acid sweetness that convinces you that this is the best fruit in the world” (229).

Grigson's praise of fruit, however, was not what first attracted me to her writing—just the opposite, in fact. I came to her work rather late, when I was already a professional cook and just beginning to write about food. I needed to research pomegranates and found an earlier edition of this book. Grigson's frank voice knocked me out of my library-induced stupor. Wondering at the huge stocks of pomegranates that arrived in British markets every winter, Grigson writes, “But why the pomegranate? It is far less wonderful than the peach, less golden to eat than the mango. In any practical way, it is an unrewarding fruit” (373). No writer I knew would preface a series of pomegranate recipes with such a statement. To be fair, Grigson does acknowledge the pomegranate's physical beauty, its resonance as a symbol of fertility and resurrection, and a certain tart pleasantness it adds to soups and braises, but I was impressed by her unwillingness to fall for the glassy gorgeousness of those transparent red seeds. Other fruits are dealt with in equally plainspoken prose: papaya is a good addition to fruit salad

but is basically a “background fruit” (286), and carambola, or star fruit, is “an amusing fruit” (102). Although promoting fruit cookery, Grigson was unafraid to point out preparations where fruit has no place. A salad of lobster and peaches she tried in France was pretty, but “it was evident that lobster and peaches have little to say to each other” (xxviii). Grigson’s oldest fruit nemesis was rhubarb (which actually is a stalk but one that’s treated in fruitlike fashion), which she dismisses as, “Nanny-food. Governess-food. School-meal-food (cold porridge with rhubarb for breakfast). And I haven’t got over disliking rhubarb, and disliking it still more for being often not so young and a little stringy” (405). She goes on (rather diplomatically, I think) to provide several lively recipes exempt from her rhubarb repulsion, including a Persian lamb and rhubarb stew, and rhubarb and grapefruit jam, although she adds, “I feel that virtue comes from the grapefruit” (410).

Grigson’s tart writing about things she disliked made me trust her when she was enthusiastic. I may have painted her as a culinary grouch, but she was not. She wrote of fruit’s many delights: gustatory, yes, but also literary, mythical, aromatic, and visual. She showed a particular affection for names of preparations: the alliterative “Quail with Slices of Quince” or “The Pompadour’s Ribbons,” an English translation of a French apricot dessert, a Bavarian mold in layers of apricot and cream.

Courtesans’ ribbons aside, cooks today will find that Grigson’s recipes appeal to our twin desires for comfort food and the exotic. There are many simple desserts in an English mode, such as summer puddings, berry fools, and nectarines broiled on buttery toast, but there are also many cosmopolitan preparations from Hawaii, China, and Iran. Many of her fruit dishes—pork belly with apples, grapefruit and chicory (endive) salad, date and chicken tajine—would be well at home in restaurants today.

Cooking with Grigson is a different affair than cooking with typical modern American recipes; her recipes have a conversational quality that might make an amateur cook a little wary—“Taste the fruit, and reflect on its sweetness and juiciness,” she advises before deciding how much sugar or cornstarch to apply to a bilberry (huckleberry) pie with mint (74). Personally, I am glad for a recipe that asks for some judgment on the part of the cook, but it is good to be prepared to make such choices.

Jane Grigson’s Fruit Book was first published in 1982 at a moment of powerful culinary excitement. Food processors and electric fryers, which Grigson favored for poaching large batches of fruit (in syrup,

not fat), were making light work of kitchen drudgery. Nouvelle cuisine was trickling down from Michelin-starred restaurants to home cooks, bringing new color and vibrancy (and sometimes questionable ideas such as the lobster peach salad) to kitchens. The movement's pet fruit, the Chinese gooseberry, or kiwifruit, had become a hot commodity at the greengrocers'. Grigson writes, "Chefs in France have made it almost a badge of the *nouvelle cuisine*, *salads aux kiwis*, *sorbets aux kiwis*, *clafoutis aux kiwis*, are all a sign of chic. In a year or two when everyone knows them, they may be demoted, but at the moment they are at the top of the culinary pyramid" (130). Kiwis and other non-European fruits—mangos, papayas, passionfruits—may seem prosaic now, but it is clear that Grigson welcomed the new exotics to the market. She even appreciated the quality of once-native produce being grown in warmer climates such as Israel, where "precious water, measured out drop by drop, comes down from Galilee through the one waterway, through the narrow width of the country, to give us strawberries in the snow of a European winter" (418).

But even as Grigson lauded the warm-weather pleasures of modern food distribution and marketing, she understood its converse: the dissipation of flavor and variety in the modern food market, something that is very much on the mind of the thinking eater to this day. Throughout her *Fruit Book*, she laments the loss of old, delicious, but more perishable strains of apples, plums, pears, and peaches. She does not use terms like *monoculture* or *biodiversity*, as food activists might today, but she recognizes mediocrity in the market. "The food trade makes the egalitarian mistake, which is also a convenience for itself, of thinking that every food has to be as cheap and inoffensive as every other similar food. This mistake has ruined chicken and potatoes and bread. No wine merchant sells only plonk, no flower shop sticks to daisies. In the matter of vegetables and fruit, we seem often to be reduced to a steady bottom of horticultural plonk" (1).

Grigson may have been unsusceptible to the pomegranate, but she was downright indignant when it came to the loss of truly flavorful fruit staples at the hands of commercial orchards that bred for heavy cropping and durability over flavor. She writes about the Cox's orange pippin—a once-glorious English breed of apple—which she found to be tapped of its former appeal. "They may technically be Cox's orange pippins, but to anyone who grows his own fruit or can remember back beyond twenty or so years, they are travesties" (1).

In the United States we have different apple names to contend, of

course. Red Delicious are now passé, to be sure, but I have yet to taste a Gala or Fuji that is as delicious as the craggy little apples we would pick from our own trees when I was growing up. Tart, red-streaked Gravensteins are increasingly harder to find in markets, as are the small, dark apples such as the Red Rome. Even upscale, organic-friendly markets still favor the big, the smooth-fleshed, and the bruise-resistant breeds.

It was not just apples that disappointed Grigson; the commercial Victoria plum tree produced “a flood of bland, boring plums” (351). She sought out the once-famous Montreuil peach and came up empty handed. Modern hybrid peaches may be beautiful enough for a Renoir painting, but they are sorely disappointing to eat, Grigson writes. “Everything is selected, trained, peaches are now the children of arranged marriages. Perhaps they would have more taste and succulence if they were love-children?” (297).

These days Americans have seen some victories in the name of variety in the supermarkets (at least the fancy ones) and through the growth of farmers’ markets around the country. But we are still debating the value of organic produce shipped from half a world away in the middle of the winter. If an organic pear comes from Chile, is it still a more eco-conscious choice than a conventionally raised domestic pear? And, I’m sure Grigson would ask, how does it taste after all that travel?

You may have heard about Fallen Fruit, a group that is mapping the public fruit trees in Los Angeles so that fruit renegades can pass over Chilean pears at the market and instead take advantage of all of the balmy city’s unclaimed bananas and figs. I think Grigson would approve, for she seems most spirited in describing wholly noncommercial fruit: old forgotten breeds too perishable for the market, wild fruits, and old trees that sit neglected in churchyards, manor houses, or a neighbor’s yard. “Go ready for the picking, in dark purple clothes,” she advises mulberry enthusiasts (247). Huckleberries, squishy soft plums, finger-staining blackberries: the fruits one gathers oneself deliver the purest fruit pleasure, something that cannot be conjured at even the most splendidly stocked grocery store. Read this book with pleasure, and next time you go walking, keep your eye out for overlooked fruit.