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## INTRODUCTION TO THE BISON BOOKS EDITION

*Amy Sherman*

Try to use the word *vegetables* in a sentence. Did you conjure up the phrase “eat your vegetables”? You probably did. But if you had asked the same thing of Jane Grigson, I imagine she might have said “enjoy your vegetables” instead. Grigson did not consider eating vegetables penance but rather a pleasure. Her recipes focus on making vegetables (even her least favorite) taste as good as they possibly can.

Jane Grigson was a celebrated culinary writer. She was almost forty when her first book on food, *Charcuterie and French Pork Cookery*, was published. Although raised in the northeast of Britain, she was knowledgeable on the subject of French food, and the book was even translated into French. She wrote for *Observer* magazine for twenty-two years and published one award-winning culinary book after another about subjects ranging from fish and fruit to mushrooms and vegetables. Grigson died in 1990; not many Americans are familiar with her books, let alone her long-running magazine columns, but her writings are still considered important in Great Britain. Almost fifteen years after Grigson's passing, the British food magazine *Waitrose* published its list of the twenty-five greatest cookbooks of all time. On the list are a number of authors American audiences are sure to be familiar with—Auguste Escoffier, Julia Child, Madhur Jaffrey, Claudia Roden, Nigella Lawson—and right there with them is Jane Grigson and her classic *Vegetable Book*.

When Grigson wrote about food, even vegetables, she did so in a most unapologetic way. While you will find her enthusiastic about some vegetables (“Brussels sprouts are an elegant miniature cabbage”), she is equally blunt on her opinion about others (“Raw red cabbage in a salad and pickled red cabbage are two things I detest”). She was insightful, honest, and sometimes funny in a dry, British way. She was an impeccable researcher, and you cannot help but delight in her trivia and anecdotes. Who knew that *nasturtium* means “nose-twister” or that cauliflowers were developed by the Arabs in the Middle Ages? *Jane Grigson's Vegetable Book* is as much about the lore of vegetables and cooking as it is a recipe book. And it is more apropos today than ever.

When Grigson wrote the book in 1978, she envisioned a future where “every town [is] ringed again with small gardens, nurseries, allotments, greenhouses, orchards, as it was in the past, an assertion of delight and human scale.” No doubt she would be pleased to see the resurgence of farmers’ markets all across the United States. Thanks to the popularity of these markets and home gardening, some of the vegetables she writes about are now more easily available. *Jane Grigson’s Vegetable Book* makes the perfect reference for when you have come home from the market or the garden with a big bunch of dandelion greens or sorrel or fennel and have no clue what to do with it.

Grigson’s writing is no-nonsense in a way that may startle you. In the chapter on artichokes she questions the practice of trimming the prickles off of the vegetable, saying, “There is no point in deforming such a beautiful object. I have never done this, and no one has pricked their finger and fallen asleep for 100 years at our table.” You know what? She’s right. After reading that, I made two large and rather prickly artichokes and found that once they were cooked neither I nor my dining companion noticed any sharp bits.

Beginning with artichokes and ending with yams, Grigson includes the most typical of vegetables, such as carrots, onions, and potatoes, as well as the more exotic, such as cardoons, nettles, and seakale. I was once told that if you find just one great recipe in a book it has been worth whatever you paid for it. Keep that in mind when you read this book because it is filled with timeless, solid recipes as well as solid advice. Grigson’s recipes are not dumbed down but are written in a straightforward style that assumes readers know what they are doing in the kitchen. Despite her knowledge, she relies on humor and common sense to reassure rather than taking a commanding tone.

Unlike other food writers in her day, Grigson did not stick with just one type of cuisine. Many of her vegetable recipes are French, but she also includes examples from Greece, Spain, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Italy, the Middle East, the United States, and, yes, even England. Grigson had a knack for finding the best recipes in many different lands and from many different sources.

When you do think of vegetables, you may think of nutrition. But Jane Grigson was preoccupied with taste, not necessarily health. I doubt she ever met a stick of butter she didn’t like. In addition to butter, her recipes often contain bacon, cream, or eggs. Halleluia! Grigson was ahead of her time. Recent research seems to indicate that we may actually need fat to help us better absorb all the nutrients in vegetables.

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British food and great British chefs have come into vogue like never before. But in the United States we have long believed the food in England to be lousy. Having spent time on a farm in Devon, I can tell you that that is not the case. Poor cooking may ruin fresh produce, but some of the most delicious vegetables come from the English countryside. In Devonshire country I enjoyed the tastiest peas, carrots, and potatoes I have ever eaten. Fresh and delicious vegetables inspired Jane Grigson, and they can inspire you too.

*Jane Grigson's Vegetable Book* is for gardeners, for cooks, for vegetarians, for carnivores, for farmers' market shoppers. It is a book for anyone who loves to eat.