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Our Food. A lifelong story

by Louise Fresco

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Translated by Liz Waters

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Foreword

‘He ate with silent respect for food, a great deal, not out of gluttony but with appreciation of his own labour in it. He knew the cost. ... “Eat,” he pronounced at intervals, assuaging his love for us, “eat, eat”.’

Herbert Gold, *The Heart of the Artichoke* (1951)

Food is the most important thing people share with each other. Every day it confirms our place in the world, our relationships with others and with nature, our health and our happiness. What you eat, how you eat, with whom you eat, how often, where and even why – it all carries within it meaning, custom and ritual. From the croquembouche, the tiered cake built out of cream puffs glazed with caramel that elicits cries of admiration from the bride’s aunts, to the quick croquette in a rainy porch in front of the station, or the lukewarm noodle soup in a foil container, eaten high above the city on a construction crane. As the above quotation from Jewish American writer Herbert Gold implies, food ultimately carries within it the meaning of love. Eat, because I love you and food is the vehicle. Food is also the acceptance of that love. Conversely, the systematic refusal of food is one of the most painful things that can happen between people.

But food also means effort, a long series of procedures that more and more people fail to notice as they become increasingly distant from its production, from the harvesting and processing of ingredients to the final dish. Of course this is the consequence of urbanization and industrialization. People are less likely than in earlier times to visit a farm or a food distribution centre, let alone an abattoir or a factory. But there is more to it than that: even the most simple details are unknown to many, or disregarded by them. In discussions of possible food shortages as a result of the war in Ukraine, people were amazed when I said that the situation would look very different a month or two hence. Did I mean that the war would be over by then? No, but

from May onwards crops would be planted in the southern hemisphere. If, in reaction to the shortages, more than usual was sown, it would have a major impact on the world market. In other words, food production is not exhaustive extraction like the production of oil, of which stocks are finite by definition. If good sense is applied, the production of food renews itself every season. Prices and scarcity are determined by seasonal changes. So in the long term there is no worldwide shortage of food (although of course local shortages may arise, with tragic consequences, as famine in the Horn of Africa confirms time and again). Food does not need to be scarce, even for a global population that will continue to grow until the end of this century, if increasingly slowly (it is already declining in parts of the rich world). But that optimistic conclusion is valid only if land is used sensibly to make food production as sustainable as possible, and to maintain or even improve the quality of the soil, water and surrounding biodiversity.

Food always involves an almost endless number of details. There are so many products, so many ways of preparing them, so many contexts in which eating goes on. Matters are usually more nuanced than superficial reporting suggests. Take the oft-repeated claim that two thirds of our food comes from just nine crops. In terms of kilograms of fresh weight this may be roughly correct, but it is a totally unhelpful generalization. In the case of rice or wheat, for example, there are dozens of taxonomically different species and varieties, grown and prepared in very different ways. To say nothing of the long history of genetic selection by countless generations of farmers, or of the many ways in which maize, for instance, is processed, fermented and mixed to create all kinds of dishes. Behind everything lies a story, or rather many stories, which stretch across centuries and even millennia.

All my life I have occupied myself with the sometimes exhausting and irritating details and nuances of food. It is so much easier to generalize than truly to look at the differences and similarities. In 2012 I published a book that came out in English in 2016 as *Hamburgers in Paradise. The Stories Behind the Food We Eat*. It built upon an earlier book of mine, published in Dutch in 2006 under the title *Nieuwe spijswetten. Over voedsel en verantwoordelijkheid* (New dietary laws. On food and responsibility). On re-reading that 2012 book exactly ten years later, and looking again at the long series of talks and articles from my years at the universities of Wageningen and Amsterdam, I was struck by a great degree of continuity. So many themes recur

– hunger but also culinary culture, soils, landscape and the evolution of crops. In *Hamburgers in Paradise* I tried to give as complete a picture as possible of ‘food and agriculture in times of scarcity and abundance’. I wrote the book because I did not want to answer the many questions put to me by journalists, colleagues, students and interested members of the public with scattered facts but instead with a broad overview in which almost everything would fall into place. To my surprise, on rereading it (to prepare for a new edition) I found that hardly anything needed to be changed. Of course there are issues that are now topical and at the time were less relevant or did not even exist, such as modern genetic technology like CRISPR-Cas, nitrogen pollution, the acute climate crisis, certain details concerning biodiversity and forest regeneration, or the pandemic zoonotic disease known as COVID-19, a new coronavirus. But everything in the book is still topical: the history of bread, the development of fish farming, the dilemmas of food in the city. I took as two leading principles the longing for an image of paradise in which nature is so generous that it makes everything freely available, and the hamburger: celebrated, reviled and reinvented.

Nevertheless a major shift has taken place. In the decade since the publication of the Dutch edition of *Hamburgers*, the subject of food and agriculture has become far more prominent in the public debate. Everyone has an opinion about it, often a fiercely held belief that excludes all other points of view. Food can unite us, but it can also polarize and spark moral revulsion. This is nothing new; we find it in closed communities where food is tightly bound up with religion. After a period of toleration, from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, when the West began to get used to abundance, that abundance and the accompanying stress of a multiplicity of choices, combined with a growing consciousness of the fragility of the planet, produced robust judgments and rules of conduct. In a modern society, the vehemence with which people object, for example to ‘the eating of species that are animals just like us’ almost resembles a religion. Moreover, everything seems to be connected to everything else: green energy also requires land or by-products from the food chain; health is more clearly than ever a result of diet and lifestyle (as became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic when people suffering from obesity were at considerably greater risk); and the dairy industry has abruptly turned out to be a decisive factor in problems surrounding nitrogen pollution, and therefore had a knock-on effect, necessitating restrictions on housebuilding and transport. Discussions in the media sometimes make me feel that the same arguments are being repeated ad infinitum. But of

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course that is the nature of such things. Debates are not consistent and rational but capricious and emotional.

My character and my background in science, like my broad interest in history, mean that I tend to seek nuance and perspective rather than taking a strong stand. For as long as I can remember I have prompted reactions from people who want to draw me into their camp ('Just appeal for a moratorium on meat for once!', 'Why don't you say honestly that we really must stop this nonsense of putting solar panels on good agricultural land?' and 'You surely must admit that the world's population is growing exponentially and radical birth control needs to be imposed on Africa and Asia'). When I don't, but instead give the friendly response that there are other aspects to the situation, or that the commentator's premise is only partly true, or even wrong, the usual florid phrases follow, of which 'You stupid woman' is the most elegant.

There are few circumstances in which taking a firm stand is of much use, except when it comes to an insistence on checkable facts, the need for a proper perspective and the power of correction. I am fond of what the scholar Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) wrote, back in the twelfth century: 'Teach thy tongue to say "I do not know" and thou shalt progress.' In this context, 'I do not know' means we must not tell half-truths or lies. The objection that we cannot afford to wait until we know everything is too easy, especially when the precautionary principle is used as a brake and legitimacy claimed for a longing for times past. As far as that is concerned, the words of historian Johan Huizinga have always been a guiding principle for me. He put it far-sightedly and succinctly in 1935 (in his book *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*): '... a general going *back* is out of the question. There is nothing but to go forward even if we stand appalled at the unknown depths and distances ahead...'

In a polarized debate, reiterating what we do and do not know is less than popular, partly because of the erosion of the concept of 'facts'. Facts are increasingly titbits scraped together in the huge fact-factory that we call the internet, which has something to suit every taste. We prefer to forget that behind scientific facts lies an international system of intersubjective, strict verification, and that self-interest often lurks behind pseudofacts and behind groups that claim to have the best interests of the planet at heart. Unfortunately, the scientific assessment system is itself subject to erosion, partly because of competition between researchers and the volume of their research, both of which have grown enormously. But ultimately, despite errors or

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differences in interpretation that can persist for a while, the system of continual assessment does advance our collective knowledge. It is not perfect, but it is the best way we have of looking at our doubts and lack of knowledge from all sides and gaining a better understanding of how the world works.

There has probably never been a time in which food was uncomplicated, but today's range of choice and ferocious reactions on social media frequently cloud our view. This book does not claim any ability to settle the great debates about food. It merely contains a few stories on the subject, most of which are connected with my personal recollections. It is not a major scientific survey, but rather a collection of dishes, tapas, or *cicchetti* as the Venetians would call them: bite-sized snacks for the confused soul. I hope it can give rise to a conversation. And if we cannot agree, or if voices fall silent, then let the conversation be an encouragement to eat and enjoy: 'Eat, eat!'

## Chapter 1. A handful of sour grapes

Or: why everything we eat has a story

At midday the cicadas are so loud that they drown out the sound of my footsteps. In the hot but gentle wind, the plumes of grass move softly, while here and there a leaf stirs. Not a person or animal to be seen. It is August, 37 degrees in the semi-shade of the Andalusian *dehesa*, that undulating landscape with its typical mix of dry grasses and bushes with the occasional solitary oak tree. More rain falls here in autumn and winter than the dry vegetation might suggest. On the chalky soil the rainwater evaporates immediately, or seeps into the ground. I go to sit with my back to an oak, even though it provides hardly any shade. Suddenly I see to my right, at eye level, a low bush with deep blue, almost black fruits. On further inspection they turn out to be small grapes, just a few bunches per plant. I cannot resist the temptation. They are sour but juicy, with an unexpectedly strong perfume. While the juice drips through my fingers, I wonder how long these unpruned, overgrown vines have been here. The field looks as if it has been neglected for decades, just like the rest of the valley. The narrow terraces where once barley was grown, on the lower parts perhaps even wheat, are nowadays no more than irregularities in the slope.

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The discovery of the grapes gives an unexpected profundity to the landscape. This is not simply a pleasant or attractive stretch of nature that deserves the protection of national park status. The *dehesa* is an ancient cultivated landscape that emerged from an open mixture of oak woodland and grass. Not untouched nature but carefully managed. Here traditional grazing takes place, cork is harvested from the cork oaks, wild animals are hunted, and coppice wood, mushrooms and useful plants are collected. With as a highpoint, naturally, acorns for the pigs that produce the famous Iberian ham. It is a meticulously maintained system, because the large oaks need space and not too much competition from grass and shrubbery, a place where agriculture, nature conservation, hunting and gathering are in theory in balance. In the lower-lying areas, lemons are grown with the aid of irrigation and, at spots where the winters are mild, even oranges. Originally this was mostly collective or feudal property, but as work on the shared sustenance of the villages diminished, it steadily became private land, either that or protected by modern regulations governing nature reserves.

But how did these grapes get here? Does anyone still pick them, so high above the village? Or have they become food for the birds, so that in reality, having once been cultivated plants, they are now part of the natural vegetation once more? Who knows, perhaps they were spread here by birds, in their droppings. Or by shepherd boys, who spat out the pips. In that case the grapes were not deliberately planted here. For confirmation I look for a graft in the bush close to me. There is none, so it seems unlikely this vine was ever part of a cultivated vineyard. The Etruscans invented grafting centuries before the start of the Western calendar, and almost all planted vines are grafted onto a rootstock. But sometimes those rootstocks succumbed to disease and an alternative was sought, so the absence of a graft does not tell me everything. These few grapes raise so many questions. When does a species domesticated by humans become wild again? And how wild is wild? How much genetic change occurs when people are no longer around to select the best plants? Who eats the fruits and how is the seed distributed? In other words: is having small, sour fruit an evolutionary advantage or not?

However that may be, the history of grapes goes back far further than a chance visitor would imagine. Were they already here at the end of the Roman Empire? Did they arrive with the Caliphate of Córdoba (or not, given the ban on alcoholic drinks, even though grapes might have

been eaten as fruit)? Or are they even older? Not these plants, of course, but the original grapes of this subspecies? Could the Phoenicians have left them behind, as some sources claim? As the crow flies, this place is not far from the coast of the Mediterranean along which the Phoenicians and the Greeks navigated. Archaeologists put the domestication of the grapevine at a far earlier date, some six to eight thousand years ago, in the region between the Black Sea and what is now Iran. From there grapes were distributed all over the Mediterranean Basin, where in several places a secondary domestication arose, and with it the development of local varieties, as was the case in the Balkans and in Hungary. Moreover, there are in total some seventy closely related plants of the *Vitis* family. Without DNA analysis we can only speculate about these wild, domesticated, or domesticated and then once again wild grapes. We know that some wild varieties have spontaneously crossed with the edible grape, *Vitis vinifera*. Perhaps these particular grapes first developed in southern Greece, moved to Italy and then, more than two thousand years ago, were further spread from Magna Grecia, the southern part of the Italian peninsula, where Greek colonizers had planted them centuries before. One of the best-known grape varieties there, just as dark blue and perfumed as this one in the *dehesa*, is called *primitivo*, a name that refers not to a 'primitive' origin but to the early harvest, starting in the second half of August. The grapes produce fragrant wines, like the Primitivo di Manduria, which, once you have tasted it, you will not quickly forget.

So behind these small sour grapes that I happened to find on a mountainside in Andalusia lie the results of many thousands of years of selection of individual vines by Persians, Greeks, Romans, Saracens, Byzantines and Spaniards. Virgil wrote that there are as many varieties of grape as there are 'grains of sand in the Libyan desert'. Even in forms that have returned to nature, like those that grow wild in the *dehesa* at Ronda, the little blue clusters of fruit embody the vicissitudes of many civilizations. Perhaps this is unnecessary ballast for those who like grapes, but all food is food for thought. Just as it is with a painting, an opera or a nature reserve: those who know more experience more.