Elizabeth Davids books belong in the libraries of everyone who loves to read and prepare food and this one is generally regarded as her best; her passion and knowledge comes through on every page. She was one of the foremost writers on food in the latter half of the 20th century and this book has her most celebrated writing. French Provincial Cooking should be approached and read as a series of short stories, as well written and evocative as the best literature.

The voice is highly personal and opinionated, sometimes sharp but always true and always entertaining. Here is a long essay on French cuisine, offering background stories and sketches of recipes more than the slavishly didactic type of recipes that most modern readers might be used to today. For many Elizabeth David was the first to introduce us to the French notion of la cuisine terroir, sometimes interpreted as what grows together goes together. For David, this is the heart of regional cooking, and the thing which most distinguishes it from cooking in haute cuisine restaurants where diners arrive at any time or any season and expect to be able to order any well known French specialty.

One of the passages which best characterizes Davids approach to a lot of cooking is her opening statement on the perfect omelet: As everybody knows, there is only one infallible recipe for the perfect omelet: your own.

The book starts with a short essay on each of the major culinary regions of France, starting perhaps not surprisingly with Provence which is blessed an abundance of produce. The largest portion of the book consists of chapters on cuisine by type of dish: Sauces, Hors-Doeuvres and Salads, Soups, Eggs and Cheese, Pates and Terrines, Vegetables, Fish, Shellfish, Meat, Composite Meat Dishes, Poultry and Game, and Sweet dishes.

The book is all the more valuable in that it paints a picture of a cooking style which existed before modern equipment such as the food processor.
Most importantly, the recipes work if your aim is to produce the most excellent food imaginable. What initially may seem to be annoying details (e.g., for omelets, eggs should not really be beaten at all, but stirred, whereas for scrambled eggs, they should be very well beaten) are actually secrets to be treasured, that elevate a good dish to a superb one. The lesson is that good food should be done simply, but it takes care, attention to detail, and frequently, time.

A hardback edition of French Provincial Cooking has been unavailable for many years and Grub Street is re-issuing it because of overwhelming demand. It should become as popular an edition as the best-selling Elizabeth David Classics.

Elizabeth David is one of foremost writers on food in the latter half of the 20th century and this book has her most celebrated writing. For this reason, I was inspired to write this modest review when I saw Amazon feature the volume as an offering, 43 years after it’s first publication in England. It is a coincidence of no small meaning that this book appeared within two years before the publication of Julia Child et al's landmark ‘Mastering the Art of French Cooking’. Child was even worried, when David's book appeared, that it may steal a lot of the thunder from Child and her colleague's effort. The fact is, the two books are very much like the Wittgensteinian 'duck rabbit' optical illusion in that they deal with the same subject but from different points of view. One distinction is that while Child's book is simply a cookbook of French recipes, David's book is a long essay on French cuisine, offering the sketches of recipes more as exercises to be completed by the reader than as true recipes. In fact, it is one of the most enduring legacies of Child's book that it redefined the detail to which a recipe writer should go in order to adequately communicate the process of preparing a dish. A second distinction between the two is that they deal with two different facets of French cuisine. As David recites from work by Curnonsky, there is haute cuisine, la cuisine Bourgeoise, la cuisine Regionale, and la cuisine Improvisee. David discourses on the third while Child, et al present the second. For many, including such luminaries as Jeremiah Tower and Alice Waters, Elizabeth David is the fountainhead of thinking on the French notion of ‘la cuisine terroir’, sometimes interpreted by the notion ‘what grows together goes together’. For David, this is the heart of regional cooking, and the thing which most distinguishes it from cooking at restaurants where clientele arrive at any time of the year or the day and expect to be able to order virtually any well known French speciality. One of the passages which best characterizes David's approach to a lot of cooking is her opening statement on the perfect omelette: ‘As everybody knows, there is only one infallible recipe for the perfect omelette: ‘you own.’ I'm sure this would not work for Daniel Boulud, but it works just fine for me, after having seen about five (5) different, contrary techniques on how to make the perfect omelette. It's interesting to constantly encounter reminders that the book was written before the widespread distribution of Teflon coated cookware, as there is no mention of it, even for egg cookery. I believe the book is all the more valuable for this fact, in that it paints a
picture of a cooking style which has irrevocably been changed by
technology. A second technological change brought upon the world by the
French themselves is the 'robot-coupe' or food processor. It's noteworthy
that the device is only mentioned in Notes to the 1985 edition where it is
pointed out that the device was a major contribution to both the good and
the bad aspects of nouvelle cuisine. As stated above, the recipes are not as
much presented as a blueprint to reproduce every dish cited, but rather to
illuminate the discourse. One of my favorites is the entry for Salade
Nicoise, where not one but four (4) different variations are given, including
the variation of Escoffier. The sections on French kitchen equipment and
French techniques appear to be quite complete and absolutely essential if
you embark on reading a cookbook written in French. The book has a
short essay on each of the major culinary regions of France, starting.
Almost obviously with Provence which is blessed not so much with great
culinary talent as a great source of produce, similar, perhaps to the
situation in California where the 'la cuisine terroir' could take root much
more easily than in Toledo or Albany. The largest portion of the book is
chapters on cuisine by type of foodstuff or type of preparation such as:

Sauces

Hors-D'oeuvres and Salads

Soups

Eggs and Cheese

Pates and Terrines

Vegetables

Fish

Shellfish

Meat

Composite Meat Dishes

Poultry and Game

Left-overs

Sweet dishes

The book ends with a bibliography which alone is worth the
price of the paperback volume. This book begs to be read from cover to
cover. The only other writers who come to mind of a similar caliber are
belong in the library of anyone who loves to read and prepare food and this
is her best.
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