

A Moveable Feast

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A Moveable Feast

**LIFE-CHANGING FOOD ADVENTURES
AROUND THE WORLD**



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Introduction

DON GEORGE

I had ventured way off the beaten track, into a weather-beaten fishing village on a foggy spit of land that slides into the Sea of Japan. Because I spoke Japanese and was the first foreigner who had passed that way in decades, I became the town's guest of honour, and I was taken with great ceremony to what I gathered was the local equivalent of El Bulli or Chez Panisse.

I was feted with the usual bottomless cups of sake and glasses of beer, and the endless succession of little indescribable delicacies artfully arranged on thimble-sized plates. Then, for a moment, the whole restaurant seemed to pause as a dish was carried regally to the table and set before me. It was a whole fish, arranged with its head and tail twisted to look as if it were still leaping. Its flank had been cut open to reveal thin-cut slices of glisteningly fresh flesh.

All eyes were on me as I picked up my chopsticks and brought them to the fish. I reached in to choose the most savoury-looking slice – and the fish jumped. Thinking this was some bizarre reflex reaction, I reached in again. Again the fish jumped. This was when I looked at the fish's eye – and realised it was still alive! This was the village's delicacy: the rawest raw fish in all Japan.

What could I do? Whatever discomfort – piscitarian or gustatory – I was feeling at that point, and however much I identified with that fish, there was no turning back.

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On my third try I steeled myself, pincer-ed the desired slice and brought it to my tongue. I closed my eyes, intensely aware that every other eye in the room – including the fish’s – was on me. Suddenly ocean-fresh flavour leapt inside my mouth. My eyes shot open and a rapturous smile lit my face. The entire restaurant burst into cheers and applause.



Travel and food are inseparably intertwined, and sometimes, as in that Japanese restaurant, the lessons their intertwinings confer are complex. But one truth is clear: wherever we go, we need to eat. As a result, when we travel, food inevitably becomes one of our prime fascinations – and pathways into a place. On the road, food nourishes us not only physically, but intellectually, emotionally and spiritually too.

I’ve learned this countless times all around the globe. In fact, many of my finest travel memories revolve around food. The *biftek-frites* I would always order at the six-table sawdust restaurant around the corner when I lived in Paris the summer after I graduated from college, where the proprietor came to know me so well that he would bring my *carafe* of *vin ordinaire* before I could say a word. An endless ouzo-fuelled night of shattered plates and arm-in-arm dancing at a taverna in Athens, and the Easter feast my family was invited to share with a Greek family in the rocky hills of the Peloponnesus, where the host offered me the singular honour of eating the lamb’s eyeballs. The Sachertorte an American couple I met on the train kindly treated me to when we arrived in Vienna. My first fleshy-seedy taste of figs at a market in Istanbul.

I remember a time-stopping afternoon on the sun-dappled terrace at La Colombe d’Or in St-Paul-de-Vence, feasting stomach and soul on *daurade avec haricots verts* and artwork

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by Matisse, Picasso, Chagall and Miró. I think of a post-wedding sake and sushi celebration on the island of Shikoku, an Ecuadorian version of Thanksgiving with my family on a life-changing expedition in the Galápagos, freeze-dried *bœuf bourguignon* under the stars on a pine-scented Yosemite night, *huachinango* grilled with garlic at a seaside restaurant in Zihuatanejo, proffered by the laughing parents at the next table as their children led ours sprinting into the sea and my toes sighed into the sand. So many meals, so many memories.



This book presents a thirty-eight-course feast of such memories, life-changing food adventures, big and small, set around the world. Selected from among hundreds of edifying stories submitted for this anthology, these tales vividly illustrate the many roles food plays in our lives on the road. It can be a gift that enables a traveller to survive, a doorway into the heart of a tribe, or a thread that weaves an indelible tie. It can be a source of frustration or a fount of benediction, the object of a timely quest or the catalyst of a timeless fest. It can be awful or ambrosial – and sometimes both at the same time. Whatever its particular part, in all these cases, and in all these tales, food is an agent of transformation, taking travellers to a deeper and more lasting understanding of and connection with a people, a place and a culture.

As the host of this literary feast, I am delighted that chefs, food critics, poets and travel writers – some of them bestselling, some never published before – are sitting together at this table, spicing the air with their idiosyncratic perspectives, adventures and voices. And I am astonished and humbled by the spectrum of settings, themes and emotions embodied in these tales, robust proof that food offers a plethora of life-enriching gifts on the road, if only our minds and hearts – and stomachs – are open to them.

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I am also delighted that, quite unexpectedly, this literary feast has been an agent of transformation in another way for me. As I have been working on this book over the past few months, I have found myself singing in the kitchen as I was preparing a simple salad, exulting without even realising it in the texture, scent and taste of tomato, lettuce, carrot and feta cheese. I have discovered a new-found fascination with the produce section of the local market, hefting cantaloupes and smelling them, relishing the smooth solidity of mushrooms, savouring the nutty tang of kale. I have made a one-hour pilgrimage to pick strawberries straight from the field, and when I eat out, I have been taking the time to taste, really *taste*, the grilled king salmon, garlic potatoes, and roasted asparagus with truffle oil on my plate. Even at home, I chew more intently and more intensely, and wherever I am, I cherish more mindfully the camaraderie that food convenes.

I hope this humble meal will have the same effect on you.

Food delights us, food unites us, food embodies the soil, the sea and the weather, the farmer's sweat and the fisherman's toil. But as these tales and my own edible adventures reveal, food is only part of a feast. Every meal, whether a single mango or a multicourse molecular masterpiece, is really a communing of spirit: just as important are the setting and the situation, the effort, attentiveness and intention that infuse and inform what we share. We feast on the love behind and within the offering, love for a moment, a lesson, a gift, for companions and connections, that will never be repeated and can never be replaced. For me, this revelation has been the last course in this literary bacchanal of risk, embrace and care: the exquisite beauty of the moveable feast is its savoury serendipity – as on that long-ago day in rural Japan, it can leap into your life when you least expect it, anywhere.

Now, let the feast begin. *Bon appétit!*