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The Window Opens Like an Orange

By Susannah Worth

One way or another, food writing is always about memory. My own sweet accompaniment to composing this article comes spooned from the bottom of a large jar of spiralled orange peel in syrup, the final precious drops of a souvenir from last summer's escape to the Turkish coast. Bought with smiles and gestures, as grandchildren just home from school skipped about our feet in the café, a too-high price happily agreed, a piece of homemade sunshine purchased, and consumed as suntans fade and memories become intense and tinted rose.

Just as those orange spirals are ingested and digested to fuel my body and imagination, so too are the recollections and memories of others from the vast, enriching canon of writers who have committed food and recipes to paper. Think of M.F.K. Fisher in *With Bold Knife and Fork* (1968) reminiscing about the legendary *croque-monsieurs* at the Palm Court of the old Palace Hotel in San Francisco, eaten with a *blanc de blanc* champagne, 'They seemed to evaporate in the mouth, like fried mimosa blossoms. They were an astonishing thing, in fact... minute and complete.' Remember Claudia Roden who, having left Egypt as a young girl and settled in London to study, was witness to the influx of Egyptian refugees who arrived following the Suez crisis in 1956, 'Traumatised, not knowing where they were going to live and where they would be accepted. They would exchange recipes, saying: "Give me that recipe of the orange cake, it'll be something to remember you by; I might never see you again."' They would tell me all kinds of things about that recipe and how it mattered to them.' And consider Mina Pächter who, starving and malnourished while imprisoned at Terezín during the Second World War, somehow, in an ambrosial act of resistance that she described as 'cooking platonically', created a hand-sewn booklet of recipes that long survived her: flaky plum strudel and rich fruit bread, liver dumplings with ginger and goulash with noodles, potato doughnuts and rosehip dessert.

Add to that delicious list Deborah Levy's description of how she ate oranges as a child in Johannesburg – a recipe of sorts – as written in *Things I Don't Want to Know* (2013): 'I rolled the orange under my bare foot to make it soft. It took a long time and the point was to get the fruit to yield its juice and not to split. This had to be sensed entirely

through the sole of the foot... When it was ready I made a hole in the peel with my thumb and sucked out the sweet juice.' Levy associates this memory with something she'd noted down years before, 'The window opens like an orange,' a line from a poem by Apollinaire. Though perhaps cliché, the window remains evocative of a portal between inner and outer worlds, the private and public, and so Levy invokes this line as she writes of her struggle with how to get her work, this deeply personal and autobiographical writing, out 'into the world'.

Recipes and cookery texts have long provided opportunities, for those whose voices are not often enough heard, to creatively record and inscribe their lives and values. Speaking from a messy, intimate and sensual realm, recipes and food writing can be essential tools to articulate struggle, to offer an escape into memory and fantasy, to open the window like an orange.