

Foods of The World

“Time-Life Books invites you on a food lover’s tour of provincial France,” reads an advertisement in a March 1968 issue of *LIFE Magazine*. “You may stop and visit such fascinating places as an open-air market in Gascogne or a charming old inn on the road to Chartres.” This “tour” cost only \$4.95, plus shipping and handling. After submitting payment by mail, *The Cooking of Provincial France*, written by M.F.K. Fisher, would arrive at the buyer’s doorstep.

The cookbook adventure series didn’t stop in Eure-et-Loir but traveled to remote regions in Italy, China, Russia and the Middle East. The 27 volumes that comprise the *Foods of the World* series are now classic pieces of culinary history, celebrated as much for their illustrious contributors as for their penchant for self-parody.

The bimonthly series started publishing in 1968, at a time in postwar America when a taste for the “exotic”—and in general, an interest in parts of the world outside the confines of the US—was expansive. The series offered an opportunity to learn how to cook delicious international fare while congratulating oneself on one’s worldly sophistication.

By September of 1968, the series had 500,000 subscribers. Writing in an issue of *New York* magazine, however, Nora Ephron revealed that, at least to its editors, *Foods of the World* was no more than an inside joke. Author Nika Hazelton worked on the project merely for the money, and M.F.K. Fisher said she wrote *The Cooking*

of Provincial France for the free trip to France.

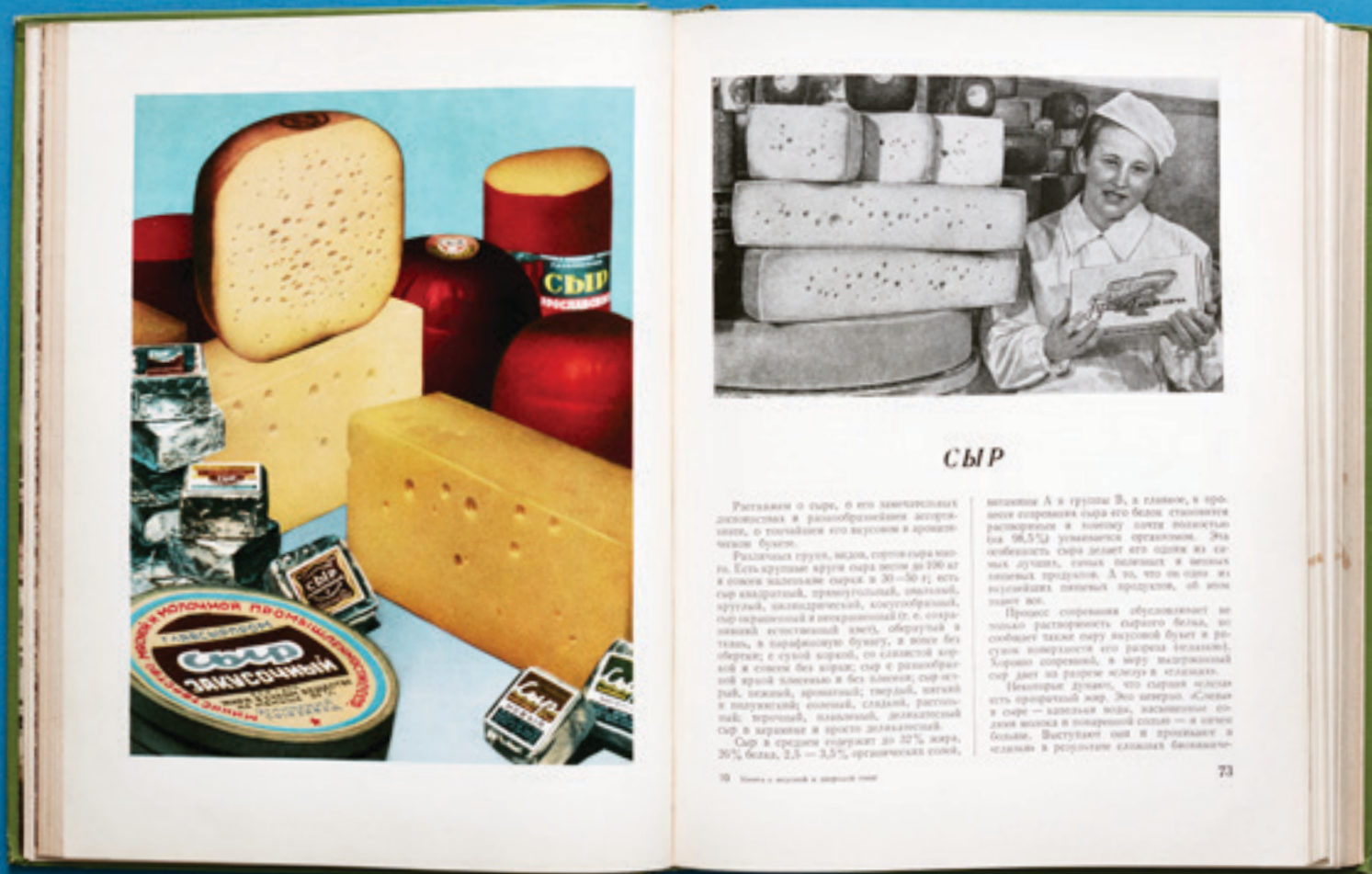
Regardless, Ephron noted, the cookbooks managed to include “nearly everyone who [was] anyone in the food world”—including Julia Child, Waverly Root and James Beard. Given that the contributors were established food writers, the subscribers didn’t seem to care “one whit whether the soufflé on the cover [was] actually a meringue.”

Today, the books are collectors’ items. Jim Leff, founder of Chowhound, refers to the series as “miraculous,” calling its volumes “legendary tomes penned by top reporters pampered with uncommon time, budget and editing.” Ruth Reichl, former editor-in-chief of *Gourmet*, says the series “opened up whole new worlds” for her.

Renowned Swedish chef Magnus Nilsson has also read every book in the collection and calls *The Cooking of Scandinavia* “a masterpiece.” Nilsson ordered hundreds of books on Scandinavia while writing and photographing *The Nordic Cookbook*, but says that Time-Life’s shone for its accuracy and detail.

“It’s clear that the author went to Scandinavia. He spent a serious amount of time trying to understand the food culture of the region so that he could offer a thorough explanation for non-Scandinavians,” Nilsson says. “It sounds mundane, but think about it—how many books about food are actually made that way? Not many. That’s why they still hold up.”





The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food

First published in 1939, *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* is a narrative of Soviet culinary history, replete with overflowing caviar tins, mounds of cheese and carefully decorated pastries.

The book is the work of Anatas Ivanovich Mikoyan, an Armenian politician who was appointed as the Soviet People's Commissar of the Food Industry during the 1930s. Upon stepping into his new job, Mikoyan set off for the United States, where he scoured food plants, cafeterias and department stores for inspiration. When he returned to Moscow, he enthusiastically introduced prepackaged *kornfleks*, ketchup and frozen treats not unlike American Klondike bars or Drumstick cones to the Soviet people.

"Food anchored the domestic realities of our totalitarian state, supplying a shimmer of desire to a life that was mostly drab, sometimes absurdly comical, on occasion unbearably tragic, but just as often naively optimistic and joyous," Anya von Bremzen writes in her memoir, *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking*. "Food, as one

academic has noted, defined how Russians endured the present, imagined the future and connected to their past."

Over time, *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* became known simply as *Kniga* or *The Book*. More than eight million copies have been printed and over a dozen different iterations have been released, generally in accordance with Soviet regime changes. Of these, which vary in both physical appearance and political commentary, the 1952 edition is the best known (though it was replaced only one year later with a version absent of any Stalin references). In 2012, an English translation provided those outside the former USSR with an opportunity to attempt *vareniki* (Ukrainian dumplings) or *rassolnik* (a Russian soup with pickles).

Despite its many manifestations, the recipes have remained mostly unchanged. Some are modest, like cabbage salads and straightforward soups. Others—suckling pig in aspic with a horseradish sauce—offer a dreamlike vision of the supposed fruits of

communism. Noting the importance of variety, the book ignores the USSR's limited supplies and intense rationing: "Not all housewives take the time and effort to make a plan for food preparation in advance. Mostly they only have around 10 or 12 dishes that they alternate throughout the years, and the family receives monotonous meals... Borscht, shchi, cutlets will appear more delicious if they appear on the menu once every ten days, or every week, at most." Seasonal sample menus each consist of a three-course dinner and dessert.

For those who grew up eating *pelmeni* (dumplings) and borscht, the book and its recipes are bathed in nostalgia. Although a piece of propaganda (lavish dinner spreads featuring Champagne and oysters were few and far between), it became, and in many instances remains, a mainstay for residents of the former Eastern Bloc. It is what von Bremzen calls "a totalitarian *Joy of Cooking*—a kitchen bible so cherished, people lugged it with them even as they fled the State that published it."