

Forget Fruitcake

This year's food books are much tastier BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

Chances are good either you or someone near and dear has at least some interest in food and related literature. Someone has to make dinner, right? Someone has a beaten-up copy of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* lovingly placed on a shelf. And someone else secretly dreams of being a chef. From Scotland to Italy, the Northwest to Japan, here are a few foodie books that just beg to be drooled over.

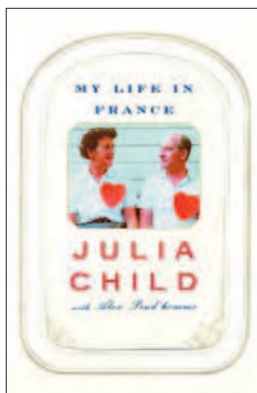
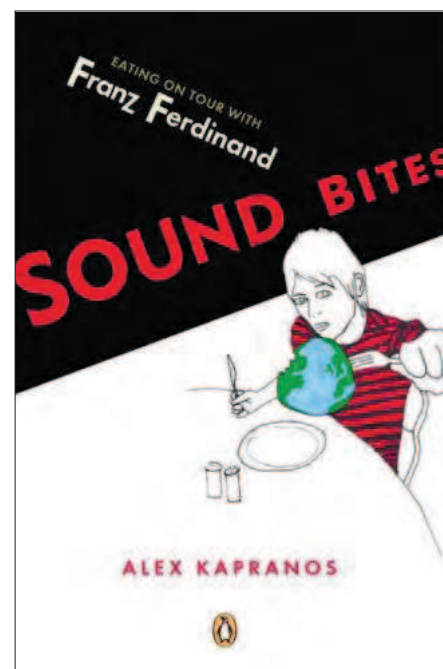
One place to start is with the master: Julia Child's *My Life in France* (written with Alex Prud'homme) explores Child's awakening to French food. "What's a shallot?" the young Julia asks early on; a hundred pages later, she's "eager to put the finishing touches on my own recipes and to start teaching." Full of photos and memories, it's a lovely companion to Child's cookbooks.

For something with a wandering spirit, try Alex Kapranos' *Sound Bites: Eating on Tour with Franz Ferdinand*. No, not the dead duke, the Scottish dance-rock band, of which Kapranos is the singer. He's also a contributor to the U.K. *Guardian*, where some of these snippets were previously published. Kapranos' stories are as much about the company and the setting as the food. They're compact, observant narratives about eating all over the world, as much fun for travelers as rock fans.

Speaking of traveling, one of the best-reviewed nonfiction titles of the year is Bill Buford's *Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany*. That's a mouthful. Buford, a former fiction editor at *The New Yorker*, found himself wondering what life would be like if he worked in a professional kitchen. So he went to work in the Manhattan kitchen of Babbo, owned by name-brand chef Mario Batali. But the restaurant wasn't enough, and eventually Buford headed to Italy, learning from the source. "There is something here for everyone," said *The New York Times Book Review*, noting that the plot "clips along" but includes a wealth of information on the way.

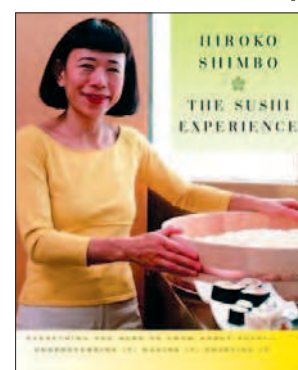
If you'd like to go a bit slower, perhaps James and Kay Salter's *Life is Meals: A Book of Days* is the right tempo. This thick-page, exquisite little book has a story for every day, from a commentary on peanut butter to a list of a kitchen's barest necessities to the menu on the *Titanic* on that fateful April 14. A reader could sample one piece a day, or gulp them down all at once - it'd taste good either way.

Things that a lot of folks might not think taste good are among the subjects in the always-enter-



taining Anthony Bourdain's *The Nasty Bits*, which collects short pieces of the author-chef-adventurer's writing, including a wild ride through the Las Vegas outposts of various celebrity chefs.

For those who would rather cook than read about cooking - well, how about both? Kathy Casey's *Northwest Table* offers 100 recipes mixed in with tales from the author's culinary adventures and notes on some of the region's particular edible offerings. Just browsing this gorgeously photographed book is enough to start a person drooling. The same goes for Claudia Rosen's *Arabesque: A Taste of Morocco, Turkey, and Lebanon*.



Surprisingly simple recipes for flavorful Middle Eastern dishes from the familiar (couscous, hummus) to the somewhat more challenging (tagine of knuckle of veal) abound. Get this one for that friend who always wants to go to Irlaia or Casablanca.

Also gorgeous and glossy is the *Esalen Cookbook*, the product of California's Esalen Institute ("devoted to the exploration of human potential"), which offers "healthy and organic recipes from Big Sur." On the more casual side, Margaret S. Fox and John B. Bear's *Morning Food: Breakfasts, Brunches and More for Savoring the Best Part of the Day* is awfully perky about morning, but irresistibly so. "The simplest breakfast dish comes out tasting like nothing you've ever experienced before," the *San Francisco Chronicle* raved.

And then there's Hiroko Shimbo's *The Sushi Experience*. Hefty and bursting with information, this is a veritable bible of sushi. It's not as pretty as some of the other books (pastel pages?) but it includes *everything*: the history of sushi, female sushi chefs, sushi today, sushi etiquette and (of course) sushi recipes, many of which have their own backstories. Just the ingredient lists can be intimidating, but hey, if you've got sushi lovers on your shopping list, they're bound to find something new in this massive tome.

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