

# AN EDIBLE EDUCATION

*French chef Daniel de La Falaise and American culinary icon*

*Alice Waters discuss her Californian food revolution*

● I aimed to arrive early, and I did. It had been a beautiful drive across the bay up to the Berkeley Hills. I parked, fed the meter and sat awhile. Live oaks and Meyer lemons lined the street. Lemons by the ton. Berkeley is a forager's paradise, an edible city. At politely past the anointed hour, I plucked up courage, made my way towards the house, ascended the steps, crossed the veranda, and rang the bell. "Alice is expecting you," said Miss Love as she signaled on through the kitchen to the open fire burning in the dining room beyond. "She's all yours," she added with a smile and was gone. I continued towards the view. An urban country-escape of rolling hills and autumn leaves framed by a redwood in the garden below. And suddenly there I was, alone, with Alice Waters.

"Tisane?" she sang. And she was up and off and out of the door, scissors to hand, skipping down the garden to pick herbs for tea—just as I would do if she were to visit me and this put me at ease. We picked mint and sage—a happy combination both cleansing and stimulating—and nibbled lovage, sorrel, and parsleys of various maturity as we dodged the rain. Her melodic voice delivered flurries of thoughts gently in waves. A copper kettle was put to boil, another log thrown onto the fire, and so we sat.

Alice Waters is an iconoclast. Her mission: edible education and sustainable agriculture. When told, "No", her resolve is a commendable "Oh, yes, you'll see". And calmly she proceeds. From kitchen to garden, from school to university, on to the Elysée Palace and the White House. Born on the East Coast, California has been her home since the early 1960s. She is one of those rare people whose capacity to share transcends limits. Her weapon is persuasion. She is a chef, an author, a food activist, and a restaurateur.

Chez Panisse in Berkeley California opened in 1971 and is arguably America's finest restaurant. All those on her payroll are employed three days a week—though paid for five—which provides them ample time for life and presence of mind. Generations of cooks have honed their slow food values under Alice's mentorship. Many have gone on to create satellites of their own around the world. In 1995 she founded the Edible Schoolyard, a project which advocates for a free school lunch for all children and a sustainable food curriculum in every public school. She received the French Legion d'Honneur in 2010. She has been Vice President of Slow Food International since 2002 and was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama in 2015.

My mother cared about health. Though she didn't know what that meant!

*Did she garden?*

Yes, she gardened, as did my father. We had what was known as a Victory Garden—Roosevelt had encouraged families to tend their own vegetable gardens during the war. My mother was trying to handle four children and my father worked hard—and late. He'd get home at seven o'clock and we'd all sit together at table and eat dinner. That is what we did. My favorite season was the summer; its abundance of produce: the tomatoes, the corn. There were strawberries to graze on, and petit-pois. When I cast my mind back to my childhood references, it dawns on me that it is as if I were pre-destined to follow the path I have.

*To feed people? Was it ever a conscious idea? Was to run a restaurant and feed people something you dreamt of doing as a young girl? Was food always going to be your subject?*

No, no, no. I never thought of it that way. Although I liked and disliked food.

*A picky eater? How did that manifest?*

"I will not eat that, but I will eat this!"

*Was that sensory discernment? A question of taste, texture, flavor?*

Yes. I think it was about taste because I ended up wanting to go to friends' houses whose parents were very good cooks! And I also loved to be hands-on in the kitchen and to get the bread out of the oven. I think it was a mixture of sensual life and taste. It was both. It was not until I went to France that I was awakened. That was during my junior year in college.

*Which year?*

1965.

*So things were still unspoiled.*

It was a slow food culture. Kids came home from school for a two-hour lunch. There were two farmers' markets: one in the morning, another in the afternoon.

*So you would have visited the old Les Halles market in the center of Paris? I was born the year it was torn down in an act of state-sponsored vandalism. Paris is as an amputee without it.*

Yes, I went to Les Halles. It was really something. I have always thought that when they moved the market down to the airport that they gave priority to the international vendors.

*Yes.*

They prioritized storage and refrigeration so that produce could be sold when the price was right, and all of that. I learned also recently on a tour of Rungis with a Frenchman conducting a social research project, that the old Les Halles provided a safety net for the people who were very poor, the hungry, who would glean the leftovers of the day.

*I have always been fascinated by the setting up and breaking down of food markets. I grew up with them. A town twenty minutes from our farm in southwest France has what is perhaps the finest independent producer market in the country. Twenty or so years ago a group of producers bound together and formed a syndicate. They collected themselves and stood up to the force*

*of so-called progress that was being pushed by the predictably corrupt local town council. Anyway they prevailed, and the lime tree lined Esplanade of Montauban is reserved for them twice weekly. Little old ladies with half a dozen eggs, an eclectic bunch all laden with their own plenty. There is the stockbreeder who sells his veal and his beef. There is the peach family, the cheese family, the this, the that, the meticulous Dutchman, monsieur foie gras, mademoiselle miel...*

And are they all profitable? Do they make a good enough living?

*Yes, at a family scale. They live the life that they know, the life that they aspire to live. They manage to afford that. Family scale production allows them a quality of life, which although at times is undoubtedly hard, is nevertheless essentially an autonomous and rich life. These people are however a dwindling breed, a noble minority. A sensory bastion of flavor, texture, and taste.*

Yes.

*Montauban is an exception. Most local food markets are in free fall, and the vitality and integrity of the produce on offer is polluted by the generic wares of wholesalers. Independent farmers have been edged out by town councils. Spineless petty officials have surrendered town planning all too easily to the advances of supermarkets and fast food chains. What I notice here in Northern California on a more encouraging note is a strong movement of young educated organic producers.*

Yes, there are. And they are approaching farming differently. They are collaborating with their friends and peers, not necessarily with their family. They are bringing me out to the farms, rather than bringing the vegetables in. What they are doing is so interesting. It feels like the culture is coming to agriculture. You do not have to be the husband, or the wife, toiling twenty-four seven to make a living. These are people trying to please themselves, people following a vision, and educating their customers all while making a living. The paradigm is changing, slowly.

*When you reference your "awakening" in France in 1965, do you refer to a sensory awakening?*

Yes, and more. It was the whole culture of France. I was nineteen. I was a student and I had privileges everywhere I went. I got discounts; there were concerts; museums were free. I felt that there was a kind of beauty all around that I had access to. All the gardens—I was really struck by the gardens. France was revelatory to me.

*So did you start to cook, and engage with the markets?*

Yes, very tentatively. Though we ate mostly in little neighborhood restaurants that served students, maybe thirty or forty people, a plat du jour. A little bar in front. Very simple cooking. And I fell in love with that. When I came back to America, I wanted to live like the French—and I wanted to feed people.

*Was it clear to you that this was going to happen in California?*

There was no question about my coming back to Berkeley. I wanted to live in a place of shared values. I finished school when I came back, then went for a year to London, in sixty-eight. On that trip I learnt to teach the Montessori Method. And that summer I went on to Turkey and to Greece for three months where I learned something terribly important about hospitality.

*What was it that you learnt?*

People gave me things without ever expecting anything in return.

*That is beautiful.*

Nothing! Not even a thank you. Nothing. And I aspired to that.

*Such elegance.*

They gave me all that they had. They gave me walnuts, but the walnuts were all dried up inside, but it was what they had. One time, somebody lifted up the top of our tent in the field where we had pitched and just slipped in a cup of goats' milk.

*Peasant hospitality.*

So when I thought of opening Chez Panisse it was inevitable that a lot of these experiences would color what I did.

*So California, and more specifically Berkeley, was, and was always going to be, home?*

I felt like I belonged. Berkeley was always the Republic of Berkeley, in a country that was doing things immoral in your name. We became part of a counter culture movement. It is about shared values. And I think that has existed here ever since that time. And now, certainly, it is more important than ever that we express ourselves. It is how I came to get involved in edible education.

*Edible education?*

I always have imagined food to be the answer. The way to solve problems is through food. Problems of health, poverty, global warming, and wars. An edible education is to teach children the essential values of sustainability, nourishment, and communication. I believe that the whole world has to be educated. Every decision we make is a very political decision. If we change the way we eat, we will have tremendous effect. We should all be able to cook. Finding ingredients is eighty-five to ninety percent of cooking, but it is easy to cook. Eating local products, eating seasonally, eating with friends and family, taking care of the land for the future, celebrating the harvest: this has been a philosophy of the past and has been part of civilisation since the beginning of time. Going back to the kids—they are the ones! It is about awakening the senses.

*Awakening the senses?*

Because those are the pathways into the mind. Maria Montessori always believed that the hand was the instrument of the mind. She believed in handwork. An interactive education. She would never punish kids because they were doing the wrong thing. She would just create something over there that was really interesting. And they would come over and they would evolve. So I always think of that place, of seduction...

*Through the senses.*

Yes... by trying to get people to use their olfactory sense. I am trying to figure out a way to bring food into the schools. And I think the way to do it is by connecting it to academia. We are studying the Silk Road and we are serving the food of the Silk Road. So: the lentil soup, the chapatti, the raita. We put this on the table and discuss ingredients: what they are and where they are from, how they travelled, and were traded. And soon, this free sustainable school lunch becomes a history class.

*Learning with the senses.*

I am convinced that what we need to do is provide for everyone a free, sustainable school lunch. If schools support art and communities support agriculture, then we may move away from the madness of the present system.

*Of central kitchens confecting school, hospital, and prison lunches, prepared and ferried out indiscriminately.*

It's madness. Children need all organic, all local, all year around.

*How did the Edible Schoolyard come to be?*

I saw a run-down school in my neighborhood and thought: I must do something to make this place more beautiful. It began twenty years ago in Berkeley at the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School. It began as a garden to be farmed by students and a kitchen classroom where the products of their labor would, under the tutelage of a cooking teacher, become a shared meal. Today, those activities are woven into all aspects of the school's curriculum, from math to history and science. Our experiences there have helped us develop an edible education curriculum we hope to eventually implement in every school nationwide. Gardens and kitchen have the potential to be interactive classrooms, just as the table has the potential to be an incubator of ideas. The more beautiful and real the food, the richer the thought and the more fertile the dialogue

*What is a typical school meal? What is on the plate?*

It is mostly vegetarian. Always with salad, always with whole grains. It is food that can be made anywhere, in France, in Africa. It is using the affordable vegetables and preparing them simply.

*Don't people demand meat?*

Yes, but again, you do not say, "Do not eat meat!" You just serve food that does not have it in it. And you do not miss it, if it is tasty food. Delicious food is easy to love. You go into the place of making something just so much better. The kids at the beginning of the edible schoolyard, would say, "Well why can't we have meat?" And we'd say, "We just can't afford that in the school right now." It was not possible for us to do it. And within three weeks the kids completely accepted it because what they were making was much tastier. It is amazing how they fall in love. And this is mostly peasant food from around the world. Really, it is what is affordable. It is beans, and whole grains, and lots of vegetables, and fruits, and nuts.

*When you discovered France, was this the kind of food you gravitated towards? Seasonal, local market food? Bistro food rather than the high and fancy food, the toques and cloches, that France derives so much of its culinary persona from?*

Yes, absolutely. I loved the fixed-price menu. Which is why I adopted this at Chez Panisse. I loved being offered something that I had never tasted before and then falling in love with it. So I would have the soup, and the plat du jour, and then the salad. That is where I got my love of salad. And a cheese, then a fruit for dessert. It was hardly ever chocolate—rather a piece of fruit.

*There is always something at the top of its game. I love the fruit bowl you serve at Chez Panisse. So elegant. A bowl of fruit. A taste of season's plenty to conclude a meal.*

Yes, we are serving dates and citrus already [early December]. Persimmon and walnuts.

*What do you make of the alarming number of people, including the baby boomers and elderly who have no idea how to cook?*

That's right. It is extraordinary. I think that is the biggest impediment to change right now. We have to feel empowered to cook again. It is much more difficult to come back to in the United States because we never had deep agricultural or gastronomic roots. We always were growing food for quantity, not for varietals, or taste or anything like that. Dinner was meant to fill the body, and not the mind! And so when fast food came in, the culture just changed, and took us with it. We just digested the values of the fast food culture.

*It is as if people have strayed so far out that there no longer remains any relationship to the source.*

Yes, and we may not be able to get it back. We are so addicted to technology that we are becoming robotic. We are changing. If we do not bring the children back to nature, I do not know what is going to happen. We are really in danger. I mean, Trump is the epitome of "you are what you eat." As Brillat-Savarin said, "the destiny of nations depends on how we nourish ourselves." And that is what I have seen happen. We have digested the values of fast, cheap, and easy. More is better, and the same no matter where you are. That it doesn't matter what season it is, that cooking is drudgery, so is farming. Don't bother! Let us bring it to you.

*Bleak.*

That advertising confers value! That food should be cheap; when it has always been something precious and now it should be cheap? It cannot be cheap. When something is cheap somebody has not been paid and usually it is the farmer. So it's that. That it is okay to eat in your car. Eighty-five per cent of the kids in this country do not eat one meal a day with their family.

*Lonely.*

It is happening. Everywhere there is fast food, this is happening.

*In France there is now a MacDonald's at the entrance to most towns. There are fifteen hundred or so already in France. They are partners in deceit with the super-market chains.*

And they pretend. Like they are *ze*-real-bakery-you-know! You have to admit that it is a big problem. I think the school system is aware of the obesity epidemic. But the French! They could really do this in their schools and introduce an edible education curriculum. When I think of the issue that is immigration—what a beautiful way it would be to teach kids to love cultural diversity. Begin in schools.

*So the first seed was sown here in Berkeley? Are there other schoolyards embracing the project?*

To date, we have collected fifty-five hundred Edible Schoolyards around the world. It's amazing, it multiplying exponentially.

*Forest fire!*

Forest fire! It is like slow food, Terra Madre. I was just in Torino for the biannual Slow Food Fair. A summit conference for our Mother Earth's most responsible stewards, whose boundaries transcend boundaries of all kinds. They put it in the streets of Torino. They opened up all of Torino. There were one hundred thousand people in the

streets. People meeting people. One hundred fifty-six countries represented. Growers and makers. So, that was beautiful. And I met there two very big, radical French men. I have admired them from afar, but had never met them.

*Who?*

José Bové.

*The king of the peasants!*

He who ran his tractor into a fast food restaurant. And Olivier Roellinger from Brittany. He has a three-star restaurant. He is amazing. Between the two of them, they reminded me how first I fell in love with France. Where it all began. And Paris, where the papers for Slow Food were signed in the beginning. And of course, it is where I began too. And yet, the slowest growth of the movement is in France.

*Interesting. Why so, do you think?*

Well, you have to admit there is an issue in order to make change.

*When you came back from your awakening in France, the bridge to starting to cook, how did that come about? One of the things I have always admired about your cookery is its economy of transformation.*

I started to cook with the help of French cookbooks. Elizabeth David and Julia Child, who like me had gone to France. They were older than I was. And Elizabeth David was such an incredible writer. I started trying to cook from their cookbooks.

*Did you meet Elizabeth David?*

I knew them both. Luckily I did. It was just cooking from home, feeding my friends. And then I said, "Hang on this is crazy. I am spending all my money. Why don't I just open a restaurant and then they can pay for it! And I can make a living doing what I want to do."

*How did you happen upon the site of Chez Panisse?*

In Bolinas, right next to what now is the People's Store, there is an old Victorian house. Well, that used to be a restaurant called the Gibson House. I went to the restaurant in that house and I thought, "Well, this, it feels like I am eating at home". And so when a house became available, right in my neighborhood, we took it.

*What was Bolinas like then?*

Oh Bolinas...

*Dreamy?*

It was where everybody kind of dropped out. From the east coast and from the west coast. And it was just so unbelievably affordable.

*Affordable?*

Affordable!

*How has Berkeley evolved through the years you have been here?*

We have always been very lucky in that we have the university. It is culturally a very rich place. We have a school initiative to make student bodies diverse. We all need to grow up with people that are very different from ourselves to live on this planet together.

*Which is being demonstrated as a less than straightforward prospect with the waves of populism we are witness to: Brexit and Trump.*

I know... integrated schools would help. What is going on is that we have an unhappy and uneducated public. Again, because it the fast food culture that is telling them, "Just make money. If you make enough money, you can be happy!" And of course nine out of ten people are left out of that.

*How do you think the rest of America looks at California?*

They always say: it happens in California first, and then around the country.

*So that says something about the people that gravitate towards California?*

Yes. Both about the people that are here and about the people that want to come here. We are, of course, very blessed with the climate. But it is not just the climate. I put a lot of it down to the University of California, bringing in people from all over the world. A lot of people come into the restaurant from the university, and a lot of the students work there. And it is what keeps the restaurant alive. Young people who embrace the philosophy and take it home with them. And after university they use that in their daily lives, perhaps opening a business. It is amazing how many people have gone through the restaurant that way, and come back to it.

*Like a school, a place of sharing, of learning.*

I would like to think of it kind of like a school. It is a philosophy of food. But it has been around since the beginning of time. You take care of the land: that is where the food comes from. You eat with family and friends. You celebrate the harvest. You farm organically. You include children and older people. It is what civilization is about.

*The label of California cuisine, does that mean anything?*

I love that you ask me about that because I never felt that it should be called a cuisine, because to me, a cuisine must stand the test of time. There is a French cuisine, there is a Chinese cuisine. But California? We have not had the test of time. We are cooking in California. We are learning how to cook and it is more defined by certain elements. Those being: maybe a fire? We cook outside. Maybe there are Asian elements? The seasoning and all that comes from China. In our cooking, at the restaurant, it definitely has a lot to do with cooking local organic ingredients. Salad is a very big thing for me, always. I have mesclun salad growing here out in the back yard.

*A green salad is to me one of the great daily luxuries of this world. A green salad, at least two thirds fines herbes, picked and eaten within minutes. Sparsely seasoned, a splash of vinegar, and a pinch of fleur de sel.*

I had a revelatory moment when I was invited to New York for a Playboy Magazine awards ceremony for the twenty-five best restaurants in America. It was the end of the seventies and we were voted number seven. So I went, and I decided the only thing I could do was to make a green salad. And I went to James Beard's (my friend Marion new him) and he was going to lend me a salad bowl to take to the event—because each person had to present some food. And so I brought the salad bowl, washed my lettuce, and took it over to this hotel where the event was being held. Well, first of all, I was the only woman. And I would guess that fifteen or so of the other chefs were French. And everybody brought ice sculptures and were busying themselves with quenelles. And I had a green salad.

I was so embarrassed I nearly died. Everybody came up to me and said, "What do you have?" I kept saying, "And it's in James Beard's salad bowl!" trying to justify what I had done. And then the next day there was a write-up in the New York Times and all they talked about was the green salad.

*Great story.*

Well I was empowered by that. I had brought all of the salad, still rooted in the ground, in boxes on my knee. I had been afraid to pick it until the very last minute. I brought it in beds, alive, from California to New York.

*When you opened the restaurant were people like Warren Weber on your radar?*

He was the first one. He was the head of the organic gardening association. His were the first salads we got. And then we were sort of introduced to everyone else. We soon had a forager on our staff. And his or her job was to travel around the country and find the right farmers, ranchers, producers, people we wanted to work with, to bring them to the restaurant for dinner, to write about their practices—and we would become friends.

*Every restaurant should have a forager. Indeed, every family should.*

We have probably eighty-five different people that we buy from during the course of a week. Some of them tiny, and then others like Bob Cannard at Green String who has been supplying us for forty years.

*It makes a world of difference to see the eyes of the producer.*

It is so critical.

*California! What is it? Is it dream or myth?*

I think it is synonymous with freedom, in some way. The freedom to be who you want to be.

*So it attracts a certain kind of person.*

I think it does. The freedom to experiment, at least that is the feeling that I get. That there is not exactly a way to do things. Some people go out into the woods and build a commune, and other people build a big old house in Beverly Hills. It's very diverse. For good, and for not so good.

*The Bay Area has been such a hive of activity and innovation for the last hundred and fifty years or so.* Yes, it has. Again, I keep going back to the University; it has been such an ally.

*An ally?*

Yes, in the experimenting that we are doing. And, I hope, for the good of the culture.

*There is an edible education degree course at the University, correct?*

We are doing a class; it is not quite a degree yet—although at Santa Cruz they are going to give a degree in farming which is sort of unheard of! But we are doing a class...

*So the university is the beacon.*

I think so. Education is the basis of the prosperity and health of a society.

*And Chez Panisse is the kitchen table—the incubator of ideas.*

Well, to me at least (laughter). California has such varied geography; a very diverse group of people

live here. I mean there is the Central Valley ...

*Feed lots, regimented almond orchards, as far as the eye can see... great channels of stolen water.*

It's a different world. The right-now, time is money, the faster the better world that warps our expectations. Seasons cease to matter, local culture loses relevance, unreality takes over. But then there are the foothills, the Sierras, the redwood groves, Yosemite, the national parks that are just breathtaking, and the endless freeways. California is a place of colliding. Colliding geographies as well as colliding populations. But I feel that there is some way that we find each other. The state has always been politically progressive. The people we elect...

*It's a hopeful place.*

It's a hopeful place. It is a hopeful place. And I don't know whether that is just because I have my sixties rose colored glasses on, or whether it genuinely is so. I am worried about the drought. I am worried about global warning. We have initiatives about global warming. We have to reinforce that with an edible education that teaches children from an early age to take care—that teaches children about where things come from.

*It is a luxury to know where things come from and what they can taste like. I am aware how lucky I am to have been raised by parents who were enthusiastic about celebrating the vitality of food. The key is, I think, as simple as that.*

It is as simple as that. We are competing for people's attention, big time, right now.

*People's reference to food has become disconnected. The provenance of the simplest foodstuffs has become an abstract consideration.*

And they don't know that they would love to have this, instead of that!

*Though the beauty of it all is that it's there to be found. A joyful dose of curiosity is enough. I always find the kitchen an incredibly peaceful place. The more connected you become to the natural synergies that occur between the realms of vegetable, fruit, herb, animal and spice, the more fun you have as a cook.*

I find cooking relaxing. I find washing up incredibly relaxing. That to me is therapeutic.

*And salad.*

Yes, salad.

*Herbs. Young tender leaf, bolting sprigs, flowers picked and eaten instantly. Parsley, rocket, tarragon, dill, sorrel, hyssop, lovage...*

Lovage...

*Lovage salt, confected from the dried seeds of the bolted plant, ground together with fleur de sel. Celery salt's refined cousin. Quails eggs, seasoned just so with lovage salt...*

Ooh... I just love that taste. I use the young leaves to season hamburgers for the grill. And hyssop, anise hyssop, with its little blue flowers for the accompanying salad. These are two herbs I love.

*And parsley?*

Fanny loves parsley. I am more of a chervil person. The kids at the Edible Schoolyard, they know their herbs. Shall we go and see their garden?

*And so off we went.*

THE END