Decades before the rise of artisanal olive oil, the worship of Sub-Zero refrigerators, and the collapse of the economy, the 1940s writer M.F.K. Fisher grappled with lean times by celebrating the pleasures of simple food and engaging conversation. Inspired by that message, a new generation of bon vivants are finding her to be an ideal table companion for an uncertain age.

By Katherine Sharpe
Fisher in 1910, and the young couple moved to Dijon, France, where Alfred pursued graduate studies in literature and Mary Frances undertook her own enthusiastic study of the French way of eating and living. Her marriage to Alfred Fisher didn’t last, but her appreciation of French cuisine did.

People who knew her in California remember her as a vivid personality, an adventuress, and a regal presence. In her own life, too, Mary Frances lived as she advised others to live—sometimes vigorously, and that it could be mastered even with the wolf of scarcity sniffing down by shopping at a wholesale restaurant-supply grocer, and the price range just yet, it’s not a stretch to imagine the wolf on the prowl, now that the phrase “worst economic crisis since the Great Depression” has lost its shock value.

For Gavin Krotheer, who cohosts “Umami” with Bradlow, Chloé Bass, and Carter Edwards, it seemed like an apt time to rediscover the wisdom of M.F.K. Fisher. How to Cook a Wolf is about eating in hard times, while Fisher’s emphasis on conviviality spoke to the group’s values. “Umami” is as much about food’s power to bring people together as it is about gastronomy. “Fisher’s writing is not just about cooking with scarcity,” Krotheer explains. “It’s about achieving communal poetry in times of scarcity. And that’s what we always try to do.”

At 5 p.m., the loft will open its doors to a stream of guests, who’ve each paid $15 for three courses of Fisher-inspired American food, including meatloaves glistening in tomato sauce, a tray of fisherman’s open-faced government cheese toasts to garnish tomato soup.

When preparing her own dinners for guests, she showed a special fondness for the basic dish, unremarkable in itself, that was perfectly suited to the moment. Some of her most arresting prose describes such simple gems. In How to Cook a Wolf, she remade a dish associated with wartime rationing. It’s a practical manual, offering guidance on everything from how to conserve cooking fuel by dense-packing an oven, to ingenious substitutions for butter in cakes (sacred fat will do, if the spices are vibrant enough), to how to turn 50 cents’ worth of grain and vegetables into a nutritious “sludge” that will last for a week. But, like all of Fisher’s work, How to Cook a Wolf is also about the bigger picture: Fisher believed that eating with intention and dignity was key to the art of living well—and that it could be mastered even with the wolf of scarcity snuffing at the door. And while butter may not be out of most Americans’ price range just yet, it’s not a stretch to imagine the wolf on the prowl, now that the phrase “worst economic crisis since the Great Depression” has lost its shock value.

For Gavin Krotheer, who cohosts “Umami” with Bradlow, Chloé Bass, and Carter Edwards, it seemed like an apt time to rediscover the wisdom of M.F.K. Fisher. How to Cook a Wolf is about eating in hard times, while Fisher’s emphasis on conviviality spoke to the group’s values. “Umami” is as much about food’s power to bring people together as it is about gastronomy. “Fisher’s writing is not just about coping with scarcity,” Krotheer explains. “It’s about achieving communal poetry in times of scarcity. And that’s what we always try to do.”

At 5 p.m., the loft will open its doors to a stream of guests, who’ve each paid $15 for three courses of Fisher-inspired American food, including meatloaves glistening in tomato sauce, a tray of fisherman’s open-faced government cheese toasts to garnish tomato soup.

When preparing her own dinners for guests, she showed a special fondness for the basic dish, unremarkable in itself, that was perfectly suited to the moment. Some of her most arresting prose describes such simple gems. In How to Cook a Wolf, she remade a dish associated with wartime rationing. It’s a practical manual, offering guidance on everything from how to conserve cooking fuel by dense-packing an oven, to ingenious substitutions for butter in cakes (sacred fat will do, if the spices are vibrant enough), to how to turn 50 cents’ worth of grain and vegetables into a nutritious “sludge” that will last for a week. But, like all of Fisher’s work, How to Cook a Wolf is also about the bigger picture: Fisher believed that eating with intention and dignity was key to the art of living well—and that it could be mastered even with the wolf of scarcity snuffing at the door. And while butter may not be out of most Americans’ price range just yet, it’s not a stretch to imagine the wolf on the prowl, now that the phrase “worst economic crisis since the Great Depression” has lost its shock value.

For Gavin Krotheer, who cohosts “Umami” with Bradlow, Chloé Bass, and Carter Edwards, it seemed like an apt time to rediscover the wisdom of M.F.K. Fisher. How to Cook a Wolf is about eating in hard times, while Fisher’s emphasis on conviviality spoke to the group’s values. “Umami” is as much about food’s power to bring people together as it is about gastronomy. “Fisher’s writing is not just about coping with scarcity,” Krotheer explains. “It’s about achieving communal poetry in times of scarcity. And that’s what we always try to do.”

At 5 p.m., the loft will open its doors to a stream of guests, who’ve each paid $15 for three courses of Fisher-inspired American food, including meatloaves glistening in tomato sauce, a tray of fisherman’s open-faced government cheese toasts to garnish tomato soup.

When preparing her own dinners for guests, she showed a special fondness for the basic dish, unremarkable in itself, that was perfectly suited to the moment. Some of her most arresting prose describes such simple gems. In How to Cook a Wolf, she remade a dish associated with wartime rationing. It’s a practical manual, offering guidance on everything from how to conserve cooking fuel by dense-packing an oven, to ingenious substitutions for butter in cakes (sacred fat will do, if the spices are vibrant enough), to how to turn 50 cents’ worth of grain and vegetables into a nutritious “sludge” that will last for a week. But, like all of Fisher’s work, How to Cook a Wolf is also about the bigger picture: Fisher believed that eating with intention and dignity was key to the art of living well—and that it could be mastered even with the wolf of scarcity snuffing at the door. And while butter may not be out of most Americans’ price range just yet, it’s not a stretch to imagine the wolf on the prowl, now that the phrase “worst economic crisis since the Great Depression” has lost its shock value.

For Gavin Krotheer, who cohosts “Umami” with Bradlow, Chloé Bass, and Carter Edwards, it seemed like an apt time to rediscover the wisdom of M.F.K. Fisher. How to Cook a Wolf is about eating in hard times, while Fisher’s emphasis on conviviality spoke to the group’s values. “Umami” is as much about food’s power to bring people together as it is about gastronomy. “Fisher’s writing is not just about coping with scarcity,” Krotheer explains. “It’s about achieving communal poetry in times of scarcity. And that’s what we always try to do.”

At 5 p.m., the loft will open its doors to a stream of guests, who’ve each paid $15 for three courses of Fisher-inspired American food, including meatloaves glistening in tomato sauce, a tray of fisherman’s open-faced government cheese toasts to garnish tomato soup.

When preparing her own dinners for guests, she showed a special fondness for the basic dish, unremarkable in itself, that was perfectly suited to the moment. Some of her most arresting prose describes such simple gems. In How to Cook a Wolf, she remade a dish associated with wartime rationing. It’s a practical manual, offering guidance on everything from how to conserve cooking fuel by dense-packing an oven, to ingenious substitutions for butter in cakes (sacred fat will do, if the spices are vibrant enough), to how to turn 50 cents’ worth of grain and vegetables into a nutritious “sludge” that will last for a week. But, like all of Fisher’s work, How to Cook a Wolf is also about the bigger picture: Fisher believed that eating with intention and dignity was key to the art of living well—and that it could be mastered even with the wolf of scarcity snuffing at the door. And while butter may not be out of most Americans’ price range just yet, it’s not a stretch to imagine the wolf on the prowl, now that the phrase “worst economic crisis since the Great Depression” has lost its shock value.

For Gavin Krotheer, who cohosts “Umami” with Bradlow, Chloé Bass, and Carter Edwards, it seemed like an apt time to rediscover the wisdom of M.F.K. Fisher. How to Cook a Wolf is about eating in hard times, while Fisher’s emphasis on conviviality spoke to the group’s values. “Umami” is as much about food’s power to bring people together as it is about gastronomy. “Fisher’s writing is not just about coping with scarcity,” Krotheer explains. “It’s about achieving communal poetry in times of scarcity. And that’s what we always try to do.”

At 5 p.m., the loft will open its doors to a stream of guests, who’ve each paid $15 for three courses of Fisher-inspired American food, including meatloaves glistening in tomato sauce, a tray of fisherman’s open-faced government cheese toasts to garnish tomato soup.

When preparing her own dinners for guests, she showed a special fondness for the basic dish, unremarkable in itself, that was perfectly suited to the moment. Some of her most arresting prose describes such simple gems. In How to Cook a Wolf, she remade a dish associated with wartime rationing. It’s a practical manual, offering guidance on everything from how to conserve cooking fuel by dense-packing an oven, to ingenious substitutions for butter in cakes (sacred fat will do, if the spices are vibrant enough), to how to turn 50 cents’ worth of grain and vegetables into a nutritious “sludge” that will last for a week. But, like all of Fisher’s work, How to Cook a Wolf is also about the bigger picture: Fisher believed that eating with intention and dignity was key to the art of living well—and that it could be mastered even with the wolf of scarcity snuffing at the door. And while butter may not be out of most Americans’ price range just yet, it’s not a stretch to imagine the wolf on the prowl, now that the phrase “worst economic crisis since the Great Depression” has lost its shock value.
Eggs in Hell
From How to Cook a Wolf, by M.F.K. Fisher
WARM-CHERRY-CHILI SAUCE
4 tablespoons olive oil
1 clove garlic
1 onion
2 cups tomato sauce
1 teaspoon minced mixed herbs (basil, thyme)
1 teaspoon minced parsley
8 eggs
Slice of French bread, thin, toasted
1. Heat of the saucepan that has a tight cover. Split garlic lengthwise, run a toothpick through each half, and brown slowly in it. Add the onion, minced, and cook until golden. Then add the tomato sauce and the seasonings and herbs. Cook about 15 minutes, stirring often, and then take out the garlic. 2. In this sauce beat the eggs. Spoon the sauce over them, cover, and cook very slowly until eggs are done, or about 15 minutes. (If the skillet is a heavy one, you can turn the heat off and cook in fifteen minutes with what is stored in the metal.) 3. When done, put the eggs carefully on the slices of dry toast, and cover with sauce. (Grated Parmesan cheese is good on this, if you can get any)

When Angela Stowell and her husband, chef Ethan Stowell, decided to open a restaurant in Seattle, they wanted a name that would convey unfussy sensuality. How to Cook a Wolf, in the Queen Anne neighborhood, is an intimate space decorated with unadorned copper, pine walls, and cork tables. Prices are modest, and the food is Italian with a Pacific Northwest accent. One of the restaurant’s signature appetizers is a bowl of chickpea with golden raisins, parsley, and a drizzle of vinaigrette. “It doesn’t get much more simple than that,” says Angela. The Stowells keep a few copies of Fisher’s book on hand for curious patrons; they’re happy to help spread her message of understated grace.

Another disciple, Brooklyn-based blogger Grace Meng read the book on hand for curious patrons; they’re happy to help spread her message of understated grace.

Another disciple, Brooklyn-based blogger Grace Meng, is a collection of essays on enjoying the humble pleasures of living and dining during times of dearth. Meng approached everyday challenges with joy and creativity—it’s an intimate space decorated with unadorned copper, pine walls, and cork tables. Prices are modest, and the food is Italian with a Pacific Northwest accent. One of the restaurant’s signature appetizers is a bowl of chickpea with golden raisins, parsley, and a drizzle of vinaigrette. “It doesn’t get much more simple than that,” says Angela. The Stowells keep a few copies of Fisher’s book on hand for curious patrons; they’re happy to help spread her message of understated grace.

Another disciple, Brooklyn-based blogger Grace Meng, finds Fisher a welcome antidote to the money-fueled machismo that brand Y, served with love and in good company, can be just as civilized it can be to have friends over instead of going out, and that cooking a meal for a year when many people will rediscover the pleasures of living and dining during times of dearth.

Some regard the idea with panic; others, with a cautious sense of optimism about the opportunity it affords to rethink our values. For the latter group, Fisher has become something of a prophet. She approaches everyday challenges with joy and creativity—it’s hard to imagine Alice Waters providing tips on how to improve canned cornsmö, or observing, “There are countless economical ways to prepare canned fish, and most of them take so little time that they are especially sensible for you if you work in a factory or an office.” Fisher is an ideally appealing sage for the moment. A few weeks ago I pulled How to Cook a Wolf down from my shelf. People nationwide were resolving to do more cooking at home, and I was one of them.

Some of the recipes in the book sounded revolting—most people read Fisher for her prose, her asides, and her attitude, not her grub—but there were a few I wanted to make. “Eggs in Hell” drew me in with its title and retro feel. It’s eggs cooked slowly in a rich tomato sauce, served on toast. So, one evening, I poured myself a glass of red wine. I minced onions and poured olive oil. I added a few red-poppy flakes to the recipe, because that sounded good to me (‘M.F.K. would have approved!’ I thought). I added tomatoes, cooked the sauce, and carefully broke eggs into it, spooning the sauce over them and slowly watching them whiten. I ate dinner slowly, too. I paired my entrée with sourdough toast and a green salad.

There was nothing fancy about the dish, and my grocery tab came to about $3, but I felt fortified and happy. It was the perfect meal for a year when many people will rediscover the pleasures of feeding themselves. Along the way, they may also rediscover how civilized it can be to have friends over instead of going out, and that brand X, served with love and in good company, can be just as satisfying as brand Y. Eggs in Hell, by the way, are delicious.

“Since we must eat to live, we might as well do it with both grace and gusto,” Fisher wrote in an afterword to How to Cook a Wolf. “If the skirted is a heavy one, you can turn the heat off and cook in fifteen minutes with what is stored in the metal.” When done, put the eggs carefully on the slices of dry toast, and cover with sauce. (Grated Parmesan cheese is good on this, if you can get any.)

“I never thought of her as having a thoughtful philosophy about food so much as ‘living a busy example of how to think about and somehow whatever life puts on your plate.’”

JOHN THORNE
Author of Martha White Open and Serious Pig

“Ms. magazine sent me to do a profile of her—this was in 1980, or the late ’70s—they asked me, ‘Do you know who M.F.K. Fisher is?’ and I said ‘Doesn’t everyone?’”

RUTH REICHL
editor-in-chief, Gourmet

“I’ve been a fan of Fisher’s work since I was in college. Over the years, I’ve gone back and reread her book, and it’s never disappointing.”

AMANDA HESSER
former food columnist, Blue Hill

“I’ve been a fan of Fisher’s work since I was in college. Over the years, I’ve gone back and reread her book, and it’s never disappointing.”

AMANDA HESSER
former food columnist, Blue Hill

“I read The Gastronomical Me when I was in college. It all felt so romantic, so heartbreakingly lovely, and so inspiring, so tough times like these, it is immensely soothing to read about simple pleasures—a perfectly cooked fish, a good glass of wine—and I wonder if the queen of that department. Her writing offers both an escape to another time and place, and a reminder that my life right now, if I choose to be mindful about it, can be very, very good.”

MOLLY WIZENBERG
blogger, orangette.com

“When Angela Stowell and her husband, chef Ethan Stowell, decided to open a restaurant in Seattle, they wanted a name that would convey unfussy sensuality. How to Cook a Wolf, in the Queen Anne neighborhood, is an intimate space decorated with unadorned copper, pine walls, and cork tables. Prices are modest, and the food is Italian with a Pacific Northwest accent. One of the restaurant’s signature appetizers is a bowl of chickpea with golden raisins, parsley, and a drizzle of vinaigrette. “It doesn’t get much more simple than that,” says Angela. The Stowells keep a few copies of Fisher’s book on hand for curious patrons; they’re happy to help spread her message of understated grace.

Another disciple, Brooklyn-based blogger Grace Meng, finds Fisher a welcome antidote to the money-fueled machismo that brand X, served with love and in good company, can be just as civilized it can be to have friends over instead of going out, and that cooking a meal for a year when many people will rediscover the pleasures of living and dining during times of dearth.

Some of the recipes in the book sounded revolting—most people read Fisher for her prose, her asides, and her attitude, not her grub—but there were a few I wanted to make. “Eggs in Hell” drew me in with its title and retro feel. It’s eggs cooked slowly in a rich tomato sauce, served on toast. So, one evening, I poured myself a glass of red wine. I minced onions and poured olive oil. I added a few red-poppy flakes to the recipe, because that sounded good to me (‘M.F.K. would have approved!’ I thought). I added tomatoes, cooked the sauce, and carefully broke eggs into it, spooning the sauce over them and slowly watching them whiten. I ate dinner slowly, too. I paired my entrée with sourdough toast and a green salad.

There was nothing fancy about the dish, and my grocery tab came to about $3, but I felt fortified and happy. It was the perfect meal for a year when many people will rediscover the pleasures of feeding themselves. Along the way, they may also rediscover how civilized it can be to have friends over instead of going out, and that brand X, served with love and in good company, can be just as satisfying as brand Y. Eggs in Hell, by the way, are delicious.

“Since we must eat to live, we might as well do it with both grace and gusto,” Fisher wrote in an afterword to How to Cook a Wolf. “If the skirted is a heavy one, you can turn the heat off and cook in fifteen minutes with what is stored in the metal.” When done, put the eggs carefully on the slices of dry toast, and cover with sauce. (Grated Parmesan cheese is good on this, if you can get any.)

“I never thought of her as having a thoughtful philosophy about food so much as ‘living a busy example of how to think about and somehow whatever life puts on your plate.’”

JOHN THORNE
Author of Martha White Open and Serious Pig

“Ms. magazine sent me to do a profile of her—this was in 1980, or the late ’70s—they asked me, ‘Do you know who M.F.K. Fisher is?’ and I said ‘Doesn’t everyone?’”

RUTH REICHL
editor-in-chief, Gourmet

“I’ve been a fan of Fisher’s work since I was in college. Over the years, I’ve gone back and reread her book, and it’s never disappointing.”

AMANDA HESSER
former food columnist, Blue Hill

“I’ve been a fan of Fisher’s work since I was in college. Over the years, I’ve gone back and reread her book, and it’s never disappointing.”

AMANDA HESSER
former food columnist, Blue Hill

“I read The Gastronomical Me when I was in college. It all felt so romantic, so heartbreakingly lovely, and so inspiring, so tough times like these, it is immensely soothing to read about simple pleasures—a perfectly cooked fish, a good glass of wine—and I wonder if the queen of that department. Her writing offers both an escape to another time and place, and a reminder that my life right now, if I choose to be mindful about it, can be very, very good.”

MOLLY WIZENBERG
blogger, orangette.com