Edna Lewis: At the Table with an American Original

Sara B. Franklin, Editor
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Edna Lewis earned a reputation as a groundbreaking chef, both for excelling as an African American woman in the New York restaurant scene and for her work popularizing Southern cooking through cookbooks like The Taste of Country Cooking. Lewis and her impact are celebrated in Edna Lewis: At the Table with an American Original, which will appeal to her fans and provide an introduction to her work for those who are unfamiliar.

The book, edited by Sara B. Franklin, gathers contributions from various well-known cooking personalities, including chef Alice Waters, cookbook author Deborah Madison, and Washington Post dining editor Joe Yonan. Some talk about personal experiences with Lewis, eating at her restaurant, or using her cookbooks. Several include Lewis-inspired recipes for dishes such as blackberry cobbler, benne seed wafers, or Dungeness crab chowder with fennel, Jerusalem artichokes, and chives.

Other essays focus on larger themes. Michael Twitty considers the history of Freetown, Virginia, a town founded by former slaves, where Lewis grew up; he links the foods she championed to the area’s culture. Megan Elias discusses Lewis as an “African-American cultural historian,” showing how she strove to break stereotypes about Southern and African American cooking and culture, and how she gained culinary credibility for foods previously dismissed in gourmet circles. An essay near the front of the book by Jane Lear thankfully quotes Lewis extensively, ensuring that her own voice comes through. Lewis’s sister and niece also contribute to the collection, adding more personal stories alongside the critical analysis and fandom.

By combining so many perspectives about her life and her cuisine, Edna Lewis: At the Table with an American Original doubles as an effective biography and a tribute from her range of acolytes.

JEFF FLEISCHER (March/April 2018)

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