

How to Eat a Book

A Gastronomer's Guide to the Classics

by Brian G. Daigle and Thaddeaus J. Swart



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Introduction

Welcome to the Classics

When a thematic cookbook hits the shelves, it cannot help but feel farcical, kitschy. It is often aimed at market trends and demographic fads. It may be promoted by big name celebrity chefs or mediocre celebrities trying to push their brand into a new sales bracket. If that is the reader's hope with this current book, we have failed you. Our celebrity stardom goes only so far as our reputation amidst our middle school students: don't ask them on test days. Likewise, we have no brand. There are no commercial sponsors or blockbuster movie agencies supporting this project. There are no politicians approving this message. For that, we are thankful.

Our convictions on both classical literature and food are bigger than Hollywood. Like the classics, they are deeper. This book is anything but farcical, anything but focused on market trends. If a thematic cookbook is put forth in hopes that the food and specific theme are taken seriously, the authors must be tethered to something bigger than themselves, bigger than modern literary awards. With this book we have aimed higher, because this is where the classics have pointed us. This cookbook came from three convictions: 1) the classics are top shelf, 2) the classics are communal, and 3) the classics deserve the table.

First, like good alcohol, the classics are top shelf. This is no mere matter of taste; it is tried and true. This is not dependent on marketing strategy or branding; the customer in this case is not always right. The classics are inherently superior, universally attractive, because they are exceptionally common. They actually taste better than the off-brands. They are memorable. And they are worth every investment one has to make in order to taste and see the classics are good. Ordering in cases doesn't diminish their value. If they belong at frat parties or AA meetings, their purpose is to turn boys into men. They can be abused: misused, misappropriated, and cheapened. Still, they are worth defending.

But what are the classics, and what makes a classic? In short, the classics are those pieces of literature which reach beyond their author, beyond their time, and beyond their audience. They are old, which is one reason why our current culture won't have much to do with them. While being old, they are eerily new, relevant and present. The classics point to something bigger than themselves, and when handled rightly they succeed in bringing the reader there. As Louise Cowan states in the introduction to *Invitation to the Classics*, "[The classics] have been tried and tested and deemed valuable for the general culture – the way in which people live their lives. They have been found to enhance and elevate the consciousness of all sorts and conditions of people who study them, to lift their readers out of narrowness or provincialism into a wider vision of humanity. Further, they guard the truths of the human heart from the faddish half-truths of the day by straightening the mind and imagination and enabling the readers to judge for themselves. In a word, they lead those who will follow into a perception of the fullness and complexity of reality." In our most base experience of the classics, they arouse gratitude: gratitude for literature, for language, for knowledge, for story, for God, for home, for life, for being. In his introduction to Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, C.S. Lewis

promoted the classics this way: “The simplest student will be able to understand, if not all, yet a very great deal of what Plato said; but hardly anyone can understand some modern books on Platonism. It has always therefore been one of my main endeavours as a teacher to persuade the young that first-hand knowledge is not only more worth acquiring than second-hand knowledge, but is usually much easier and more delightful to acquire.”

There is a second conviction from which this book came: the classics, like all good meals, are made to be enjoyed in the presence of many, in community. Since the classics arouse gratitude, and since gratitude by definition is communal, the classics push us to others. They bring us at least to our fellow man, to know the similarities and differences between us and every other human around us. They then guide us to earlier times, times when man had a different view, perhaps a better one. They call us into our own time, to understand, criticize, and build. They ask us to consider why it is man cannot live on bread alone but must rather be nourished by truth, goodness, and beauty. The classics finally require us to consider what kind of future we ought to work toward. What kind of character am I? What kind of life is worth living? What kind of cities are worth building? What kind of community is worth growing? It is worth noting here - in a cookbook about classical literature, inevitably replete with clever culinary metaphors - we agree with Os Guinness: we are custodians of the classics, not cannibals. “...we stand against the ‘cannibals’ - those who go too far in treating literature and art as commodities to be consumed.”¹ Like the classics, this cookbook is not about communication, commerce, or candied consumerism; it is about community.

Classical literature forms not from the individual need of one author, but the collective need of all humanity. In *The Iliad* we smell death. In *The Odyssey*, we consider the comedic nature of home and the powerful justice required for domestic peace. Virgil’s Aeneas asks us to see that the hero is likewise a statesman; our greatest virtues are ultimately political. The Norse skalds and Anglo Saxon scopos show us why society requires brotherhood, probing us to consider what kinds of leaders are necessary for good communities. Chaucer makes us pilgrims, together. Dante presents a hell worth living against and a heaven worth dying for. Shakespeare gives us the city and the forest, and makes us see the movement of grace in a fallen world. All these come from and point to community.

Finally, this cookbook comes from the conviction that the classics deserve the table, not just a place at the table. The classics do not only need to be recovered, renewed, and re-chewed; they need to be reborn, given a life by which our lives may be rightly measured. Of all modern education’s blunders, one stands at the center of its hubris, the root and fruit of its growth: it has isolated modern man. It cuts modern man off from former times. It makes man self-contained, the worst kind of slavery. It suspends modern man far above our ancestors, our history, and any reasonable tether that could otherwise prevent us from floating to oblivion. We have floated to oblivion.

Modern education has assumed a position of chronological snobbery, not only laying the classics in the ground, but removing their gravestone and apologizing for ever allowing them to have a place in this world. It has done all but deny that they ever really existed. Modern education lit a fast, bureaucratic, and accolade-driven burn, with the vigor and smell of Alexandrian ashes. The classics promote universals? There are no universals, says modern education. The classics speak of man’s relationship to the divine? There is no divine. The classics build a golden road of tradition to our own time? We have moved beyond those cobbles. The classics are exclusive; Modern man is inclusive. They are spiritual; We are material. They are leisurely; We are pragmatic. Modern man floats away, no ascension possible.

Let the old tombs break forth. Resurrection sweet and savory. Dust jackets and wine skins were made for times like these.

Brian G. Daigle
Baton Rouge 2014

¹ Cowan, Louise and Os Guinness, editors. *Invitation to the Classics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 1998. Pages 14-15.

Welcome to This Cookbook

When compiling and formulating the recipes for this cookbook, there was much to be considered. We thought about who may receive this book, and that made things more complicated. If we wrote this book for any one audience in particular, we would be making some bold presumptions.

First, we cannot assume that this book is aimed at classicists. We understand that this book could fall into the hands of many types of readers, with the only assumption being that they do, in fact, know how to read. You may have picked up this book with a desire to begin reading the classics, sensing this would be a lighthearted means by which to commence upon such an undertaking; and in that hypothesis you would be correct. Or, some might have received this book from their eccentric great-uncle, a man of distinction and academia, who desired that his niece or nephew chew on the classics while also learning to chew with their mouth closed. In such a case, the reader is fortunate to have such an uncle. Alternately, like many great books, this book may have been purchased with the intent of creating the illusion that one does read, and in this case, like so many other cookbooks, the illusion that one also cooks. If that is the case, we are honored to attain such a lofty position and promise to help maintain the illusion. While, undoubtedly, many do not fall neatly into one of these three scenarios, we would prefer believing you are a studied classicist, the Dante to our Virgil.

Second, we cannot presume that this book is aimed at a group with any particular cooking experience. In all likelihood, this book will end up in a flat-rate shipping box, sent with love from mom to her budding wordsmith - the English major away at college subsisting on a diet of ramen and, well, probably just ramen. On the other hand, given that the recipes in this book are paired with great works of literature, you may enjoy the finer things in life, and be proficient in the kitchen, or at least have mastery of a menu.

With all presupposed notions in check, we attempted to create a cookbook that met the user at their own level—whether pedestrian or practitioner. We have endeavored to write this book in such a way that the least skilled cook could have moderate success, and the most skilled chef would not find our fare laughable. This should likewise prod your understanding of great literature, and help to build your culinary clout. We have purposely included courses that are simple, as well as courses that are more complicated. We've also included a glossary of culinary terms, along with some other helpful information for the catechumen of cuisine.

Some of the meals in this book are quite involved. That is because we envisioned this book being used in community. We earnestly desire readers to gather together a full dinner table, enjoy this food together, and discuss the food, the drink, the literature, and whatever else may come up. We would like to see the classics become ordinary table talk. We also intended for these literary dinner groups to share the burden of the meal. We would suggest having different individuals responsible for different courses. This would help alleviate the burdens of money, time, and even skill. If you know that one particular member of your club has difficulty microwaving ramen, you may want them to provide the cocktail. At the very least, we recommend rotating the responsibility for each meal. Cooking every one of these recipes would be quite the undertaking for one individual.

For the most part, our recipes seek to bring about some tie to the text's original culture. At times, this may be a superficial tie, created by a pun in the dish's name. Still, the dishes used in this book are often part of a cultural tradition. Admittedly, the dishes may be diluted versions, but keep in mind that we're also not reading *The Odyssey* in Homeric Greek. Thus, having an "edible translation" that fits the audience should be viewed as acceptable.

By providing a way to figuratively digest the classics while literally digesting the stories, our end goal was to come up with an odorous means of turning Sir Francis Bacon's quote on its head: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." *Bon Appétit*.