

## Garlic's Long March From Foul to Fabulous

Once shunned for its pungency, garlic became a staple of American cooking largely thanks to the efforts of a Californian farmer in the 1970s



Illustration: Hanna Melin

By Bee Wilson - June 9, 2022 6:06 pm ET

There is more than one way to love a bulb of garlic. You can love it full-throttle, as in Spain, where alioli—a mayonnaise-like sauce—may contain enough raw garlic to slay a vampire. Or you can love garlic like a faithful spouse you take for granted, as in China, the source of more than 70% of the world's garlic, where mountains of garlic are simply one of the basic seasonings of everyday life. It is also possible to love garlic in a more timid way, like a bashful lover. In Italy, cooks are sometimes so alive to the power of garlic that a single clove may be warmed in oil until barely golden, then removed, leaving only its perfume behind.

However you love it (and I am taking the liberty of assuming that you do), garlic is in our lives to stay and available to be enjoyed in a hundred different ways. And now is the time. The freshest garlic are the greenscapes of spring (young garlic with tender leaves), but summer garlic is hard to beat. Whether purple or white, new summer bulbs are firmer outside and juicier inside than bulbs that have been stored until winter (when the cloves can be disappointingly shriveled and waxy). As the Italian-American cookery writer Marcella Hazan wrote, with young garlic, “the flavor is so sweet that one can be careless about quantity.”



Garlic is at its freshest in spring and summer.  
Photo: Brian Yarvin/Getty Images

When opening a lovely summer bulb and separating out the papery cloves, I sometimes pinch myself with gratitude, remembering how relatively recent it was that garlic was shunned in kitchens in the Anglo-Saxon world. How boring food must have been in the absence of garlic. Imagine life with no hummus and no garlic bread, no bok choy with garlic and definitely no chicken braised with 40 cloves of garlic.

“Garlicks, tho’ used by the French, are better adapted to the uses of medicine than cookery”: Such was the opinion of Amelia Simmons in “American Cookery,” the first cookbook that we know of written by an American, published in 1796. Simmons wasn’t alone in this view. I went in search of garlic in American cookbooks of the 19th century and for the most part, I drew a giant blank, except in the sections on home

remedies. Garlic was used to cure everything from the common cold to earache (a book from 1823 recommended sticking a whole clove in your ear) and as a paste to deter head lice, but it was used very little in American cooking, except in a few recipes for flavored vinegars and pickles. In 1884, the French chef Pierre Blot lamented the American prejudice against garlic, writing that “They dislike them on account of their pungent taste when raw, not knowing that when cooked it is all evaporated...and gives such a good flavor to gravies and sauces.”

It took an amazingly long time for the prejudice against garlic to die in Anglo-Saxon cooking. In 1944, George Orwell notes that the British working class “regard such things as garlic and olive oil with disgust.” In the U.S., the term “garlic eater” was a slur against Italian immigrants in the early 20th century. As for Canada, the politician David Crombie recalled in an interview that before the 1970s, garlic was available at only one specific market in Toronto.

Garlic was one of the essential elements in the transformation of American cooking that took place in the 70s and 80s.

For the first half of the 20th century, most American cookbooks suggested for garlic to be used only with extreme caution. In “Marion Harland’s Complete Cook Book” in 1903, several recipes, such as one for cream cucumber sauce, involve taking a clove of garlic and rubbing it around the serving bowl before removing it. This habit of rubbing bowls with garlic enraged the British food writer Elizabeth David, a staunch garlic lover. David remarked (in her 1955 book “Summer Cooking”) that the question of whether rubbing the salad bowl with garlic was enough to give flavor “depends whether you are going to eat the bowl or the salad.” David was one of a generation of food writers who encouraged British cooks to imitate the French and be braver about garlic.

Millions of Americans converted to garlic between the 1970s and the 1990s. From 1975 to 1994, U.S. garlic production more than tripled, from 140 million pounds to 493 million pounds. This was largely thanks to the efforts of a Californian garlic farmer named Don Christopher, who helped establish the annual Garlic Festival in Gilroy in 1979, attracting huge numbers of visitors and leading to many more garlic recipes in newspapers. Garlic was one of the essential elements in the transformation of American cooking that took place in the 70s and 80s. Alice Waters, the chef-founder of Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, was so enamored of garlic that she renamed July 14 (celebrated as Bastille Day in France) “Garlic Day.” More than anyone else, Ms. Waters spread the word about the sweet, earthy charms of garlic whole-roasted in the oven.

For several years, I stupidly forgot about roasted garlic, having relegated it to “foods of the 1990s” along with sun-dried tomatoes (another wrongly maligned ingredient). But my word, roasted garlic is good: The stickily sweet flesh, squeezed from the clove like toothpaste from a tube, will enhance almost anything from risotto to a salad dressing. My favorite recipe of the summer so far comes from a new book by José Pizarro called “The Spanish Home Kitchen.” It is a take on Mr. Pizarro’s mother’s garlic soup, made from two whole bulbs of roasted garlic simmered with fried breadcrumbs, a little smoked paprika and vegetable stock. At the end, you blitz it with milk and serve with toasts flavored with green olives and manchego cheese. This sweet garlicky broth has some of the comfort of French onion soup but is lighter.

What to do if you love the taste of garlic but fear causing offense with your garlic breath? This worry isn’t new. It was said that in 1330, the king of Castile so disliked the smell of garlic that he laid down an order that knights who had eaten garlic couldn’t appear at court for a month. My favorite solution to the problem—other than chewing fresh mint or parsley leaves—came from someone I knew in my student days. Any time she ate garlic for lunch, she phoned her boyfriend and urgently requested that he eat some garlic too. Garlicky kisses are only offensive when they are one-sided.

Appeared in the June 11, 2022, print edition as 'Garlic’s Long March From Foul to Fabulous'.