

FOREWORD

CORBY KUMMER

LYNNE ANDERSON LIVES IN MY neighborhood—Jamaica Plain, a part of Boston—and she is as proud of its diversity as I am and most everyone else who chooses to live here because of it. And my, what she found in the streets all around me: a whole world of cooks, mostly women, living the cultures they came from at the markets I shop in and the kitchens I never see or even imagined were here.

But Anderson, a former professional cook turned teacher of immigrant communities, found them: women and men from countries that have had a strong presence here, like Haiti, Cape Verde, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Brazil, but also cooks recently arrived from Ireland (long a mainstay of the street where I live), from Italy, from Sudan, and, in nearby neighborhoods, from Latvia, Morocco, Venezuela, Chile, and Vietnam. Of course, she went looking for them. But I don't think her tour would be difficult to take in most other large American cities.

While other cities might offer international riches, they don't necessarily have cooks and writers as gently sympathetic as Anderson. Even though she gives us abundant recipes, some of them challenging for the ingredients they require, but most of them accessible and tempting, she went looking for more than interesting dishes that most anyone can cook as a small, exotic journey to a foreign land. She also went looking for the meaning of home.

In her warm, subtly attentive interviews—though she never mentions herself or her way of interviewing, you can sense her tact and acceptance of people just as they are—Anderson listens for what is most important to a cook far from the place she or he grew up. That importance can be the way to knead pasta dough, the choice of curry stirred into a stew, the friendships formed with the only people who sell ground okra or the particular vegetables, fish, and cuts of meat that can best reproduce a memory.

And she listens for the language of the women and men who cook, usually with children or friends, to understand and show us how cooking and food forge and keep forging lasting connections. As these cooks tell Anderson about the lands they left and the lives they led then and lead now, they become lost in their memories, as if the smell of a certain stew is the royal route to the kitchens and the people they most loved there. The actual circumstances that brought them to leave can be too painful to recount directly. It is hunting for mushrooms as they did in Latvia, or stuffing pork into soaked corn husks for Christmas tamales as in Costa Rica, or boiling beef and beets for a health-transmitting broth as in Vietnam, that lets them live again their childhoods.

Not that most of the cooks Anderson found left terribly painful pasts. Some did, and suffered for their beliefs or from family circumstances over which they had no control. But most came here for opportunity, for education, for better lives for their children: the goals that have always driven people to emigrate. And most seem content with the new lives they have made—or, rather, they seem adaptable and resourceful, the necessary calling cards of the immigrant. Finding or improvising the tools and ingredients to reproduce remembered dishes, knowing how to handle food and move in the kitchen—subtleties and graces Anderson is alive to—will endure displacement and disruptions, will literally keep families together.

This book of vivid, living memories can help you make memories of your own. Through the cooks Anderson presents, you can reproduce some of the elegance of a cinnamon-flecked Persian green herb omelet, the earthiness of Venezuelan roast beef with baked plantain and corn cakes, the surprising satisfaction of Irish baked sole with carrot-parsnip mash and mashed potatoes. (“Be sure to use enough butter” for the potatoes, a mother admonishes her tech-minded son via a video camera on his laptop screen—of course, considering that the best butter in the world is Irish.) The best part is, you can, whatever your own family background and wherever you are now, live a part of the American immigrant experience.