

# Introduction

Food is Life.

I once stood on a busy street corner in Puebla, Mexico. A market day, a late October morning, battleship-gray skies overhead. Women—young, old, rich, poor—lugged string bags or baskets laden with food, hurrying home to cook *almuerzo*, lunch.

As I watched this scene, I couldn't get the thought out of my head: Food *is* life. Life revolves around the growing of food, the eating of it, the cooking of it. It's the saga that drives everything, including history. As Kristine Kowalchuk so perceptively puts it in *Preserving on Paper* (2017), "They [bread and wine] mean, literally life over death. Medieval and Renaissance people, because of their connection to the land and cyclical conception of time, perceived this deeper literal meaning."<sup>2</sup>

The script of life is all about eating to survive, to go on living. Everything humans do ultimately circles around food and the getting of it. That day in Mexico I deemed this truism an epiphany. And I still do.

Food. Such a small word with such a large meaning.

What happened after 1492 changed the world forever. Sea voyages first sponsored by the Portuguese and Spanish crowns, and later by England's Virgin Queen Elizabeth I fueled the rise of immense empires. Adding to the richness of this story are many subtexts: cultural clashes, political power, greed for gold and spices. And hegemony.

Yet something else took place, much more subtly. The diffusion of foodstuffs from across the oceans, from all the fields and forests and rivers of newly discovered lands, all that changed the world every bit as much as did all the political jockeying in the royal courts of Europe.

This handbook takes you on a whirlwind tour of historic cookbooks dating from the earliest days of cookbook writing in Europe, circa 1390, with the emergence of the English manuscript, *The Forme of Cury*, and the Catalan *Llibre de Sent Soví*. I include medieval and colonial-era Spain, because Spanish cookbooks tend not to be analyzed and studied as much as those originating in England or France or Italy. But my approach is fitting. Over a period of almost 800 years, Islamic rulers controlled much of what is now modern Spain. Influential thirteenth-century Arabic manuscripts such as *Kitâh al-Tahîkh*

*fi'l-Maghrib wa'l-Andalus fi'asr al-Muwahhidin* (Anonymous Andalusian) and *Fudalat al-Khiwan* (The Delights of the Table) guided Spanish cookbook authors for centuries. The Arab influence on Spanish cuisine, and indeed much of medieval cooking, is undeniable.

I regard cookbooks to be primary sources as much as are culinary manuscripts or other materials. My focus here is on manuscripts and books ranging from medieval times to the end of the 1700s. All reveal information useful to archaeologists, historians, writers, reenactors, living-history interpreters, chefs, home cooks, and anyone intent on deciphering and recreating the intricacies of food history and culture.

What you'll learn from this book:

- ❖ What cookbooks teach about past social, economic, political factors
- ❖ Why it's important to know about the history of cookbooks
- ❖ How to read, interpret, and recreate recipes from period cookbooks
- ❖ Where to find information for further study

Spain ruled the New World from 1492 to 1899. At one point, England controlled 25% of world's land mass and the people therein. These empires molded the lives of both elites and ordinary people. Both of these culinary legacies still shape the historical landscape, in the same way that a river flows and cuts through rock, carving new formations.<sup>3</sup>

It's quite a story. Shall we begin?