A long time ago and for a very long time, I led, as a writer, a double life. My respectable job was to write literary criticism for academic journals while teaching Shakespeare and the history of English literature during the college term. My underground job was to write travel articles for newspapers and magazines during the summer. Lit crit versus journalism, two very different styles. One job was very hard work and for no pay, while the other was lots of fun and almost paid expenses. The best part about the fun job was discovering that the easiest way to write about travel was to write about food. Food by definition was fun, but I had no idea that food would take over my life.

My first two books came out within a year of each other, and they neatly summarized my double life. Mabel, published in 1982, was the culmination of ten years’ research into the history of early Hollywood and silent movies. I chose to write a biography of Mabel Normand because she expressed a new vision of the American girl—a bathing beauty, an athlete, and a comedienne—one shaped entirely by the movies. She’d teamed up with slapstick clowns like Mack Sennett, Charlie Chaplin, and Fatty Arbuckle; she’d directed as well as acted; but she’d died early and alone from too much jazz age and far too much gin.

Masters of American Cookery, published in 1983, was the culmination of thirty years as a home cook, housewife, mother, and devoted reader of cookbooks written by contemporaries like M.F.K. Fisher, James Beard, Craig Claiborne, and Julia Child and by their hundreds of American predecessors in the nineteenth century. I wrote the book in a frenzy, in a single calendar year of cooking, reading, and interviewing, putting words down as fast as my head could grab them. Since I’d spent most of my adult life feeding other people, I thought I surely knew something about the subject without resorting to libraries, but it hadn’t occurred to me that the history of food was a subject as worthy of study as the history of drama or literature or any other art or craft.

While civilizations in other parts of the world—Europe, Asia, Latin America—had long ago incorporated food into the serious studies of archaeology, anthropology, semiotics, sociology, and ethnobotany, in the United States we had left food to the home ec and nutrition departments, on the one hand, and to fancy French chefs, on the other. Thirty years ago, with a lot of help from Julia Child, we Americans were just beginning to come out of our culinary Dark Ages, where the subject of food was still to most academicians as vulgar as slapstick pies and banana peels. Food may be fit for vocational cooking schools but not for contemplation in the sacred humanities or the soft sciences.

While I was undecided whether to follow up Mabel with a biography of Jean Harlow or maybe Carole Lombard, I kept on cooking and reading and interviewing because I’d gotten hooked on the question of whether there was such a thing as American cookery, and if so, what it was and where it had come from. I was looking for history, for food roots, in order to understand what American culture was. Also, as an American, I wanted to know about myself. Without noticing, I was continuing to be a travel writer, but I was doing it in my own country instead of Europe, hopping from Vermont to Charlestown to New Orleans to Santa Fe to Seattle to Milwaukee, combining what I had learned from journalism with what I had learned as an academic historian, blending together my bifurcated writing styles.

When asked what I was doing, I’d say, “I’m a food historian,” and people would squint and say, “What’s that?” It
was a good question, because I was flying by the seat of my pants, ferreting out people by luck or accident who might characterize the history of a particular region by the way they talked and cooked and thought about their local foods. No scientific method, no orderly scholarly procedures. I was grabbing whatever I could find and hoping I could make something of it, whether it was a church supper in Maine or a crawfish binge in Louisiana.

The truth was, I had backed into the subject of food almost by accident, but once inside, I was delighted I’d taken the bait because I relished the combination of talking to people, cooking, writing, eating, exploring, discovering—without end. Every day, every single foodstuff I put in my mouth had a history, all the way back to Adam and Eve or to Australopithecus, and if I worked hard enough, I could trace it. To me, that was an extraordinary discovery. The history of food, I saw, was the history of mankind, and you could take it anywhere and everywhere you wanted to on the immense grid of past and present. Over the last decade, to my real surprise, that is just what has happened. Even as I write, anywhere and everywhere are being mapped, surveyed, classified into a multiplicity of culinary sites by people with a great variety of motives but a common cause of exploration. Food writing, food history, food studies have swelled from a few rivulets of gastronomic essays to a snowmelt of personal memoirs to a tsunami of academic treatises. Food, thank God, has joined the pantheon of subjects that matter, like sex, death, movies, and how best to live in a world we are constantly destroying. Like someone you love—man, woman, or child—the subject of food is inexhaustible and infinitely rewarding because it links all of our individual and shared pasts to our communal present. In the fracturings of America we need linkage. As Mas Masumoto, that admirable peach farmer turned food writer, has said, “With food, you’re never alone.” If only Mabel had known more about food and less about gin, she might not have died so early or so very much alone.