In 1986, British food writer Patience Gray published what is now considered to be a classic cookbook, *Honey from a Weed*. The unusual and remarkable collection of vignettes and recipes, as well as ethnographic and botanical observations, was written during the two-plus decades that Gray spent in rural Greece and Italy. The book is not your average cookbook. It covers edible weeds, wild mushrooms, and recipes for wild boar, fox, and hare. While it did not do for Mediterranean peasant food what Julia Child did for French cooking, *Honey from a Weed* nevertheless has had a quiet and enduring influence on the food intelligentsia. British food writer Nigel Slater and chef April Bloomfield have publicly praised Gray’s book and food writers such as Corby Cummér have profiled the enigmatic Gray.

Now Adam Federman’s thorough biography, *Fasting and Feasting: The Life of Visionary Food Writer Patience Gray*, tells the story of the decades that went into *Honey from a Weed* and her intriguing life. Gray was born to a family with means in 1917, but throughout her life she made decisions that distanced her further from a privileged position, the first being a relationship with a captivating “artist manqué” (p.21) with whom she had her children out of wedlock. The relationship ended, and during World War II, Patience experienced hardship as a single mother in a society that did not accept her position. After the war, Gray left her children mostly with her mother and moved to London, where she lived among artists and exiles who were rejecting the conventions of life.

Federman’s portrait of postwar Hampstead’s artistic circles is captivating. The now posh London neighborhood was then a decaying area with large, bombed-out homes where artists and writers found cheap quarters. Gray purchased part of a subdivided mansion called “The Billiardroom,” and Federman quotes her description of it as “an escapist kind of home, which turns its back on materialism” (p.49). In this space, with its tiny kitchen, Gray contributed to publications such as *Wine and Food* and co-wrote the book she would first become known for, *Plats du jour*, aimed at the postwar time-crunched, penny-wise housewife.

But it was the decision to leave her Hampstead life and move with her new partner, the sculptor Norman Mommens, that provided the material for *Honey from a Weed*. Gray and Mommens spent several years searching for an inexpensive home, far from London. They were inspired not only by a desire to live frugally and artistically but also by a disdain for the modern, consumer world. Their counterculture sensibilities led them to a home among peasant society, where they found people’s foodways to be intimately connected to the seasons—first in Greece, then in Italy.

It is this way of life that Gray captures evocatively in *Honey from a Weed*. Federman describes the years she worked on its many drafts, documenting a way of cooking and eating that connects humans to the earth’s cycles. Because the Italian farmhouse that Gray and Mommens purchased was so rustic—they collected water by hand—and the landscape so harsh, Gray was deeply involved in food provisioning. From gathering weeds and mushrooms, to growing beans and potatoes, to making olive oil from the trees on their land, and even raising and butchering pigs, she and Mommens became dependent on the land, an experience that informed her approach to food.

Not everyone was captivated by this perspective. Federman describes the mixed response to Gray’s writing. Some called her colonial and were offended by the way they felt she misinterpreted life on the Greek island of Naxos. Certainly the idea that these small villages are at the end of the world—the “fin du monde” as one of Federman’s chapters is titled—evokes colonial notions. Similarly, the idea of the peasant’s way of life as primitive is problematic.

Federman’s book is driven by Gray’s character and interesting life. However, the detail is dizzying. In his acknowledgments, Federman describes an abundance of archival material that Gray’s son offered him. This, plus many interviews with those who recall Gray, enables Federman to provide incredible detail. But this can be too much. The reader can get lost in the curlicues of life and it is easy to confuse one person with another.

Altogether, *Fasting and Feasting* is an achievement that tells the story of a woman whose unconventional life might have been overlooked or forgotten. And by telling it, Federman also gives a gift to readers of *Honey from a Weed*. This book, without the biographical context, is curious and enchanting. Paired with *Fasting and Feasting*, it becomes utterly fascinating.

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