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## A dinner scene

"She made him the kind of jollof rice he liked, flecked with bits of red and green peppers, and as he ate, fork moving from the plate to his mouth, saying, 'This is pretty good,' as he always had in the past, she felt her tears and her questions gathering."

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's entrancing novel *Americanah*, jollof rice, a Nigerian staple, springs up several times throughout the more-than-500-page tome. At times, references to the smokey dish read as a harbinger of things to come; at others, a catalyst for a contemplative study on the part of its brooding characters. It, and food in general, is entwined with the narrative, conveying subtle truths about race, identity, relationships and the lingering affection between its main protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze. From Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* — "A census taker tried to quantify me once. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a big Amarone," quips Hannibal Lecter — both literary canon and works of contemporary fiction reveal that food and literature make for great bedfellows.

At the outset, it is clear that the former informs, brightens and colours the latter. The inverse is also true. Literary-inspired cookbooks, such as *The Artists & Writers' Cookbook*, *Fictitious Dishes: An Album of Literature's Most Memorable Meals*, designer Dinah Fried's imaginative picture book of famous literary dinner scenes, and memoirs interspersed with recipes, all lay bare the culinary quirks and fascinations of some of the greatest novelists this world has known. But food and literature, at its core, is much more than peppering the scene, seasoning the words that paint the breadth of human emotion with elaborate brush strokes.

"I think food is so important in terms of creating a sense of time and place. And it reveals so much about character," says Kate Young, a cook and writer whose own love of books inspired *The Little Library Café*, a blog featuring all manner of literary recipes. "The things that characters eat are details that are often everyday in nature, but they aren't at all trivial."

The first recipe Young posted to her blog two and a half years ago was one for a treacle tart, inspired by the titular character of J.K. Rowling's acclaimed fantasy series. "I realized I fancied one because it's Harry Potter's favourite dessert, and those books are some of my favourite comfort reads," Young recalls.

The Little Library Café counts more than 100 recipes, drawn not only from novels, but children's books, poetry collections, and plays. Among them, clam chowder inspired by Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and alfajores, a Central American delicacy reminiscent of the warm biscuits in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Young's cookbook, set for publication in October 2017, will include breakfasts and midnight feasts alongside cakes, tarts and other gustatory treats inspired by her favourite books.

As *Americanah* and novels both old and new demonstrate, culinary descriptions of food whet the appetite, but by no means are they mere flowery tangents. Their raison d'être is manifold. The moments they signify, considerable. Their influence, palpable. Literary cookbooks, in all their iterations, are a testament to that.

While Adichie's jollof rice and all that it portends lingers in my mind, it is within the pages of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* that Young's most beloved literary food scene unspools, which marks "the slow thawing of both the garden and of Mary," as Young puts it.

"It was an agreeable idea, easily carried out, and when the white cloth was spread upon the grass, with hot tea and buttered toast and crumpets, a delightfully hungry meal was eaten, and several birds on domestic errands paused to inquire what was going on and were led into investigating crumbs with great activity." \*