



David Leite

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David Leite, editor-in-chief of the culinary Website *Leite’s Culinaria*, is reshaping the way we read about food. Over the past two years, he has received three awards from the James Beard Foundation, the most prestigious culinary institution in the United States. David Leite’s cooking, greatly influenced by his Portuguese roots, is “full-fat, full-flavor, full-time cooking.” During our recent conversation in New York, where he lives and cooks most of the time, we spoke about the need for this generation to get back into the kitchen and to get re-acquainted with our food chain.

Why do we read about food? What is the fascination? After all, we can’t taste what we read.

“Our grandmothers were the ones who were doing all the cooking. Our mothers went out into the work force and relied on pre-packaged meals. So we are one generation removed from home-cooked meals. We don’t really cook. Molly O’Neil, one of today’s most prominent food writers, coined the term “food porn,” meaning that a lot of people use reading about

food as a substitute for cooking. So all these hungry mouths are cuddling up to a book instead of a pot.”

I feel our generation has a monologue with food...

“I think there is some truth to that. If you look at food in the media, especially TV shows, they are about assembling. But there is something that needs to be added to the equation to understand what happens to ingredients when you cook them. It’s an important process that connects us to our source of energy and sustenance. Many people have got back into the kitchen because of this, but it’s not as widespread or as grand as many people would think.”

“Our generation is probably the last generation to be misplaced culinarily. As time goes on, we’ll see more of a return to the kitchen. And in the meantime, food writing has acted as a surrogate mother for us.”

How did you get into food writing, the culinary world?



“I always helped my grandmother in the kitchen as a child, especially with baking. She wasn’t literate, couldn’t read or write, so after she died a lot of her recipes died with her, because nobody made them but her. I thought this topic would make an interesting article, so I wrote about it for the *Chicago Sun Times* in 1998. Then I wrote

four more articles and founded *Leite’s Culinaria* online.”

You recently finished a book about Portuguese cuisine that’s coming out in August 2009. How did you do the research?

“My family is from the small island of São Miguel in the Azores, where there was no electricity or telephones until the late 1960s, I believe. Their lives were very simple. My father used to run barefoot and catch octopus with a piece of bacon as bait. Then suddenly I was in Lisbon in 2008 having a sophisticated dinner made by a man who loves to cook, with a vibrant crowd that discussed exquisite wines and home *sous vide* machines. So I thought that I needed to write about this Portugal today, which is very different from the meals the women in my family prepared. All the dishes in the book are contemporary, but grounded in tradition.”

Beyond Brazil, how has Portuguese cuisine influenced the world?

“Manhattan clam chowder, prepared with tomatoes instead of cream, was an invention of Portuguese immigrants in Rhode Island. Also, there’s a culture of *malasadas* – fritters covered in sugar – in Hawaii. The Portuguese Jesuits brought tempura to Japan in the 15th/16th century; the word “tempura” comes from the Portuguese *temperar* (to season or flavor). There is also the belief that the Portuguese brought back tea from Asia. The only tea plantation in all of Western Europe is on the island of São Miguel, which is where most of my family worked.”

Any exciting upcoming food trends?

“There is a widespread enthusiasm about food in the United States. Twenty years ago, we did not compete as well on the culinary world stage. And certainly in the 1960s and 70s, all the top restaurants were French, which isn’t the case today. Of course, you’re not going to find some little homestead cheesemaker from Vermont in the middle of *Champs-Élysée*, you’ll find McDonald’s because they are the ones who can afford it. But we are seeing more and more dishes from the U.S. being able to compete on the world’s table. We are creating great cuisine that will become even more focused over time.”

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