

Aphrodite

A Memoir of the Senses



Isabel Allende

BOOKS BY ISABEL ALLENDE

The House of the Spirits
Of Love and Shadows

Eva Luna

The Stories of Eva Luna

The Infinite Plan

Paula

Aphrodite

DRAWINGS

Robert Shekier

RECIPES

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HarperPerennial
A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers

which they were greatly addicted. The sultan's food was tasted by a eunuch, to prevent his being poisoned, and the more prudent favorites of the harem demanded the same treatment.

In India and China, too, there were luxurious gynaeceums where women lived as prisoners but in the midst of the most exorbitant opulence. The emperors of ancient China, and nobles who could afford the expense, had numerous wives, consorts, and concubines. There was one emperor of the Tang dynasty who had two thousand women in his harem and engendered nearly five hundred children. A labor worthy of Hercules. Every night, after dinner, he received the menu from the harem and selected one or several companions; no argument prevailed against it. Forget the possibility of listening to his nightingales or playing mahjong; the prosperity of the nation was measured in the number of children he conceived: patriotic duty called. To guarantee his enthusiasm and good disposition, he had at his disposal a team of physicians, acupuncturists, and experts in aphrodisiacs whose duty it was to stimulate him with any method known to that millenary tradition. Food was an essential component—not only ingredients, but combinations that increased virility. More than one chef was decapitated without preamble because his birds' nest soup did not have the desired effect upon the emperor. Once dinner was over, the physicians' herbs swallowed, the needles of the acupuncturist on duty duly inserted, and the pillow books leafed through, the fortunate—may we hope—wife or concubine for the night was shown into the presence of the emperor.

What followed was not a private engagement but a matter of supreme importance and security for the empire, attended by various witnesses. A notary recorded those amorous soirées and thus could calculate with exactitude the days of each infant's gestation. If the dates did not coincide with the usual nine months, the head of the mother accused of adultery went to join that of the chef on the chopping block. The emperor's every mouthful was noted down in the same detail, in order and in quantity. With so many women at his disposition, he could attend each—in the best of cases—only once a year.

The concubines lived at the margins of these main events, but as they were young and idle women they had no need of aphrodisiacs. What else was there to think about? They consoled one another with febrile resourcefulness and the prodigious inventiveness of the eunuchs, who

were capable of outrageous innovation and of giving them more pleasure than the emperor, with all his miraculous herbs and turtle soups, could offer. Castration did not abolish desire, and although the eunuchs could not produce children, as lovers they possessed extraordinary gifts. It was believed that once a woman had known a eunuch, no complete man could satisfy her. This tradition has not reached Western hearts, and eunuchs are very scarce on this side of the world. Nevertheless, Chinese wisdom regarding aphrodisiacs and erotic food is not lost to us.



Eggs

In all cultures, erotic and restorative powers are attributed to eggs; they are supposed to invigorate old men, cure indifference, and regenerate the dried-up wombs of infertile women. In *The Perfumed Garden*, a prodigious man named Mimmún—and how proud he was of his feat!—practiced the game of love for sixty days without slaking his thirst, all thanks to eating nothing but egg yolks and bread. You don't have to be a genius to see the relationship between eggs and fertility, which is why they have always been favorites in erotic cuisine, from caviar, the minuscule fish eggs whose market value makes them even more aphrodisiac, to the enormous ostrich egg capable of feeding an entire family.

In Chile we have the tradition of eating eggs “a la oyster,” that is, raw, as an incitement to virility and to mend the body and recover memory upon waking up from a drunken spree. After the birth of each of my children, my mother-in-law brought me every day a beer she beat with raw eggs and honey, an age-old home remedy given to nursing mothers. Obedient, I drank it down, ignoring any thought of calories or of the irrefutable fact that it was turning me yellow and making my knees too wobbly to hold me up. To restore vigor to men going through a sexual crisis, in some European cultures they are deluged with astounding quantities

of raw egg yolks beaten with cognac, exactly the formula we use in Chile to wash our hair: Eggs lend themselves to all sorts of naughtiness: hard-boiled, you can roll them in bed; scrambled, you can serve them in the palm of your hand, without a fork; as meringue they can be spread on your breasts for your greedy lover to lick off.

The noblest way to prepare eggs for an erotic skirmish is also the simplest and most classic: as an omelet, that is, the elegant French way of serving scrambled eggs with countless variations from garden herbs and spices to vegetables and chopped meat. For a good omelet, you need a thick iron skillet in which eggs will cook evenly and then slip out effortlessly. In exactly the same way that a barber cares for his scissors, a chef cares for his skillet and will not allow it to be used for any other purpose. You never wash it, you just wipe it out, and as the years of its noble life go by, it turns increasingly dark and wise.

In the same *Perfumed Garden* in which Minnin made like a rabbit, the pious Sheikh Nelzawi, who had never heard the word cholesterol, dedicates several paragraphs to the aphrodisiac power of eggs.

The who will feed for several days on eggs cooked with myrrh, cinnamon and pepper, will find an increased vigor in his erection and his capacity for coition. His member shall be in such a turgid state that it will seem as if it could never return to a state of repose. (May Allah in his greatness preserve him to the Resurrection Day.) He who wishes to operate a whole night through and who, due to the suddenness of the desire, has not been able to make the preparations I have already mentioned, will have recourse to the following; he will fry a good number of eggs in fresh fat and butter and, when they are well cooked, he will mix them with honey. He will eat as much as possible of this with a piece of bread, he will be able to soothe and comfort all through the night. (With the help of Allah. May he bestow his blessings on his Prophet and grant us salvation and mercy.)

Quail eggs—small, with dark spots and free of cholesterol—are sold as aphrodisiacs. Their size makes them ideal for hors d'oeuvres and for garnish. Personally, I prefer caviar, of course, and I can think of a thousand pornographic ways to serve it, but since it is so expensive, I have caviar only on spe-

cial occasions when I must resort to excesses of cleverness and sensuality to achieve my amorous objective. And of course I take it when it is offered to first-class passengers in airplanes, although it isn't easy to play games with caviar on a commercial flight: the stewardess is always watching. As a modest alternative, I also like a raw egg served on my lover's navel, with chopped onion, pepper, salt, lemon, and a drop of Tabasco, although I can't always use the last ingredient: my man is allergic to hot spices. Caviar is one of the most expensive aphrodisiacs in the world, almost as expensive as the famous birds' nests so prized in China. It is taken (logically) from the female sturgeon, not from a surgeon, as I thought in my youth. This demizen of icy seas, one of the most ancient creatures on the planet, is usually about four meters in length. The price of the caviar varies according to the quality, and that is measured by rarity, following the natural law that the more difficult something is to obtain, the more we want it. The largest eggs, called beluga, are the most expensive and come from the largest fish. The highest-grade beluga, practically unknown outside Russia, is totally consumed by political high-ups and the Bolshoi Ballet. Ossetra are medium-size eggs, and severuga, the smallest. In Russian processing plants they employ a taster, whose liver, over-



time, acquires the boilerplate invulnerability of the battleship *Potemkin*. This expert tests the caviar to classify it and to determine how much salt is to be added; like wine tasters, he swishes it around in his mouth and immediately spits it out. There are some addicts, nevertheless, who devour fantastic quantities of this intense edible between great swigs of hot tea.



Supreme Stimulus for Bechery

One of the most notable monarchs of all times was Catherine the Great (1729–1796). This German princess—married young to the Grand Duke Peter, the ugly, gluttonous, cowardly, violent, and rather imbecilic heir to the throne of Russia, found the way, with the aid of five handsome army officers, the brothers Orloff, to be widowed at an early age. Then, as czarina of Russia, she reigned with an iron fist for half a century. She spoke four languages, supported the artists and intellectuals of Europe, exchanged a voluminous correspondence with several of them, but in her own kingdom she did not tolerate any of the modern ideas she applauded outside it. She had many official lovers—among them the celebrated Potemkin, a political genius and the true *émence gris* behind the throne—and countless companions-for-a-night whose names are not recorded in history. Legend accuses her of being so insatiable in bed that she went so far as to have relations with her horse, and that she herself designed a harness from which to suspend the animal, although this may only have been malicious gossip. She had prodigious vitality and good health. To the end of her seventy-seven years she rose at five in the morning to work and still late at night had enough energy to indulge herself with the favorite of the day. Her breakfast consisted of vodka-laced tea and a caviar omelet.

A freshly prepared omelet can be a song for the spirit comparable only to the music of the fakir's flute that seduces the serpent to rise from its basket, erect and powerful. In the streets of India, from a prudent distance, I watched several of these cobra charmers and always thought: If they have all that power with a snake, what might they not arouse with their music? Perhaps that is why male tourists of a certain age offer special tips to have the charmers play for them. (I don't know why this reminds me of the lighthouse of San Francisco. Every time fog is predicted, a number of men wander over to the lighthouse, because when the lugubrious horn begins to sound to warn ships of danger, the vibration awakens the visitors' libidos). But let's get back to our perfect aphrodisiac omelet.

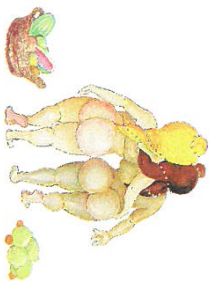
THE EMPRESS'S OMELET

For two people in love, you need 5 eggs, fresh from the nest of a virgin hen, salt and pepper, fresh country butter, chopped chives, 4 fine but succulent slices of Norwegian smoked salmon, ½ cup of beluga caviar, if possible from the Baltic Sea, 2 teaspoons sour cream, and, of course, toast. Ever so delicately, break the eggs into a fine porcelain bowl—porcelain for reasons of elegance, nothing more—and beat lightly, adding salt and pepper. Warm the butter in the omelet pan sacred to every good cook, and as soon as the butter begins to turn the tint of warm Caribbean skin, pour in the eggs. When the omelet is half cooked on the bottom, loosen it with infinite gentleness, whispering encouragingly, because if you are rough, it will lose its enchanting disposition; add the chives and salmon and fold it over, exactly as you would close a book. To free it entirely, experts move the skillet back and forth with the pulsing syncope of a good dancer and then, with a sudden flip of the wrist, toss it up in the air and catch it, now reversed, so it will cook to a golden brown on both sides—although I admit that every time I've tried that move, the omelet has landed on my head. These gyrations are pure exhibitionism, because when you make an omelet, as when you make love, affection counts for more than technique. Serve your omelet on your most beautiful plates, already warmed in the oven. Spoon on the caviar, and beside this triumph place the sour cream and warm toast. After a night of passion, this is the breakfast indicated for making love, no holds barred, the rest of the day.

into it, the whole thing falls apart and a radish in the shape of a bee lands in my lap. I am left with the sensation of not having eaten enough and having paid too much. It isn't like a Basque inn or Mexican taco shop, where for a modest price you are stupefied for four or five days.

Nouvelle cuisine can be interesting, but when it comes to food—and men as well—I prefer more robust flavors and a simpler appearance, like an honest fish that is not ashamed of its nakedness. It's true, I do want it dead. I am horrified by food that moves, which is why I avoid gelatin and oysters, but this is a mania I must combat: many animals in the aphrodisiac recipe file are barely more than swooning when brought to the table. Once in a Scandinavian restaurant I was served a sea serpent—eel, I think they called the poor thing—that suffered a brief attack of epilepsy when I tried to cut it. I let out a screech, and the waiter, who at that instant was serving the wine, dropped the bottle. The ideal is for your food to be good and dead but to have avoided rigor mortis. And no eyes, please, even if they're closed. There's nothing so horrifying as the entreating gaze of a whole animal on a tray. Since they've gone to all the work of killing it, why not cut off its head in the bargain?

My objections to tomatoes turned into roses, potatoes disguised as nightingales, and other euphemisms of nouvelle cuisine do not mean that I have a taste for dishes that look like prison mush, the kind of gruel I had in the English school where I acquired my characteristic stoic stomach, or that I like the brutish offerings of peasant origins. Those roast pigs in Spain with an apple in their snout and a sprig of parsley up their ass deserve a requiem mass. It's sin enough to kill animals; there's no need to humiliate them on top of it.



Cheese

Cheese is milk teeming with bacteria, and everything else is wishful thinking. The first time I saw cheese being made was at a dairy in the interior of Venezuela, hot as the Sahara, in a germ-filled shed where six cows were distractedly waiting their turn to be milked, chewing their cud and flicking away flies with their tails. Part of the milk, destined for the well-named “hand cheese,” was mixed with curds; the heat multiplied the bacteria, and as soon as the liquid curdled it was strained through a large sieve. The whey went straight to the hogs, who were right beside the milking shed, which explained the smell, a bouquet more far-reaching than cow dung. The rest of the milk went into the round tubs where Don Maurizio, a gigantic half-Indian, half-African, naked from the waist up, sweating and singing, plunged his arm in up to his armpit and conscientiously stirred. Don Maurizio, a great cheesemaker, had a battery-operated radio tuned to a station where *joropos*, salsas, and country songs gauged the time needed to turn the curds into cheese, and his timing was so exact that the result was always identical.

Since then, I have had the opportunity to visit industrial computerized cheese-processing plants where hygiene is as strict as that of the operating room and the barns smell of pine forests. The cows have been fed so many hormones that they moo in soprano and any one of them could produce enough milk to fill the celebrated bath of Cleopatra; the cheeses, nevertheless, do not seem as perfect, or nearly as tasty, as those made by Don Maurizio. He molded them into round loaf shapes, left them to set in the shade, and after a few hours they were ready to be sold and eaten. After picking out the flies, which tended to get stuck in the surface, we ate the cheese with *cachapas*, warm corn tortillas right off the coals. It is one of my most pleasant memories of that difficult period as an immigrant in a foreign land. And that hand cheese must have been aphrodisiac, because all I have to do is recall its delicate flavor and the sweat slipping down the brawny arms

Kong you can drink a small espresso coffee containing gold dust? In the Piazza San Marco in Venice, you can pay just as much for an espresso *without* the gold.) Madame du Barry, the Marquis de Sade, and Louis XIV consumed truffles with incontrovertible faith in the effect they wrought in moments of intimacy; and Rasputin prescribed them to the tsar to thicken his blood and strengthen the royal bloodline. A recipe from the time of the Borgias reads: "Take a truffle cleaned of dirt and excrement, soften it by brushing it with fragrant oil, wrap it in a fine ribbon of pig fat, and place it over the fire until, the fat melted away, the truffle exudes its essence."

Napoleon ate truffles before meeting Josephine in their amorous battles in the imperial bedchamber, in which, it is no exaggeration to say, he always wound up defeated. Scientists—however do they come up with these experiments, I wonder?—have discovered that the scent of the truffle activates a gland in the pig that produces the same pheromones present in humans when they are smitten by love. It is a sweaty, garlic-tinged odor that reminds me of the New York subway.

Some years ago, I invited to dinner—with intentions of seduction, naturally—an evasive bean whose reputation as a good cook forced me to outdo myself with the menu. I decided that a truffle omelet sprinkled with a dusting of red caviar at serving time (the gray was beyond my possibilities) constituted an obvious erotic overture, something akin to giving him red roses and the *Kama-sutra*. I searched high and low for truffles, and when finally I located some, my modest salary in a land not my own would not stretch far enough to buy them. The clerk in the delicatessen, an Italian as much an immigrant as I, counseled me to forget the truffles.

"Why don't you use mushrooms instead?" he asked as I disconsolately gazed at those little bits black as rabbit droppings, which to my eyes shone like diamonds.

"It isn't the same. Truffles are aphrodisiacs."

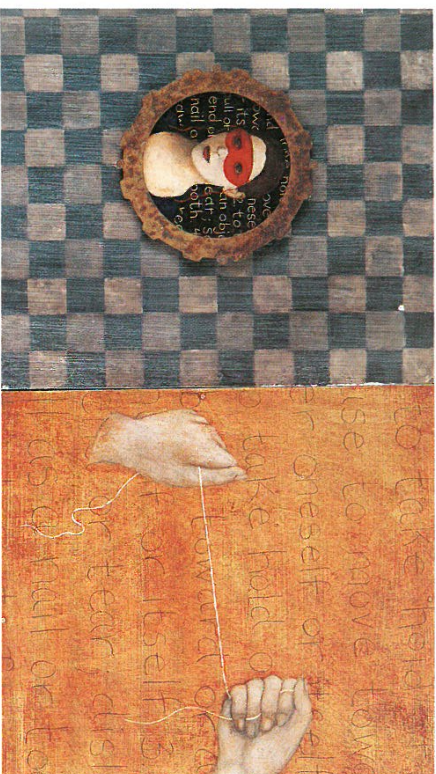
"They're what?"

"Sensual," I said, to avoid going into detail.

I must have blushed, because the man came out from behind the showcase and approached me with a strange smile. He imagined, I suppose, that I was a nymphomaniac hopping to rub my erogenous zones with his truffles. "Romantic," I murmured, blushing redder and redder.

"Ah! For a man? Your sweetheart? Your husband?"

"Well, yes . . ."



At that instant his smile lost its sarcastic twist and turned complicated: he stepped behind the counter and produced a small bottle, like a perfume vial.

"*Olio d'oliva aromatizzato al tartufo bianco*," he announced in the tone of someone pulling an ace out of his sleeve. "Olive oil with the scent of white truffles," he clarified.

And immediately he slipped a few black olives into a plastic bag, with the direction to wash them carefully to remove the flavor, chop them into small pieces, and marinate them a couple of hours in the truffle-scented oil.

"As romantic as truffles, and much cheaper?" he assured me.

I did as he said. The omelet was perfect, and when my exquisite bean detected the unmistakable fragrance and asked with surprise whether those inky fragments were indeed truffles and, if so, where the hell I'd found them, I made a vague gesture that he interpreted as flirtatious. He devoured the omelet, constantly casting sideways glances dark with perplexity, an expression that at the time I found irresistible but in fact, seen with the detachment of age, was closer to being comic. I'm really glad I gave him olives. His reputation as a bean was as exaggerated as that of truffles.

And since we are talking about "truffled" olive oil, the moment has come for me to share my "emergency recipe." Since the age of nineteen, I have been married every day of my life except for three months of playing around between a divorce and a second marriage. That means that I have had approximately 16,425 occasions to drive some man mad. The creation

of this soup was a matter not of chance, but of necessity. It is a practically infallible aphrodisiac that I always fix after some terrible fight, a flag of truce that allows me to make peace without humiliating myself too greatly. My opponent has only to smell it to understand the message.

RECONCILIATION SOUP

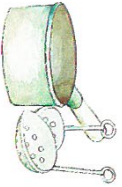
Preparation

If you can't find fresh mushrooms and must use the dried ones, soak them in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of good red wine until they spring up happily; in the meantime, while they're soaking, I calmly drink the remainder of the wine. Then I mince the garlic clove for the pure pleasure of smelling my fingers, because I could just as easily use it whole, and then sauté it with all the mushrooms in the olive oil, stirring vigorously for a few minutes—I've never counted, but let's say 5. I add the stock, the port, and the truffled olive oil—not quite all of it, I leave a couple of drops to dab behind my ears; let's not forget, it's

Ingredients

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped Portobello mushrooms (if dried, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped porcini mushrooms (if dried, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup)
- 1 cup brown mushrooms
- 1 clove garlic
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 cups stock (beef, chicken, or vegetable)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup port
- 1 tablespoon truffled olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons sour cream

aphrodisiac. I season with salt and pepper, and cook over low heat with the lid on until the mushrooms are soft and the house smells like Heaven. The last step is to process it in the blender; this is the least poetic part of the preparation but unavoidable. The soup should end up with a slightly thick texture, like mud, and with a perfume that makes you salivate and awakens other secretions of body and soul. I put on my best dress, paint my fingernails red, and serve the soup, in warmed bowls, garnished with a dollop of sour cream.



The Spirit of Wine

Nectar of the gods, consolation of mortals, wine is a marvelous beverage that has the power to drive away worries and to give us, though it be for but an instant, a vision of Paradise. No one can argue the aphrodisiac power of wine: in moderate quantities it dilates the blood vessels, carrying more blood to the genitals and prolonging erection; it lessens inhibitions, relaxes, and fosters joy, three fundamental requirements for good performance, not only in bed but at the piano as well. In my distant youth, I believed that white wines were served during the day and red wines at night. Later someone tried to rescue me from ignorance by offering me his version: white wines are for women and red for men, a heresy capable of felling an oenologist with a fatal stroke. We are talking about an ancient and elaborate art to which countless volumes have been devoted through the centuries; it would be a blasphemy to try to sum them up in a couple of sentences. It has taken me several decades to learn some basic principles; from the beginning, I state my ignorance.

In expensive restaurants, I smell the cork, chew the first sip with an expression of profound concentration, and then return the bottle, complaining of a certain acidity. That always impresses the waiter and earns me a little respect. The truth is that I have a bad head for alcohol and with the second glass I start taking off my clothes and skipping down the street. The theoretical part of this chapter wasn't at all difficult; I sought the counsel of experts and consulted a half dozen books, but the practical part cost me more than one cold. My neighbors think I belong to a euphoric nudist sect.

I always wanted to have a wine cellar. I'm not referring to six bottles in the back of a closet—that I have—but to a cold, dark cellar embroidered with spiderwebs and closed off with a wooden, triple-locked door whose keys hang at my waist, a vault in which bottles of exquisite wines have lain for years. I imagine the ceremony of descending into the belly of the earth with a candle to seek the perfect complement to enhance my dinner with my lover . . . all right, it can just as well be with my husband. We had that tradition in my family. I don't

the place where they had set up their picnic to find that someone had stolen all their clothes, and the professor's car as well. Beside the weeping willow, still silvery with chirping little birds, lay the Italian straw hat.

“Eating the World”

*I was born with my mouth open . . .
entering this juicy world
of peaches and lemons and ripe sun
and the pink and secret flesh of women,
this world where dinner is in the breath
of the subtle desert,
in the spices of the distant sea
which late at night drift over sleep*

*I was born somewhere between the brain and the pomegranate,
with a tongue tasting the delicious textures
of hair and hands and eyes;*

*I was born out of the heart steam,
out of the infinite bed, to walk upon
this infinite earth.*

*I want to feed you the flowers of ice
on this winter window,
the aroma of many soups,
the scent of sacred candles
that follows me around this cedar house,
I want to feed you the lavender
that lifts up out of certain poems,
and the cinnamon of apples baking,
and the simple joy we see
in the sky when we fall in love.*

*I want to feed you the pungent soil
where I harvested garlic,
I want to feed you the memories
rising out of the aspen logs
when I split them, and the piñon smoke
that gathers around the house on a still night,
and the mums left by the kitchen door.*

—Excerpted from the poem by James Tipton, 1995



Finally . . .

Appetite and sex are the great motivators of history; they preserve and propagate the species, they provoke wars and songs, they influence religion, law, and art. All of creation is one long uninterrupted cycle of digestion and fertility; everything in life is reduced to a process of organisms devouring one another, reproducing themselves, dying, fertilizing the earth, and being reborn transformed. Blood, semen, sweat, ashes, tears, and the incurable poetic imagination of humanity in search of meaning . . .

After a couple of complete trips around the world of aphrodisiacs, I have discovered that the only thing that truly excites me is love. I fear, however, that in these pages I have given the impression that I'm not a romantic and therefore lack the authority to speak about the delirium of love. Not so. Unfortunately, I'm the kind of person who believes in love at first sight and then carries it a step further and marries. Oscar Wilde said that "love is a mutual misunderstanding." In the fiftieth year of my life, I look back upon my past and, in all fairness, find that I have to agree with Wilde; even so, I have not become a total cynic and still can lose my head over a man (I'm heterosexual but not fanatic) given the right circumstances, such as words whispered into my ear and a good hand at massage.