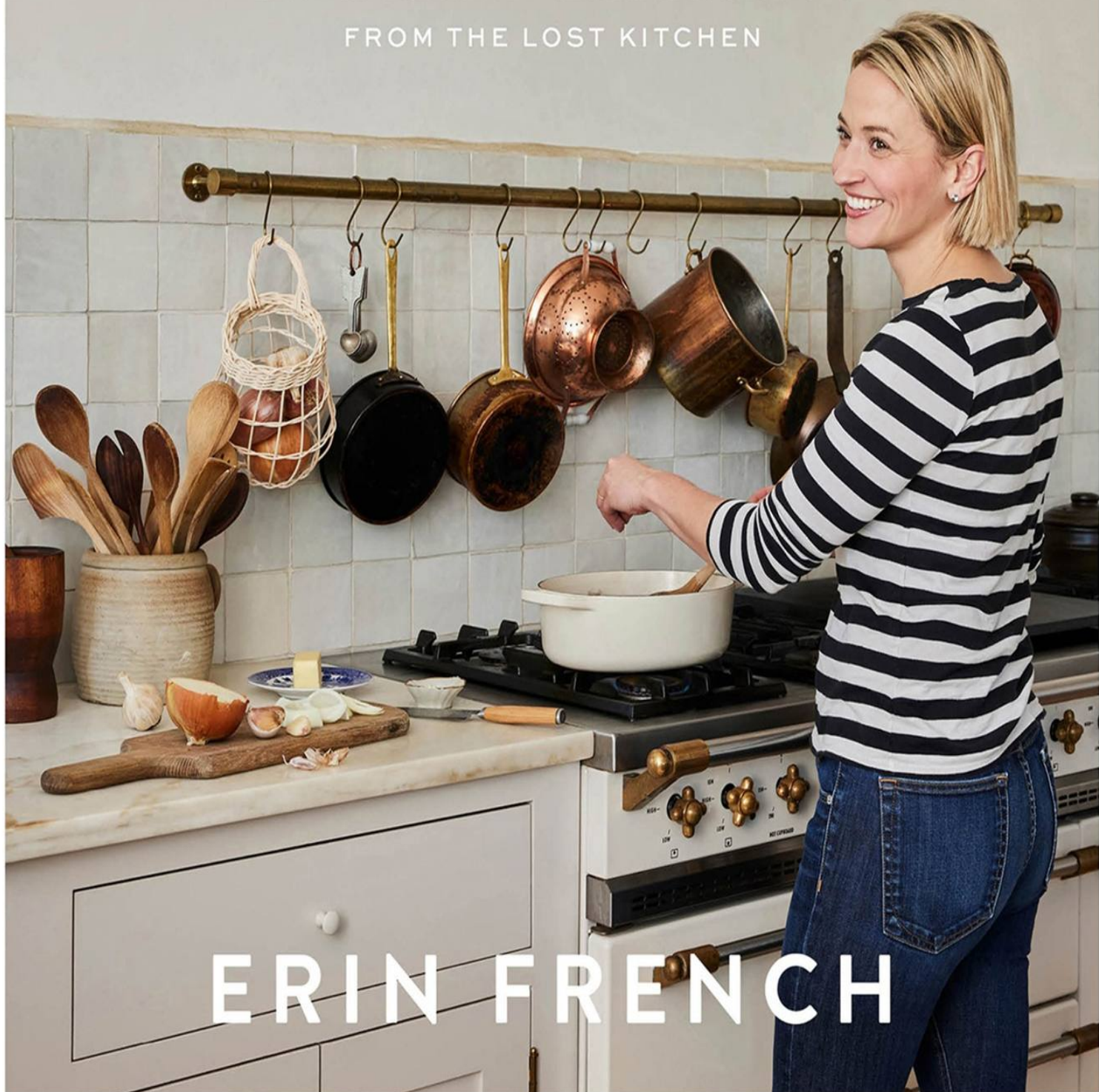


"I LOVE ERIN FRENCH'S SIMPLE, ELEGANT FOOD." —INA GARTEN

BIG HEART LITTLE STOVE

BRINGING HOME MEALS & MOMENTS
FROM THE LOST KITCHEN



ERIN FRENCH





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ERIN FRENCH

WITH
RACHEL HOLTZMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICOLE FRANZEN



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**FOR MICHAEL,
MY HEART AND MY HOME**







INTRODUCTION

IT WAS THE FIRST SATURDAY OF DECEMBER, the kind of drowsy winter afternoon when evening closes in at 3 p.m. It was bitterly cold outside, but my dining room was made warm and welcoming by the glow of a dimly lit floor lamp and a constellation of candles, plus an oversized secondhand rug that I'd managed to lug up nineteen steps (not that I'd counted) and spread beneath my table made from scrap wood and galvanized sawhorses. In the candlelight, you'd never have guessed that I'd sewn the tablecloth on my grandmother's sewing machine from a bolt of linen-look-alike fabric I'd unearthed at the odd-lot store, and the mismatched dishes—sourced with the last of my savings at rummage sales—looked downright elegant.

In minutes, sixteen people would walk in my front door expecting to be served a meal. It felt like my craziest idea yet, to host a five-course dinner for people I didn't know (except for the handful I'd convinced to come to make for a more respectable showing) with no fine-dining experience, or even a second pair of hands. Just me, my 1992 four-burner GE Electric, the best ingredients I could find, and an overwhelming desire to fill people with the kind of warmth and joy that can only come from food made with love.

I knew in the pit of my being that this was what I was born to do, but still the nerves hit. Hard. My heart hammered as I second-guessed everything I was about to do. I thought that with one look at my tiny apartment and even tinier kitchen, my guests would know I was an

impostor. *Who was I to play restaurant?* But then I remembered the still-dewy heads of baby lettuce perched on my counter, waiting to be tossed with crisp fennel and the last of the gem-toned fall fruit I'd managed to score at the market. I pictured the oysters that had been plucked from the ocean that morning, icy and cold and filled with the promise of their salty brine. There was the Calvados sorbet in the freezer to gently stir appetites between courses; the line-caught Maine cod that I'd sear to a crispy golden brown in cast-iron skillets before finishing it in the oven with more butter than I might care to admit; pungent, salty cheese that I'd offer up beside tiny squares of honeycomb and toasts; and the upside-down cornmeal and caramelized pear cake I'd made that morning to be served in generous slabs, dolloped with tangy crème fraîche. I'd deliberately and devotedly made each of these selections and each of the dishes as though crafting an offering more than a meal.

Yes, I knew (hoped) that they would all be delicious, but more than that, I could imagine the *feelings* that they would evoke. From helping guests leave behind the events of the day with a tart, refreshing cocktail and nibbles for grazing to everyone slouching a little deeper in their chairs after a warm bowl of silky potato soup made even more fragrant with herb-infused oil to hands softly brushing hands as they passed around a platter of carefully prepared vegetables harvested that morning to the contented hush that would fall over the table as everyone tucked into their main course and finally to the wide-eyed delight over sweet treats (and unrestrained giggles when these were followed up with a surprise second dessert of freshly baked cookies)—these are the moments I would quilt from uncomplicated, unfussed recipes made and served, quite simply, with love. And no nerves or chipped plates or sorely outdated kitchen appliances would stand in the way of something I knew so deeply, so innately, that I could do.

By the time the Miles Davis playlist had long since

run out, the tapers melted and snuffed, the French presses emptied, and the wineglasses drained, and the last guests were shrugging on their coats with a tipsy glow, I knew that after years of feeling like there were no clear signposts on my life's path, I'd found the one that mattered. It was the little chalkboard, the one my mom had dug up from her old teaching supplies, that I'd hung at the top of the staircase to indicate to guests that they were in the right place: it said, "Welcome to The Lost Kitchen."

Over time, I was lucky enough to be able to share my passion with more and more people, first at regular suppers in my apartment, and then eventually filling a restaurant dining room. It wasn't exactly a straight line or simple process (to say the least), but even through hardships and heartbreaks and soul-crushing setbacks, and uncertainty as to whether anything would ever be OK again, the need to connect with people and to nurture them through food that I could make with my own two hands was the driving beat that pushed me through.

For a handful of years, it seemed as if the dust had settled, and I was able to ease into a new rhythm. I was cooking in my beloved mill on Freedom Pond, and my life was quiet and small. Its boundaries were essentially drawn around the tiny town of Freedom, Maine—I never had much reason to leave, as the ingredients I cooked with at my restaurant came mostly from farms I could see from my window. The farthest anything traveled was the coffee and bread I drove three hours round-trip to get every Tuesday from Deer Isle, part of a spray of islands just off the coast. I was living and working in the place that had raised me, every day passing the houses, barns, roads, and people who were sewn into the fabric of my life. It was familiar and quiet, and I liked it that way. As long as I could serve my food with the same intention and care as when I'd hosted my very first supper club, it didn't matter who walked through my door. I didn't

mind being just a self-taught cook in her little restaurant in the middle of nowhere.





But along the way, this little restaurant in the middle of nowhere somehow found itself in the international spotlight. While we weren't strangers to a full dining room booked up months in advance, at midnight on April 1, the moment we opened our phone lines for the next season's reservations, the game changed. One news headline read "10,000 calls in 24 hours for a 40-seat restaurant." Our three-line phone system groaned under the weight of all the calls. We couldn't empty the voicemail quickly enough as the requests continued to pour in, to the point that our security system, unable to dial out for hours on end, set off alarms and alerted the fire department. The world had found The Lost Kitchen.

Just like I knew that some things (the integrity of our ingredients, the integrity of our service, the integrity of our commitment to our local community) would never, ever be compromised, even in the face of this surreal boom of visibility, I also knew that other things would have to change. Our reservation system, for one, which now asks hopeful guests to mail us a postcard—a welcome return to the loveliness of handwritten notes that perhaps simultaneously saved the Freedom post office from having to cut back its hours.

I also wanted to figure out how I could find a way for anyone who wanted to partake in this special place to be able to. I saw the thousands of postcards with their heartfelt notes, poems, illustrations, and other personal touches that had not been selected for that season's dinners, and I wanted to build a bigger table, as it were. I wanted to give people a tangible piece of this restaurant that they could take home with them. After all, what will also never change is that I'm still the same girl who just wants to bring guests into my world and take care of them. So I'd like to think of this book as essentially setting a place for everyone at The Lost Kitchen, whether or not you're here in Freedom.

To do that, I've been reflecting on what makes this place so special. To be honest, it's a question I've asked myself over and over again. That's partly because it sometimes mystifies me how a collection of imperfections, mistakes, and lessons learned the hard way could have turned out as they have. But then I remember that the restaurant was never just a restaurant. For one thing, it has never been just a place to work. It is the embodiment of my whole heart and soul. The women who work here are my family, each one contributing her own gifts to round out our village, whether it is growing the flowers we use for the arrangements in the dining room or cultivating the very food we eat or nurturing us all with kindness. The Lost Kitchen is *home*. Every time we open the doors and welcome people inside, it is with the purpose of inviting them to be a part of that. As a result, this kind of sincerity and authenticity has redefined what our guests think of as "restaurant food." You won't find any tweezers, sous vide machines, or culinary degrees here. Many of the dishes that fill the menu come from my childhood memories—things I learned to make on the line at my dad's diner, my mom's specialties that we looked forward to seeing on the table when we got home from school, my grandmother's recipe box classics, and Mainers' rites of passage. The

rest are simple preparations that take the lead from what's good and fresh. And the hospitality details that are there every step of the way to delight, to lull, to indulge, and to connect don't come from any restaurant playbook—they come straight out of our own personal kitchens, living rooms, and dining rooms. But more than anything, when we set out to serve our guests a meal, our ultimate goal is not really to serve them food. It's to create those same feelings I set out to capture back in my apartment all those years ago.

What I discovered organically as I slowly made my way from that supper club to cooking out of a converted Airstream in any farm or field that would have me to running my own restaurant is that it may be the promise of a good meal that first brings people in, but it's the intention to make them feel completely comfortable and at ease that keeps them there long into the evening. It's the difference between people saying, "That was an amazing meal," versus exclaiming, "That was an *amazing night*." And the guiding light that makes it possible is this: simple dishes prepared and served with the utmost thoughtfulness and care.



I can tell you with time-tested certainty that when you care so deeply about what you're doing and about the joy and well-being of your guests, that love can be tasted. People can *feel* it. And it's the best ingredient there is. When you prepare meals with love, when you put your entire self into that beautiful effort, you don't need a big fancy stove. You don't need all those kitchen tools. You don't need complicated recipes or expensive ingredients. You just need a handful of back-pocket

dishes, the resources around you, and a big heart. At its core, The Lost Kitchen is still that four-burner electric range in my apartment. No matter how far we've come since then, we will always remember our roots and the lessons that got us here—which are now yours to enjoy at home.

At the heart of this book are recipes that can suit any meal, any mood, and any season. They are easy to prepare, easy to personalize, and quick to impress. And they all foster the kind of welcoming, communal spirit that we've become known for at The Lost Kitchen. You'll notice that these dishes are not organized by season, as the recipes in my first book were, but rather by their role in a meal: Nibbles & Sips, Soups & Stews, Salads & Sides, Suppers, Sauces & Staples, Sweets, and Sundays. That's because when I craft a menu, I'm always thinking about the mood that each course will bring to the rhythm of the meal. There are starters to welcome and convene, soups to comfort or cool, salads and sides to share, suppers to settle into, and sweets to spoil. (Seriously, I think your guests should feel like spoiled children at the end of a meal—the reason why we oftentimes serve our desserts with a glass of cold milk.) When I think of the perfect meal, it's one during which our guests are moving through these feelings, alternating between getting lost in their own emotions and connecting more deeply with the people around them. It's a dance at the table between individual and collective experiences, a dynamic back-and-forth that is at once evocative and joyful. That begins with every plate or bowl of food that you serve having a purpose. Ask yourself, *How do I want my guests to feel?* It's a more important question than, *What do my guests want to eat?* Because while a dish that meets the craving for a flavor is certainly part of what makes a meal stand out, a dish that meets the craving for an *emotion* is what imprints that memory forever.

And that doesn't stop with the dishes you serve. It's

the plates, the silverware, the music. The smells and sounds. It's that nice, warm bubble that people don't want to leave. In the final chapter [here](#), I've shared some of my favorite "signatures," or subtle touches that create an even more meaningful experience for your guests. For example, you couldn't properly take *The Lost Kitchen* home with you without learning how to bring the outdoors in. I've always felt the romantic tug of nature, so it only makes sense to include it everywhere I possibly can (not to mention the fact that it is completely free). From covering just about every available surface with flea-market vases bursting with foraged arrangements (flowers, branches, seed pods, moss, you name it!) to finishing my dishes with sprays of edible flowers (what could possibly make a salad or sandwich or scoop of ice cream more special?) to infusing herbs and other seasonal botanicals into teas and simple syrups and using them to give my menu a sense of time and place to nestling my signature offering of oysters into a tray of frozen rocks scavenged from right outside my door—the beauty and pleasure of these experiences is made all the more significant by the care that went into making them possible. And all of these touches are available to you— I promise!—with a little planning and a little resourcefulness (and maybe a little trespassing).

This book will teach you how to tie together all the pieces that add up to singular meals and moments. I talk about what to serve, when to serve it, and how to serve it. I talk about how to make your dining room table/kitchen table/picnic blanket/tree stumps in your backyard the kind of place your guests will want to linger for hours, including all the TLK "hacks" that add that last little *something* your guests won't be able to put a finger on but know in their bones is there. Of course, you don't need to reach for all of these details at once. In fact, sometimes choosing just one or two meaningful gestures goes a long way, like the simple act of offering cold flower- or herb-infused cloths on a hot day (who

said all courses had to be edible? See [here](#)), serving your main course on plates that you've warmed in your oven (a trick I learned from my mother-in-law Julia; see [here](#)), sending your guests home with small bags of Chocolate Coins with Candied Ginger, Rose & Almonds ([here](#)), or just serving someone you love a lazy breakfast on Sunday (one of the most effortlessly luxurious things you can do, which is why there's an entire chapter devoted to it; see [here](#)).

As you move through this book, give yourself the permission and grace to start small and make mistakes. I'll be the first to admit that I've left behind a trail of burned browned butter, underset panna cottas, and rubbery scallops. You shake it off, learn, grow, and move on. (Maybe even have a cry in the pantry.) At the end of the day, what matters most is that you showed up—for yourself and for your guests. When you have a mission to make something special for people you care about, the sear on your steak is almost beside the point (and nothing that a little Roasted Bone Marrow Butter with Chives, [here](#), couldn't fix). My hope is that this book will be a jumping-off point for your own creativity and unique touches, and that it will inspire many gatherings to come. It was, after all, made with love.