

# Food *for* thought

Compiled by Ava Chisling

## The experts:

**Anissa Helou** is a Lebanese-born food writer, broadcaster and cookery school owner, based in London. Her books include *Lebanese Cuisine* (short-listed for the prestigious Andre Simon Awards), *Café Morocco*, *Mediterranean Street Food* (to be published in paperback this August), and *The Fifth Quarter*. Her next book, *Mediterranean Savory Baking*, will be published in January 2007

**Nancy Leson** is the restaurant critic for the *Seattle Times*. She spent nearly 20 years waiting tables before trading her apron and corkscrew for a critic's notebook and keyboard. Before joining the *Times* as lead critic in 1998, her freelance career included food-focused columns in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *Seattle Weekly* and *Seattle Homes and Lifestyles* magazine. She has written and edited many travel guidebooks and her work has appeared in numerous national and international publications

**Ava Chisling:** Starting with an easy question: if we are what we eat, then describe yourselves as lovers of food.

**Anissa Helou:** I am between East and West, probably quite spicy.

**Nancy Leson:** I'm sushi: toro, to be precise, with extra layers of fat.

**Anissa:** I love toro. It looks as though I'm going to like you, Nancy.

**Nancy:** And I like my foods spicy, so we're a match, Anissa.

**Ava:** Since Anissa is from Lebanon and now London, and Nancy is from the United States, would you both be different people if you switched countries? So Anissa, if you had the same mother but were born in NYC, you wouldn't be the same person you are today?

**Anissa:** No, I would not. Unless my mum cooked Lebanese food day in day out and never let me eat outside.

**Nancy:** No one could be like my mom. I talked to her via the internet last

In the first of a series of online round-table discussions, *Royal Wings* invites experts from different parts of the world to explore issues that affect all our lives. This month, two renowned, award-winning writers and chefs talk about their love of food, good company and how perfection can be found in the shape of a roasted chicken

night. She had eaten Italian food in a new joint in New Jersey and described it as 'To die for!'

**Ava:** So both of you were influenced by your mothers?

**Anissa:** You're bound to be influenced by your mum, but also by the culture you are living in. I owe her all I know about Lebanese food and my ability to cook given that I watched her in the kitchen since I was a baby.

**Nancy:** I owe my mother because she had a job and since I was the eldest child, I got into cookery at an early age.

**Ava:** Is it possible to describe the kind of love you have for cooking and eating in a way a non-food lover like me will understand?

**Nancy:** Food, cooking it, dining out, reading about it, learning about it: it's my way of travelling. To open my spice cabinet or my fridge and take out all the 'ethnic' ingredients; to go out to eat at the many different kinds of restaurants; to open a cookbook all this is to travel. Don't you think that's true for most people?

**Anissa:** I like to cook because, as well as eating it, I like to create delicious food and offer it to my friends. And as for eating, I love excellent food. Obviously my first love was Lebanese food but then I moved onto Japanese, Italian, Moroccan, Turkish and as they are my fields of expertise, I'm getting better and better at cooking these foods.



**Nancy:** My idea of a great shopping trip is to go into a speciality food store or to a market and see what interesting new things I can buy. I can't get enough Asian food: Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Malaysian, Korean.

**Ava:** What do you think, Anissa? Do most people equate food with travel?

**Anissa:** I don't think so. It really depends on what they're looking for. Italian people, for instance, only like their own cuisine.

**Nancy:** For me, food is a way of finding comfort, perhaps with the food of one's childhood, say, pot roast or a corned beef sandwich, but also of going beyond who I am.

**Anissa:** ...but cultures like the UK or US – their cuisines are not so exciting.

**Ava:** Over to you to defend 400 million Americans, Nancy.

**Nancy:** Perhaps I'm more open-minded than most, but I see the food world in the US as opening up more, and not just in the urban centres. The multiculturalism and the lack of true 'American' foods are bringing on this change.

**Anissa:** But if you go to regular restaurants in the US you still often get pretty horrid food unless it's pancakes and maple syrup. I'm exaggerating, but still...

**Nancy:** Pizza and pasta are 'American'. Hotdogs are 'American'. Sushi in every supermarket is 'American'...

**Anissa:** Sushi is not American!

**Ava:** Oh no! I think the world's first online food fight has started.

**Nancy:** Maybe it's because I come from a very interesting food city [Seattle], but travelling elsewhere I see it too: the acceptance of an international palate in American food culture.

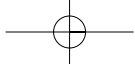
**Ava:** Do you believe food can bridge cultures?

**Nancy:** Having spent the better part of eight years with an Iranian friend who was a superb home cook (and is now chef/owner of an Italian restaurant in San Francisco), I learned to open my mind to many kinds of foods I had never have eaten. This includes goat's head soup, kidneys, spices and herbs I'd never seen before. I've learned to incorporate many of his great dishes into my own repertoire and now my Irish-American husband thinks home-made flatbread with feta is the greatest breakfast item ever.

**Anissa:** Just think about [the film] *Babette's Feast* and how the puritanical group mellowed [under the influence of good food]. I've had the opposite experience: I had great food on the table spoiled by a political and personal discussion between two friends who hated each other.

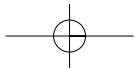
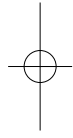
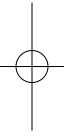
**Ava:** So food may be wonderful but human nature can still ruin it.

**Nancy:** When I eat alone at sushi bars, which I do regularly, I always order the strange stuff and inevitably get to discuss, and even share it, with strangers. That's what makes the dining experience so special for me: the sharing of food, culture and happiness. ▶



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**Anissa:** I like that story. I absolutely agree. That's why I like street food so much – I get food and human contact when I'm travelling.

**Ava:** Would either of you be close to someone who did not appreciate food?

**Anissa:** Not even as a friend. I find people who don't appreciate food bizarre. I don't even like travelling to countries where the food is awful.

**Nancy:** When I was dating my husband and went to his house for the first time, he was chopping nuts and apples for a pie when I arrived. Later, he pulled a lamb roast out of the oven and excused himself to take it outdoors, saying, 'I'm going to finish this on the grill.' I turned to my friends and said 'I'm going to marry this guy' and I did. Food has a huge impact on who I choose to be around.

**Ava:** Does food have to be expensive to be good?

**Nancy:** Have you ever roasted a perfect \$4 chicken?

**Anissa:** A simple sandwich from a stall in the souk can be divine.

**Ava:** Describe the feeling of divineness from eating something simple.

**Nancy:** As a restaurant critic, I always describe that as the thing that makes me close my eyes and say, 'Wow.'

**Ava:** Do you both feel that a non-food lover can be taught to love food?

**Anissa:** I say you can convert them if there is enough interest.

**Nancy:** I see folks with no interest in food as lacking in a willingness to explore something really important, something easily attainable as well.

**Ava:** Do you think food lovers are more emotional than the rest of us?

**Anissa:** I think they're more – sexy.

**Nancy:** I agree. Think about it: the scents, the textures, the temperatures.

**It might be that proverbial roasted chicken, one of the first things I learned to cook. You take this ugly, naked, legged little thing, spice it, roast it and out comes something glorious yet simple**

**Ava:** What dish has meant the most to you personally?

**Nancy:** It might be that proverbial roasted chicken, one of the first things I learned to cook. You take this ugly, naked, legged little thing, spice it, roast it and out comes something glorious yet simple. And I can just cry when confronted with a perfect plate of sashimi.

**Anissa:** The first dish I ever cooked was green beans in tomato sauce. I was 16 and I made it in the middle of the night. My mom was really impressed.

**Ava:** What is the biggest misconception – and biggest truth – about Middle Eastern and American cuisines?

**Nancy:** Big misconception about American food is that no one cooks in the US anymore.

**Anissa:** Biggest misconception is that it is called Middle Eastern food. Lebanese, Persian, Turkish, Moroccan... but not Middle Eastern. The biggest truth is that there is quite a lot of difference between Turkish and Lebanese dishes, for instance, and that neither is spicy.

**Nancy:** As an American who eats lots of 'Middle Eastern' food, I think the biggest misconception here is that it's 'all garlicky' and, as Anissa says, that it's 'Middle Eastern' food.

**Ava:** As a final question, please tell me why food is such a big part of your lives?

**Nancy:** For me, it's not the food itself, it's what brought it to the table. At home, or at a friend's house, it's about the cooking: the time, the skill, the ingredients used. At a restaurant it's about the entertainment, the service, the atmosphere and then, most importantly, the food.

**Anissa:** I must say I'm more interested in food than in anything else. I mean I wouldn't like a beautiful restaurant if the food was average. I wouldn't go back.

**Ava:** Thank you both for a most lively discussion.

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