



# NEAR A THOUSAND TABLES

A HISTORY OF FOOD

FELIPE FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO

AUTHOR OF MILLENNIUM

PRAISE FOR  
*NEAR A THOUSAND TABLES*

"Felipe Fernández-Armesto adds to his distinguished record of lively and wide-ranging books with this latest account of a subject that interests all of us: food. Whether you are content with bread or your taste instead runs to snails or human flesh, you will take away from this book a new appreciation of your favorite menu."

—Jared M. Diamond, author of the  
Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel*

"Felipe Fernández-Armesto, one of my favorite historians, never fails to enlighten and surprise: *Near a Thousand Tables* is no exception. With erudite gusto and analytical savvy he traces the long and complex evolution of food since the Middle Ages. After reading this book, you'll never think of eating the same again. Highly recommended!"

—Douglas Brinkley, director of the Eisenhower Center for  
American Studies and professor of history at the University of New Orleans

"As interesting to the hungry man in the street as it is to the austere academic."

—*The Wall Street Journal* (Europe)

"A sparkling ramble through history which scatters countless pointers to new research along the way. It is intellectual history, but not in the least arid: His opinions are strong, but supremely palatable."

—*Financial Times* (London)

"An intellectual digest . . . One of the most serious works on the subject, both analytical and entertaining."

—*Sunday Review* (London)

HISTORY/COOKING



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When eating escargots de Bourgogne at a three-star restaurant, diners are consuming the world's oldest "cattle." Indeed, snails have been bred for food for more than five thousand years, everywhere from Sumeria to ancient Rome to prehistoric Scotland. The nutmeg customarily sprinkled on eggnog was, once upon a time, the cause of a war between the Dutch and the English. The oysters with which a gourmet's meal begins are, uniquely, eaten uncooked and unkilld . . . a food that unites twenty-first-century humanity with our hominid ancestors. Every ingredient of our past and our present can be read off our plates: our identity, our place in society and the place of our society in the world. In *Near a Thousand Tables*, Oxford historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto tells the fascinating story of food as cultural as well as culinary history—ecology as well as gastronomy.

At the heart of this engrossing book are what Fernández-Armesto calls the eight great revolutions in the world history of food: the origins of cooking, which set humankind on a course apart from other species; the ritualization of eating, which brought magic and meaning into people's relationship with what they ate; the inception of herding and the invention of agriculture, perhaps the two greatest revolutions of all; the rise of inequality, which made food an indicator of rank and led to the development of haute cuisine; the long-range trade in food, which, practically alone, broke down cultural barriers; the ecological exchanges, which revolutionized the global distribution of plants and livestock; and, finally, the industrialization and globalization of food. *Near a Thousand Tables* reveals what microwave families and tube-fed astronauts have in common with pre-social hominids; why India is the source of street food in Cairo and court food in Isfahan; why the name "avocado" is derived from an Aztec anatomical term.

Because cuisine is a—perhaps *the*—defining characteristic of a culture, *Near a Thousand Tables* is a sampler of civilizations; even more, it is an exploration in

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historical ecology, and even of the history of science. Above all, perhaps, because food is universally appealing, this book is always—even at its most instructive—unashamedly about the pleasures of eating . . . pleasures that have been immortalized by everyone from Homer to M. F. K. Fisher.

Boldly conceived, the work of a brilliant scholar who is “dazzlingly erudite” (*Boston Globe*), “contentious and provocative” (*The Independent*), “as iconoclastic as he is ambitious” (*The New York Times Book Review*), *Near a Thousand Tables* is a lively and utterly original achievement.



FELIPE FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO is a Professorial Fellow of Queen Mary, University of London, and a member of the Modern History Faculty at Oxford University. He is the author of thirteen books, including *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years* and *Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature*.

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of Food*

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