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The People's Chef: The Culinary Revolution of Alexis Soyer

Ruth Brandon

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During the first half of the 19th century, Alexis Soyer became the most famous cook -and man-in London. In addition to his kitchen inventions and best-selling cookbooks, Soyer was part of many of the great events and social changes of his time. In her exciting biography of a culinary giant, Ruth Brandon uses each phase of his legendary career to explore a different aspect of 19th-century life, including the destruction of the English peasantry, the Irish potato famine, and Britain's disastrous involvement in the Crimea.

Born in France, Soyer moved to England in his teens and rose to early fame as head chef at London's Reform Club, where he designed a kitchen so innovative that it became a tourist attraction. He opened London's first French restaurant, and was linked to some of the most famous actresses and dancers of the day. Yet for all his flamboyance, Soyer's fame lies in the work he did for those in need. He wrote cookbooks for the poor and designed a model soup-kitchen during the Irish famine. He traveled to the Crimea to manage the kitchens in Florence Nightingale's hospital, and invented a battlefield cook-stove that remained in use as recently as the Gulf War.

Soyer's influence remains today with three of his books still in print. The People's Chef at long last pays tribute to this remarkable man who had such a profound effect on 19thcentury society.

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