

## NEWS FROM PROSPECT BOOKS

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Prospect Books is run from home in London by myself, with Tom Jaine editing *PPC* from Devon. How does this tiny company manage to tell the world about the books we love working on? It's quite a conundrum, really. One solution of course is to obtain third-party endorsement such as we had for *Slippery Noodles*, by Hsiang Ju Lin, which I published last year. In the Spring 2016 issue of *The Cleaver Quarterly* (#7) <[www.thecleaverquarterly.com](http://www.thecleaverquarterly.com)> there was a pleasing short interview with the author which went as follows:

Let's say your goal in life was to learn how Chinese people eat. And let's imagine a genie granted you the ability to read Chinese. Now you could access the vast cultural repository of cookbooks, travelogues, memoirs, reporting and Internet discussions about food. But to travel back beyond the 13th century or so, you'd need a magic wand to unlock the texts written in classical Chinese, where the secrets of the earliest Chinese experiments in gastronomy lie buried.

Hsiang Ju Lin is that magic wand. We were lucky enough to ask her a few questions about *Slippery Noodles*, which is addition, received acclaim from the BBC Radio 4 Food Programme as the favourite food book of 2015, chosen by food writer Xanthe Clay.

**In both scope and execution, this book is a monumental undertaking. Was this project originally so ambitious or did your scope expand as you pursued your research?**

It took me about eight years to write it and over a year to find a publisher (thanks to Tom Jaine!). It started out as a translation of an old cookbook that I found in a secondhand bookstore in Hong Kong (cited a few times in *Slippery Noodles*). My relatives found the translation boring. All right, I said, but didn't you like the footnotes? The footnotes became the current book.

**Why was *Slippery Noodles* chosen as the title?**

The title is easy on the tongue. Also, it is a type of noodle that probably preceded the 4th century and appears in various forms at least to the end of the 19th century.

**What is the oldest condiment of the Chinese repertoire that remains on menus today?**

Perhaps not the oldest but one of the most used is the fermented beans that now appear in braised dishes and steamed fish, for example.

**You describe making sponge cake from a Qing-century recipe that relied upon incense sticks to measure cooking time. Did you conduct any other hands-on experiments?**

I like Jia Sixie's scrambled eggs. I freeze bean curd in Yuan Mei's fashion. I developed my own (simple) way to make pressed noodles without making a hole in the wall for the bamboo pole. I make excellent crunchy fish balls. In fact I like most things sold in Hong Kong noodle shops, so I like to try my hand at them.

**Of all the writers whose cookbooks you put a spotlight on, whom would you like to share a meal with?**

Without a doubt, Yuan Mei.

**In your opinion, what's the best Chinese restaurant in the world?**

The best meal that I ever had was in an outdoor stall in an alley in Hong Kong, near Central. Roast goose over rice.

**In every era, the reigning "eight delicacies" sum up the culinary aspirations of that time. If you could taste any of these delicacies from any past dynasty, which one would you choose?**

I would like to taste the dish made with carp's tail [from the Song Dynasty]. The tail of the carp was a delicacy because it had both the fat and the lean. The skin and its underlying fat were bonded to the sweet flesh. The carp's fins were left attached to the tail so that when cooked, juices collected where flesh met the delicate bones.

**In modern China, where meat consumption is available to all and exotic ingredients can be easily summoned to one's door via e-commerce, do you think the idea of "eight delicacies" still has any meaning?**

Of course the eight delicacies will go on, wherever there are food snobs, great cooks and rich patrons.

This week, I sent a catalogue to press, which I will have at the April 2016 London Book Fair. The first book featured is *BY THE ATLANTIC* by Caroline Conran – a name that still brings a shiver to my spine, as I have a copy of the *CONRAN COOKBOOK* in my kitchen. We have had several meetings at her elegant Holland Park apartment, and her photographs of pintxos, seafood, piles of oysters and fish marinating on open grills have happily been safely transferred onto computers. The chapters are arriving in my inbox, and I then will spend time adding in imperial measurements, so our American readers can prepare the recipes. Of course, with pintxos, many are very time consuming to make at home, and others ridiculously easy, if you happen to have sardines, salted anchovies and tomatoes to hand.

The next title is full of vigour, argument, and song; *FOOD WORTH FIGHTING FOR* by Josh Sutton tells of the food fights. From Enclosure Acts of the fifteenth century, felt to be too severe on the peasants by Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII, to the Riot Act of 1751, the Corn Laws, Captain Swing and the destruction of threshing machines in rural England, to the fact that allotments were frowned upon, as they gave the means to produce food to ordinary people., this book explains that the production of food is key to a civilized society, and that the present day is far from perfect.

Vegan diets and the history of the 1970s vegan pioneers is the subject of Joanne O'Connell's book, *THE HOMEMADE VEGAN*. They were certainly industrious, making their own cashew butter and tofu, as the supermarkets did not have any products. Of course, we are now spoilt for choice, but I would lay money on the homemade products being better. I must admit that I make my own yoghurt every week – mainly because I do not want to pay several pounds for prepared yogurt that may contain sugar, but also because I find it calming.

Then the redoubtable Jane McMorland Hunter and Sally Hughes have written *BERRIES – GROWING & COOKING*. Also by Jane (with Sue Dunster), *QUINCES* has been reprinted twice in a year. When I went to see Jane to discuss her new

book, I was given a slice of Strawberry Meringue Cake, made by Sally Hughes for their book group later that day. This was a magnificent vanilla sponge cake, filled with strawberries and cream, with a crispy, crusty meringue topping. It is a cake to show off with, and to enjoy on a hot summer's day. The book is worth it just for this one recipe.

And just published – THE JOURNEY OF THE BEAN – from cacao to chocolate by Samuel Mutter. If you want to find out how to bake chocolate bread, make a sea bass dinner with a mole sauce, and learn about the way *Theobroma cacao* moved from its Amazonian origins across the world, and how the economics of cacao are still in flux, this book is perfect.

And Jane McMorland Hunter is promising a new book on nuts, for 2017. If you have any passions you wish to put into a book, please contact Prospect Books.