

BOOK REVIEWS

Ronnie Scott: *Salad Days*: Penguin (Australia), 2014: 45 pp., p'back, \$Aus9.99. Self-described 'foodie' and, more particularly, 'gastronaut', Ronnie Scott asks: 'So why do we eat the way we do – and is it right that we do so? Is the backlash against foodie culture just the general noise about anything cool, new, conspicuous, exuberant and ultimately liable to contain words borrowed from the French? Or is the problem in this case more real, and in need of an actual corrective?' These reflections followed closely on an expensive meal at newly opened Noma in Copenhagen. It was not just having an interest in food that he questioned – to pay some attention to eating is perfectly normal and acceptable – but the seriousness of the interest, since this is what arouses the hackles of the critics.

The question Scott poses is an important one, deserving of a considered and thorough response. How do we justify a serious interest in what and how we eat – and why might we feel an obligation to do so? Why do those with a serious interest in, say, football, or a particular pop group, escape this scrutiny? Unfortunately, the author fails to provide one, limply concluding that 'something that makes us feel good ... has to be worth something'.

Part of the reason, of course, is the duality of food, both essential nourishment and vehicle for meanings and values, embodying the convergence of the material world and the world of ideas. Having a passion for food is like having a passion for Matchbox cars or nineteenth-century clocks – except for one importance difference: food is ephemeral, it cannot be collected and displayed.

The late Don Dunstan, former Premier of South Australia, had a much more direct answer when asked how he reconciled his role on the committee of Freedom from Hunger with his enjoyment of fine food, as though he should feel guilty about spending money at a good restaurant. Reprimanding the questioner, Don responded that self-denial is pointless; we do not help the starving people of the world by failing to purchase and consume the produce of our own country – but we can achieve something by acting as effective citizens to reverse the world's greed.

To be fair, some of Scott's digressions – which seem to have diverted him from his central question – would have repaid longer and deeper discussion. Does social media have a valid role as a means of sharing gastronomic experiences, no longer purely private and personal pleasures? What is the difference between cooking and cuisine? Can we no longer accept a concept of lifestyle that does not include fine dining? Critical responses to such questions from a twenty-something – the Y generation? – could bring a new and imaginative perspective to debate.

BARBARA SANTICH