

DARTMOUTH HOUSING

I suppose it is in the nature of things not to stand still. Since arriving in Dartmouth in 1973, I have treasured the approach to this small town – stepped up one slope of a deep estuary valley – from the west or landward side. At night, you could speed across the plateau with not an inkling of the town over the escarpment. You came at it abruptly, there was a perfect edge to it. No longer. Year by year, it has extended its toehold on the higher ground. The site used to constrain its expansion: the town might become denser, but never larger. With motor cars destroying any sense of distance, all that has changed. Ribbon development is the rage. You might think this anathema, but not in Dartmouth. There will come a time when the town which started at the top of the hill – when Anglo Saxons were leery of riverside life – will end up at the top of the hill again, leaving the waterside for rich weekenders. Already the schools, half the churches, the supermarkets, the carparks, half the housing and the leisure centre are on the hilltop, and the lights of Dartmouth glow from miles away. Matters are getting worse with a proposal to build 400 more houses, of course on the summit. The idea stems from central government's urge to factor in more housing. That was in the days of John Prescott; news has just reached Devon. It doesn't matter where the dwellings are, just build them. Dartmouth is isolated: it is cut off by its river (no bridge), is 13 miles from the next town and anything like a main road. Four hundred houses means 400 full-time jobs and at least 200 part-time. Where? Dartmouth has no employment. If they are family houses, it also means a minimum of 500 new school places. Where? Dartmouth has one of the worst schools in Devon and it is small. Presumably the new inhabitants are expected to drive to everything: schools 13 miles away, jobs even further. It has taken the local authority two years to realize that this might be a problem.

A TASTE OF OLD ENGLAND

We lost our hot water system for a week or two in the coldest snap. This coincided with a visit from a company making a television programme about the life and work of Dorothy Hartley: no subject more deserving. It was therefore apposite that I was able to show them our giant water boiler, all in gleaming copper, that I had bought at Christmas. It holds five gallons, has the authentic long spout and tap so that you can draw water off

without burning your fingers, and worked a treat on top of the woodburner (rather than off a hanger in the fireplace) keeping us in sufficient water to maintain a seemly life.

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

The house has been echoing to debate about Julian Barnes's Booker Prize-winning novella and we thought we were unique, but in fact the discussions are happening everywhere near you. I could not grasp its qualities, save for the fact it was elegantly written. It did not benefit from brevity, there was no space to let a character develop; the action was incredible; the motives were inscrutable; where it should have had resonance (because author and reader went through much the same mill), it had none because the author misread entirely the motives and behaviour of his actors. Its discussion lubricated many dinners. I also reckon that the enjoyment gained by many from the now-notorious Geoff Dyer review is because readers found the universal praise lavished on the work did not quite match their experience.

CATHERINE DICKENS

The bicentenary of her husband has seen a welcome renewal of interest in Catherine Dickens. There is to be a television programme; there was the biography of her by Lillian Nayder; and there has even been a paean in her praise (and of her *What Shall we Have for Dinner?*) by Penelope Vogler in the *Guardian*. Ms Vogler is editor of the Penguin *Great Food* series, that strange set of a-historical historical revivals mentioned an issue or two ago. Her article seems to be a précis of Susan Rossi Wilcox's excellent study (*Dinner for Dickens*) which we published five long years since and which has never received the sales or the praise which it deserved.

TOMATA HONEY

We have all been enjoying a pot of tomato honey made by our son-in-law Paul Adams from an American recipe in *Miss Leslie's Complete Cookery* (1837) which was reprinted by Elizabeth David in her *Omelette and a Glass of Wine*. The tomatoes are cooked and strained through a jelly bag; the flavourings are lemon and peach leaves (or almond essence); it is heavily sugared. It tastes divine.

AMAZON

I was struck a blow when ordering Matthew Sweet's *The West End Front: The Wartime Secrets of London's Grand Hotels* (Faber, £20) to find that Amazon were offering it at £8, post free. The book, by the way, is good fun. He has been diligent in seeking out survivors; he has a journalist's facility for telling a yarn; his gallery of characters is eye-popping; the stuff on labour disputes at the Savoy is of value; its only fault is being slightly over-long. But the Amazon price. Which publisher can turn a profit with discounts like that? How do they do it? Which reminds me that publishers themselves are not innocent of market distortion. Not least, journal publishers. Which brings us on to the new proposals for open access for scientific research. It smacks of protectionism of the worst sort. Why there isn't 'Green' open access for all humanities and science is beyond me. There should be a strike by the entire academic world to force the publishers' hands. Just compare the prices of Presses Universitaires de France, below, to OUP.

OFF TO FRANCE

At the end of spring, we spent a week in Burgundy and a week getting there. Exposure to French hôtellerie and restauration was, as always, of great interest. Those of you with delicate constitutions had better now stop reading as I indulge in a moment's French-bashing. We were once again struck forcibly by the contrast between town and country. The towns, especially in northern metropolitan areas, seemed hyperactive. Parking was impossible, traffic dense, streets crowded. There was every bit as much a divide between the wealthy Parisian region and less populated parts as there is between south-eastern England and the rest of our own country. The change in small towns and villages in the face of rampant supermarketry and the decline of small-scale agriculture and its attendant services is also as noticeable as here in south Devon. The desertification of the great northern plains (farmers might call them prairies, but bird-watchers will prefer the term wasteland) was also something to behold. Fields of cereals stretching as far as the eye can see, with not a human (or any other wild life) in view. We tried hard to eat at and stay in places with some form of third-party recommendation, so reckon we were giving them a fair chance to show their proper qualities, but these were often not something to extol. When choosing a place to rest our heads, the most satisfactory solution seemed

to be a characterful bed and breakfast operation. Alastair Sawday's guides are a starting point for these, as are the various associations of château proprietors. From these, you can find remarkable buildings and owners with personalities and taste. The level of comfort is often extremely high. Of course, you can draw the short straw of a place run by a madman or someone crazed by the concept of rules and regulation, but we were lucky this year. Unless you single-handedly rescue the Euro, hotels are only too likely to offer you polyester bed linen and dreadful pillows. Breakfasts in France seem to have embraced the self-service buffet system. I find this requires a depressing level of alertness at too early an hour as you fossick among a giant display of things you don't want to locate a croissant, some butter, some jam and so on. Croissants seem to have plunged still lower in quality; brioche is a better bet. Coffee, too, is not generally good. The Nespresso machine appears to have a stranglehold on many proprietors (even Marc Meneau at L'Espérance), the cafetière a lost art. Although by no means shy about room prices, the French cost of breakfast never ceases to raise the eyebrows. At L'Espérance (two stars in Michelin), a magical place, this was €28 per person for *petit déjeuner simple* and €34 for *complet*. Sated by the previous night's dinner, who would want more than coffee and a croissant? But to justify the exorbitant whack on the wallet the *simple* was a table laden with breads and fine home-made jams, tip-top butter, cherries, nectarines and strawberries, good yoghurt, crème caramel, poached pears, and a croque-monsieur if still peckish. That there are changes afoot in restaurants is exemplified by their sometimes odd approach to cheese. The *chariot de fromages* survives, but is not so universal as it was. We repeatedly came up against the *croustillant de fromage* as a substitute. This is a lump of cheese wrapped in filo pastry and baked in the oven. One particularly adventurous place had balanced the lump on top of a slice of *pain d'épices* before the final wrapping. Shades of deep-fried Camembert. Adventure for the sake of it was a common theme, when all one wanted was careful straight cookery. Mashed potato laced with pink grapefruit was one high point of this tendency, which was also evidenced by an urge to overcomplicate. Thus a fine dish of candied oranges was overpowered by an equally fine chocolate mousse. Apart, they would have been matchless; together, a mess (I confess to a horror of the combination). The need to elaborate (to seem to give value) is best seen in the multiplication of amuse-bouches, *avant-desserts*, intercourses, nibbles and extraneous matter popped in front of you when

all you want is the meal you ordered. There was a time when they were really good (often better than the meal itself) but now, become compulsory, they are largely boring and no great advertisement of the chef's ability (and usually served straight out of the fridge). One evening we were constrained to eat in an Indian restaurant (which are multiplying). It was run by cheerful migrants from England, but the cooking was unrecognizable, even if the menus familiar. Some might aver the flavours more delicate, more refined. In fact they were bloodless, the spices almost imperceptible. Not for the first time, the ethnic alternative was not a solution.

THEODORE ZELDIN

It was with much pleasure that we read of the award of the highest category of the Légion d'honneur to Theodore Zeldin. One of the secret delights of our annual excursion to the Oxford Symposium is a fleeting encounter with this great man.

TESTICLES

While advertng to a planned public outing of Giles MacDonogh and myself in discussion about testicles and other offal at the Abergavenny Food Festival this September, I was passed this press report by Tony Brookes, maker of fine wine in South Australia. 'An Australian hoaxer left organizers of the world testicle-cooking championship hanging after claiming he was Australia's leading kangaroo testicle cook. A man calling himself Nigel Bevan failed to turn up after contacting organizers to boast of his credentials and order a supply of kangaroo testicles for the competition. Local villagers in Sumska Cuca in northern Serbia turned out in huge numbers to see what delights the Australian could come up with and a band was ready to play to welcome the mysterious Mr Bevan. The musicians were disappointed and the organizers were out of pocket after buying the kangaroo testicles with no one to cook them.'

MIKHAIL PROKHOROV FOUNDATION

Some, if not all of you will have heard of Darra Goldstein's decision to relinquish her distinguished editorship of *Gastronomica*. I believe it takes effect with the coming new year. So far as Prospect is concerned, an unexpected consequence is that I am to publish a Russian book by the

late Yuri Lotman and Jelena Pogosjan which is entitled (in our language) *High Society Dinners. A Panorama of Life in the Capital* and treats of the manuscript archive of the Durnovo family in St Petersburg in the mid-19th century inasmuch as it relates to food, cookery and entertainment. The book was first published in 1996. Lotman was an extremely distinguished cultural historian. Darra Goldstein is to provide the introduction and Marian Schwartz the translation. When the project was mooted I protested that Prospect had no funds to underwrite the labours of so many important people. It was suggested that I might appeal for funds to the aforementioned foundation, created by the world's twelfth-richest man (from gold and platinum says *Forbes*) and devoted to helping the greater dissemination of Russian literature. The Foundation has proved extremely generous and I am grateful for their support. The book may be expected in 2014. If any of you is keen to translate other Russian books, the relevant programme is called Transcript and may be further investigated at <<http://www.prokhorovfund.com/projects/own/195>>.

SALON DES LIVRES GOURMANDS, PARIS, MARCH 2012

I had another outing to Edouard Cointreau's Gourmand bookshow in a Paris that was slightly less cold than previous years. It is always interesting to see what new stuff is around, although the exhibitors from England and the United States are in very small numbers. The best thing was a stand from the Presses Universitaires de France which showed many books relating to food history, mostly from Rennes and François-Rabelais de Tours. I give below a list of their titles. This is the nearest they are going to get to a review in the immediate future, so I think it best to give you news of them at least. I bought them all for the *Companion*. There will be a few evenings' reading there. Note the very competitive prices of these books.

Nelly Labère, ed. *Être à table au moyen âge*: Casa De Velázquez, Madrid, 2010, 279 pp., paperback, €24.00.

Annie Hubert et Michel Figeac: *La table et les ports. Cuisine et société à Bordeaux et dans les villes portuaires*: Presses Universitaires De Bordeaux, 2006, 304 pp., paperback, €20.00.

Florent Quellier: *La Table des Français. Une histoire culturelle*: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007, 270 pp., paperback, €20.00.

Robin Nadeau: *Les Manières de table dans le monde gréco-romain*: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais & Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010, 494 pp., paperback, €24.00.

Valérie Boudier: *La Cuisine du peintre. Scène de genre et nourriture au cinquecento*: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais & Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010, 372pp., paperback, €20.00.

Athéna-Hélène Stourna: *La Cuisine à la scène. Boire et manger au théâtre du XX^e siècle*: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais & Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011, 339 pp., paperback, €20.00.

Martin Bruegel, Marilyn Nicoud & Eva Barlösius (eds.): *Le Choix des aliments. Informations et pratiques alimentaires de la fin du moyen âge à nos jours*: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais & Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010, 260 pp., paperback, €18.00.

Matthieu Lecoutre: *Ivresse et Ivrognerie dans la France moderne*: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais & Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011, 395 pp., paperback, €21.00.

Marc de Ferrière le Vayer & Jean-Pierre Williot (eds.): *La Pomme de terre de la renaissance au XXI^e siècle*: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais & Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011, 418 pp., paperback, €20.00.

I should also announce with pride that Giles MacDonogh's translation of *Testicules* came second in the Gourmand Food Awards, category Translation.

I was interested to note the considerable price asked for the Robert Laffont series of French chefs' books (around 1500 euros for the full set). I also noted that while single volumes of these command a price of approximately 50–60 euros, the first edition of Alan Chapel's is 'très rare et très recherchée' and costs 150 euros. Why this should have been so rare and sought after by contrast to the rest of them, I don't know. (These prices come from the second-hand bookseller [with a stall on the Seine] Alain Huchet, 46 rue Gassendi, 75014 Paris.) Other antiquarian booksellers I should also mention are Henri-Pierre Millescamps, 7 rue Saint-Front, 24000 Périgueux, and Librairie Gastérea from Lausanne in Switzerland (gasterea@citycable.ch).

The other exciting development, which is in anticipation more than reality because I was unable to buy the books in Paris, is the astonishing output of the University of San Martín de Porres in Lima, Peru. They really do have a lot of interesting and exciting books on Peruvian food

history. So many indeed, that I can only point you to the website <<http://www.elblogdelfondo.com/search/abel/Libros%20de%20Gastronom%C3%ADa>>. That address will get you to their gastronomy list.

SYMPOSIUM OF GASTRONOMY

The next Symposium in Australia has been announced for Sydney, 5–8 April 2013, the subject is ‘The Generous Table’ which explores themes of hospitality, sharing and social inclusion in an era of billionaire power, greed is good, anger and entitlement, privatization and ‘no’. Michael Symons has sent me their call for contributions, though the deadline is 10 August, 2012 which may have been passed by the time you read this. What used to be called ‘soup kitchens’ have changed in interesting ways with charity meals providing not just nutrition but also community. The Loaves and Fishes Free Restaurant in the Sydney suburb of Ashfield will thus provide an appropriate venue. Operated by the Uniting Church’s Exodus Foundation, the restaurant serves around 600 meals daily for the homeless and others in need. Separately, and also responding to requests at the eighteenth symposium in Canberra, the organizers invite considerations (papers, meals, panel discussions) of gastronomy itself. How is Brillat-Savarin’s dream doing? Has the symposium done its job? As is usual with the Australian event, when they ask for contributions they’re not just talking about papers, but also contributions of a more creative kind, be it cookery, performance or who knows what. For more information contact: sydneysymposium2013@gmail.com.

CORDON BLEU IN SYDNEY

While many of you will know of the Cordon Bleu involvement in gastronomical studies at the University of Adelaide, some might not be aware that the combination of the university and Cordon Bleu no longer operates and Adelaide continues its courses without an outside partner. Cordon Bleu itself now has a new partner in the Southern Cross University’s School of Tourism and Hospitality Management. They are offering a Masters of Gastronomic Tourism. If you want more information about this, dial up <<http://www.scu.edu.au/coursesin2013/>>.

EDIBLE MUSHROOMS

As with most English people, I have never fully embraced the world of the wild mushroom. Anxious not to follow in the steps of the myriad French who made a dreadful error, conscious that I can walk through miles of woodland seeing nothing desirable where a practised hunter will spot a skipload, I prefer to leave the activity of gathering mushrooms to those more expert. But sometimes I do pick the inescapable: the giant puffballs, the chicken-of-the-woods, the big things we all know to be OK. Now I find that even that simplest fungus, the chicken-of-the-woods or sulphur shelf, presents a hidden menace. I quote Wikipedia: ‘The sulphur shelf mushroom sometimes comes back year after year when the weather suits its sporulation preferences. From late spring to early autumn, the sulphur shelf thrives, making it a boon to mushroom hunters and a bane to those concerned about the health of their trees. This fungus causes a brown cubical rot and embrittlement which in later stages ends in the collapse of the host tree, as it can no longer flex and bend in the wind.’ Sad to say, the high winds and rain of the last few weeks caused just such a collapse, of our largest oak tree from which I have merrily picked many a slab of the fungus. I should have retained my original suspicion of the order.

OXFORD COMPANION, 3rd EDITION

Life at Prospect Books may be occasionally interrupted over the next six months by my having signed a contract with Oxford University press to oversee the composition of a third edition to Alan Davidson’s *Oxford Companion to Food*. A publisher needs constantly to refresh a book such as this to persuade bookshops to continue stocking it in the way it deserves. However, were the Press to lay waste the original in order to construct a wholly new and up-to-date edition, they would, in the eyes of almost all the readers, be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. So, as with the second, the third edition will be a conservative exercise, keeping Alan’s gems while attempting some nod to the very rapid changes that have come about the world of food, food writing, and the appreciation of the table. Any corrections or ideas will be gratefully received.

ANECDOTE OF TALLEYRAND

Mark Cherniavsky has sent me the following communication:

‘I’ve recently come across an anecdote about Talleyrand at dinner in Paris, which I have never seen before in the usual sources. It appears in the 1787–1817 diaries of Frances, Lady Shelley (published for the first and last time in 1912) and caught the attention of Maria Polushkin Robbins, editor of the small *Cook’s Quotation Book – A Literary Feast* published in 1983 by Pushcart Press in New York. I suspect that Lady Shelley’s diary remained obscure until it was added to student reading lists and it has now been reproduced widely in inexpensive editions available from Amazon.

I checked the quotation in Ms Robbins’ book against the original in the diaries themselves and it is in essence the same. The date is August 25, no year is given but evidently the Duke of Wellington was in Paris just before the battle of Waterloo and accompanied Lady Shelley to dinner to mark the occasion. Lady Shelley was Frances Winkley by birth and married the heir to the Shelley baronetcy, thus becoming the poet’s aunt. Her diary is a lively, colourful account of her socializing in Paris at a time when so many legendary figures were there to negotiate a lasting European peace.

‘... “Let’s go to Crauford’s and end with Talleyrand’s” [the Duke] said.’ After a number of other observations, Lady Shelley continues: ‘At the beginning of the week we dined with Talleyrand. ... During the whole repast the general conversation was upon eating. Every dish was discussed, and the antiquity of every bottle of wine supplied the most eloquent annotations. Talleyrand himself analysed the dinner with as much interest, and seriousness as if he had been discussing some political question of importance.’

In my own experience of accompanying my foodie wife, Anne Willan, on special dining occasions, I have observed how the topic of cooking, eating and drinking can take over the entire conversation. I am encouraged that even such an august personage as the Prince de Talleyrand fell into the same habit and wonder if it is peculiar to the French? The British, I suspect, are still embarrassed by conversation about food and cooks, and prefer small talk about the weather. Or has the rise of celebrity chefs in England changed the dynamic of English table talk while dining?

PROSPECT BOOKS LATEST NEWS

For whatever reason there has been insensate activity at Prospect Books. We have published Andrew Dalby's translation of Walter of Bibbesworth with the Anglo-Norman text laid out in parallel; we have sent Alan Davidson's two seafood books for reprinting with new covers (they should be back before July is out); we have reprinted Hannah Glasse in a slightly different format to make it sit more easily on the shelf; we have paperbacked Peter Brears's master-work *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England*; we have received back from the printer the next volume of Oxford Symposium proceedings, *Celebration*; we have published Michael Raffael's *Messy Cook*, the first cookbook with full colour photographs that we have ever done (looking, most will say, as if it was designed in the 1950s). I am quite breathless. Your only duty is to buy them and then I will be rich yet still panting.

†HILARY RUBINSTEIN

It was with great sadness I heard of Hilary's death in May of this year. He was the literary agent of Alan Davidson and many other distinguished authors. The pleasure I derived from any dealings I had with him was very great and he will be much missed.

DI MURRELL

The first article in this issue is a look at the cooking on English narrow-boats when canals were still an economic artery. It's a real pleasure to report that its author Di Murrell was awarded the Sophie Coe Prize at the recent Oxford Symposium. This means that in two successive years (last year it was Eileen White) PPC authors have scooped the pool. Bravo!