

Jake Tilson: *In at the Deep End*: Quadrille, 2011, 224 pp., paperback, £20.00.

As an amateur cook, I am wary of cooking fish. There, I have admitted it; if I were to attend a support group it wouldn't be AA but FF (fish fearers). I enjoy cooking, but my attempts at preparing fish following recipes from some of the greatest have only resulted in disappointment. So, do I need another cookbook to fill this gap in my culinary offerings? The answer is yes, especially as the author of *In at the Deep End* owns up to his fear of fish on the very first page – 'for as long as I can remember I have always been scared of fish'. Yes, most definitely that is how I feel when attempting to produce a fish dish, even if it comes with a jolly man on the front of the packaging (even then I am guaranteed to burn the contents). So, I immediately warm to this personal voyage of discovery. Tilson will be empathetic and show me there is nothing to fear ... I just have to dip my toe in at the deep end.

*In at the Deep End* is Tilson's second book after his well-received *A Tale of 12 Kitchens: Family Cooking in Four Countries*. As *The Observer Food Monthly* wrote, 'a fascinating combination of autobiography, recipes and pictures put together artistically.' Before I became too involved with the recipes, I flicked through the rest of the book, stopping as images arrested and intrigued me, enjoying the bricolage approach. I then turned to the first chapter, 'Bacala for Breakfast'. Like Tilson, I have a love affair with Venice, so the pictures painted in the first chapter were familiar. I too have eaten alongside locals, on foggy November evenings, and visited the Coop Italia. As apparent in his first book, Tilson's reflections have an honest sense of time and place which make his experiences seem real and drew me in.

Reading about Venice encouraged me to choose one of the recipes, from that chapter, in the comfort of my kitchen. In at the deep end, I look at the method for *Folpetti Lessi Conditi* (mini-octopus). The first instruction is to remove the eyes, beak, and internal organs of each octopus, and wash the rest thoroughly. I feel lost before I begin. (I do wonder how Tilson got to this stage so quickly?) There is little 'technical' description for a fearful amateur, so another recipe for *Bigoli alle Vongole* (*Bigoli* with clams) is marked down as my first outing.

But is this too ambitious for an amateur? I flicked forward and found myself in New York City. The recipe pages are the ones that delighted, so in my eagerness to read the recipes I skipped the descriptive introduction

to this new chapter. I enjoyed reading the small asides, with the species references and the ethical warnings and descriptions of time and place. The next recipe that caught my eye was Bass with Horseradish and Sour Cream Sauce; I recognized all these ingredients and the method seems straightforward.

Shopping for the ingredients was easy, as everything was available locally. Back home, I set out the ingredients for New York-style bass and I was ready to start cooking. The fishmonger had skinned the bass, and it passed the sustainability test. So to begin – at which point hubbie walked in and said, ‘You’re not cooking fish are you?’ I am immune to these insults and carry on. My approach to following recipes is loose, so the end-result, is based-on rather than a reproduction of the recipe, which I believe is in the spirit of Tilson’s book. The recipe was easy to follow and the end-result was to some degree a success. (My guinea-pig husband wasn’t sure about horseradish and tomato). Tilson’s memories are so evocative, I could imagine that I had stumbled across this recipe in New York and brought it home myself.

The scrapbook approach to Tilson’s personal journey of cooking fish works in adding the personal touch of friends sharing their experiences. The varied typefaces are fun but the book would live happily without them. If I were to express a reservation it would be the size of typeface for instructions: a few points larger would make it easier to follow the method. The book could also do with some additional images giving a blow-by-blow account of how to gut that squid, followed by a ‘this is how it should look’ photograph. This, I am sure, is a failing in me, but I am not a confident cook.

After all the travels and travails the story has a happy ending back in Peckham. Tilson concludes, ‘I’ve shucked off my fish phobia’. As with all travellers, there are warnings and recommendations about sustainable fishing, and useful tips on sourcing alternatives that are nearer to home. Tilson’s experiences have inspired and as a fellow amateur cook I look forward to becoming fish-savvy at the deep end, but if my fear gets the better of me, there is always the travelogue and make-believe.

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