

The Man Who Ate the World

Jay Rayner

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Extract

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The Man Who Ate The World

In Search of the Perfect Dinner

Jay Rayner



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Warning!

Reading this book will make you hungry. Hunger can seriously affect your ability to concentrate and, after a few pages, you will be incapable of appreciating either the grace or the subtleties of my writing. You will also become confused by the twists in the narrative. As a result, you may fail to grasp my justifications for some of the dodgier episodes, particularly the Paris thing. I need you at the top of your game when we finally get to the Paris thing. It is therefore in my interest to give you some tips on how to read this book.

Do not attempt to read it after dinner. You might think that, being sated, you will not succumb to hunger. This is true, but you will succumb, instead, to drowsiness, and that is worse than hunger. Unless, of course, you are the type of person who does not eat a dinner substantial enough to engender drowsiness, in which case you are not greedy enough to be reading this book. Put it down. You won't enjoy it.

Better to read it between mealtimes with snacks at your

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side. Salted nuts are a good idea, but not shell-on pistachios. Even if you get into a good rhythm, expertly picking the kernels from their shells, you will still be partially distracted, and that serves nobody. You would be wise to leave them in the cupboard for time spent in front of the television, unless they are Turkish pistachios. Turkish pistachios are the best in the world and deserve to be eaten whenever the opportunity arises. If you have some Turkish pistachios, leave this book until later and eat them first.

Fruit is a good idea, though not all of it. A banana is both satisfying and easy to eat while reading. An orange is not. Naturally, being a person of taste, you will choose a quality orange, a seriously juicy one, which will make your hands sticky, and that can only hinder your enjoyment. I want you to have a good time during your reading of this book, and juice-slicked hands will surely only get in the way of the perfect experience.

The best option is to read it over a meal by yourself in a small restaurant, the kind that doesn't have too much glassware on the table. Some people are wary of eating alone in restaurants, for fear that others will think them a complete loser. Don't worry too much about this. At times you may find yourself laughing out loud at what you have just read. Other diners will immediately decide that you are not a loser, just a little mad. They will stop staring at you after that. If nothing funny has happened in the book by about halfway through your main course, you may want to laugh out loud anyway, while staring at your plate. This is always a good strategy when eating by yourself. If it's available, be sure to order Armagnac. This has nothing to do with a successful reading of the book. People just don't drink enough

Warning!

Armagnac in restaurants these days and those that serve it ought to be encouraged.

I will understand if you choose to ignore my advice, for many people have. I am aware I don't have all the answers. Still, I hope you won't blame me if, after a few pages, you find yourself feeling ravenous and irritable and desperate. This is something my time as a restaurant critic has taught me: I can only be a guide, not a leader. I can point people in the direction of a good place to eat. I can tell them which are the best dishes on the menu and which are not. But I can't do the ordering for them, however much I might wish to.

You have been warned.

I Want Proper Dinner

I was eleven years old the first time I ate alone in a restaurant. It was the dining room of a wooden-framed hotel in an unglamorous Swiss village close to the Italian border, and I wasn't even meant to be there. I was staying down the road at another hotel, with a group from my school on a skiing trip, and had to pass it every day, as I trudged back from the slopes, bruised and humiliated. The place where we were staying was an unlovely, grey, modern block that smelled of mothballs. This hotel was built from heavily carved and darkly varnished timbers, and looked like a stately galleon afloat on the oceans of that winter's snows. By the front door, under glass, was a menu written in an expansive italic font. Most of it made no sense to me. It was in two languages and I understood neither of them. There was one word I did recognise, a word no restaurant ever bothered to translate because the original French did the job: escargots.

I had first eaten snails in garlic butter at home in north-west London, where my mother prepared them from a do-it-

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yourself pack sold in the local supermarket. They came in a transparent plastic tube. At the bottom was a can of the naked snails, which looked like big, fat commas when they were pulled from the brine and laid out to dry; stacked above them in the tube were the creamy-coloured shells, patterned with swirls of brown and grey. Laboriously my mother poked the snails into the shells. She back-filled them with garlic and parsley butter, and then grilled them. They were cooked often in our house in the 1970s, mostly as dinner-party food, when the kids were not there, but sometimes we got to eat them too, and I loved the hot, salty, garlicky melted butter and the dark, rubbery prey that bathed in it.

Now I was in Switzerland and, having been surprised to discover that skiing was not a sport for an overweight boy with weak ankles and fallen arches, I was horribly homesick. With the twisted logic of the eleven-year-old, I concluded that eating something French would make me feel better about not being in Britain.

That evening, after we had been served dinner at our hotel – a grey soup of some kind, some greyer meat and vegetables – I slipped away in search of Technicolor. I cannot imagine what the staff made of the prepubescent English boy sitting alone in the almost deserted dining room, round belly to the table's edge, humming to himself as he set to work, expertly, with the spring-loaded escargot tongs, a spiked prong and an arsenal of fresh, crisp bread. I know I was happy. The snails came on their own ornate iron stand, complete with inbuilt meths burner, and as the flame guttered underneath, the generous slick of butter from the shells became so hot in each dimple I could fry my bread in it. This I did until all the bread and all the butter were gone. I paid and left, absolutely clear

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in my mind as to how I would be spending my evenings on this trip from now on.

I returned the next day, and the day after that (once with a friend), until on the fourth night the waiter didn't even bother to bring me the menu; he just presented me with the snails.

I had emptied all the shells and was busy frying my bread when I noticed wisps of smoke lifting from the plate. I liked my bread really crisp and on this evening had turned the flame up as high as it could go without, for a moment, thinking there might be consequences. Within seconds of the smoke appearing, the butter ignited, producing an impressive cone of flame at least a foot high, which burned enthusiastically on the ponds of dairy fat.

I must have sat rigid with terror, because I have no memory of the waiter advancing upon me, only that he was suddenly at my side. This was a dangerous moment. The only thing that wasn't immediately inflammable in that restaurant was the cutlery, and the inferno on the table in front of me posed a real threat. The waiter didn't flinch. He opened the window next to me, letting in a sudden burst of frigid night air, picked up the burner from the base and heaved it out into the snow. He wiped his hands on his apron, closed the window and we agreed it was time he brought me the bill. My adventure was over.

Walking back to my own hotel that night I was disappointed, because I knew I couldn't return. Nevertheless I was comforted by the knowledge that my family would be impressed by what had happened. It wouldn't have mattered to them if, in that one week, I had developed into a world-champion downhill skier. It would have made no difference

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if I had broken the slope record. They would have been pleased for me if I was pleased with myself; however, as far as my parents were concerned, any eleven-year-old kid could learn to ski. But ordering snails in a restaurant! All by himself! That was a different matter entirely.

This is how it had always been in my family. My parents were both children of the Depression, knew what it was to go without and were not about to revisit the experience, either on themselves or their kids, so ours was a house of plenty. I always said that culturally I was only a Jew by food, and it's true that there was no room at the Rayner house for ritual or faith. The Jewish God was far too picky an eater to be given space at our table. Forego sausages and bacon? Reject shellfish and cheeseburgers, all in the name of mumbo-jumbo? Don't be ridiculous.

Yet there was, I think, something fundamentally Jewish about our way with food: the noisiness of the dinner table, the stomach-aching generosity, the deep comfort we sought from it. Food was what we did. Long before anybody had thought to initiate a debate on the importance of allowing small children into restaurants, my parents were taking all three of us out to eat on a regular basis: to Stone's Chop House near Piccadilly Circus; a grand old Italian called Giovanni's on the Charing Cross Road; and the great Chinese places in Chinatown or along Queensway, near Hyde Park, where the chefs stood in the window hand-pulling noodles. By the time he was four my brother was so good with chopsticks the waiters often assumed he had been raised in Hong Kong, and I had developed a taste for chicken with cashew nuts in yellow bean sauce, and for deep-fried seaweed scattered with golden crumbs of dried scallop –

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dishes that were rarely found outside of Chinatown back then, let alone outside of London.

Unsurprisingly the story my parents most like to tell about me involves a rebellion at the kitchen table. It was a hot summer's evening in 1973, I was six years old and for dinner my mother had decided to serve salad and a slab of mahogany-brown smoked mackerel, with a brutal cure and slimy skin. I hated smoked mackerel and said so. My mother told me that if I didn't like it I should leave the table, so I did.

A quarter of an hour later, when I hadn't sloped back to my chair and my plate, they came looking for me. I was nowhere to be found and my parents became worried until, looking out of the window, they spotted me on the pavement in front of the house. I had known exactly how to respond to this challenge of theirs. After all, it was a time in Britain of great industrial strife and protest. Pictures of it were on the television news every evening. Taking my lead from those images, I had gone upstairs and found a piece of the card round which my father's shirts were folded when they came back from the laundry. To that I had taped a ruler. I had then scrawled a message on the card and was now to be found picketing the house with the placard held high, bearing the legend 'I want proper dinner.'

My parents laughed. As I recall, they also congratulated me on my initiative, though they still insisted that I come back inside to the kitchen table from which I had fled and eat what I had been given. I did as I was told.

Despite its repetition, I like this story. It's the sort of story that should lie in the history of someone who later became a restaurant critic. Yet it was precisely because of my family's

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interest in food that it didn't for a moment occur to me that it might be possible to earn a living from going out to eat. Sitting round a well-laid table was such a part of life, of being, that it couldn't possibly be a job. Look, Mum! They're paying me to breathe!

Instead I became a different type of journalist. I wrote about murderers and politicians. I covered war-crimes trials and pursued terrorists. I interviewed movie directors, worked abroad occasionally for the foreign pages and once interviewed a high-class hooker about the business of prostitution while sitting in a bath with her. I still wanted proper dinner but, for the moment, I had to pay for it myself.

All that changed in 1999 when the editor of the *Observer's* magazine supplement suggested quietly that I might like to try my hand at the restaurant column. The editor of the newspaper resisted the appointment. He wanted me to carry on pursuing terrorists and sitting in baths with cocaine-snorting hookers, but I wasn't giving up that easily. This was too great an opportunity, not least because Britain's restaurants were undergoing a period of revolution and renewal unlike any other. It was on my watch that both Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck and Gordon Ramsay would achieve their third Michelin stars. With his high-end French cooking Ramsay displayed a mastery of crisp neo-classical technique; Blumenthal experimented with snail porridge and smoky-bacon ice cream, and showed it was possible to innovate and startle without losing sight of the imperative of deliciousness. Together, they inspired a new generation of talented chefs. Gastropubs spread around the country and, while it remained (and remains) possible to starve across huge swathes of Britain for want of a good

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meal, there was no doubt the map was being redrawn. It was a very good time to be patrolling the waterfront.

I wasn't satisfied, though. A part of me – the large, greedy part – was constantly pursued by the fear that, for all the good food I was getting to experience, somewhere out there was a great meal, the ultimate meal, and that I was missing out on it. My day job was to travel the country eating in restaurants. At night, in my time off, I would go online and read about restaurants elsewhere in the world that I couldn't reach.

I would spend hours on websites like egullet.com, where obsessives with deep pockets write long accounts of the meals they have eaten, complete with photographs. There were, it seemed, a lot of people out there who loved photographing their dinner. More worrying was the fact that I liked looking at them. I wanted to know what the tasting menu was like at Hôtel Le Bristol in Paris or Charlie Trotter's in Chicago or Tetsuya's in Sydney.

I became an avid reader of food blogs written by people with ripe and exotic names. There was Steve Plotnicki, a multi-millionaire New Yorker with a wheat intolerance and a habit of taking with him to restaurants hugely expensive bottles of wine from his own cellar, even when he was visiting a cheap kebab joint. There was Pim Techamuanvivit, a Thai woman now living in San Francisco whose blog, *Chez Pim*, had become a cult because of its mix of intricate recipes from the streets of Bangkok and its detailed accounts of dinners in the three-star gastronomic temples of Paris. There was Simon Majumdar, a half-Welsh, half-Bengali London-based publisher whose slogan was 'Carbs are death' and who liked to write long eulogies in praise of the pig.

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The more I read, the more it became clear to me that in these, the early years of the twenty-first century something fundamental was changing in the world of high-end restaurants. Once, their spiritual home had been Paris. There were good restaurants elsewhere, of course, but if you were looking for a whole city that expressed its self-confidence through the life at its most expensive tables, the French capital was where you had to go. Nowhere else came even close. The end of the Cold War had changed all that. A new, international moneyed class had arisen, not just in Europe or America, but in Russia and China, the Middle East and Japan; this new tribe had developed a taste for symbols of their affluence that were less tangible than the yacht or the top-of-the-range Mercedes. They needed lifestyle too. They wanted experiences, and that meant hotels and health clubs and, yes, restaurants. Paris was still important – nothing was going to change that – but many other cities were important for restaurants now as well. Gastronomy had gone global.

I read about the new big-ticket restaurants that were opening around the world, and felt guilty about my interest in them. Most other food writers I know claim to despise this sort of thing. For them, what matters is authenticity and, as far as they are concerned, that is never to be found at a table laid with heavy white linen and sparkling glassware: it is all contrivance and artifice. For them, the real thing is up on the hill, far from the last metalled road. It is in the farmhouse or down by the stream where the salmon leap. It is on the table of the local peasants whose family have tilled the land for generations and who feel the pulse of the teat in the palm of the hand.

I have long been suspicious of all this. It is not that I

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despise simplicity. It is appetite that drives me, and I can just as easily satisfy that in a tapas joint that has done nothing more than slice the ham as I can in a Michelin-starred restaurant. Even so, there is something about the cult of authenticity that bothers me. It venerates lifestyles lived in poverty for being in some way more genuine than those lived in comfort with silly modern conveniences like, say, clean drinking water and electricity. It feels like a middle-class fetish.

Then again, I may just be making excuses for the fact that I love and always have loved the unique glamour and expectation produced by arriving at a restaurant of ambition. As a food writer, I know I am meant to be in touch with my inner snaggle-toothed peasant; as a restaurant critic, I have long suspected I am actually in touch with my inner pearly-toothed plutocrat. The more I learned about the world's new restaurants, the more my inner plutocrat wanted to get out there and experience them.



In November 2005 the Michelin organisation, long regarded as the final arbiter of quality in European restaurants, finally acknowledged the globalisation of high-end gastronomy when it published its first ever guide to New York, also the first in the US. There were four restaurants in the city awarded three stars, the highest ranking in Michelin's gift, plus four more with two stars. This immediately placed the city second only to Paris in the Michelin stakes. The New York guide was to be followed, we were told, by guides to other parts of America – San Francisco and the bay area would be next – before Michelin expanded into Asia.

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I was in New York the day the stars were announced and the next morning went to see Mario Batali, the Italian-American celebrity chef made famous in the US by his television cookery show *Motto Mario*, and renowned as the owner of a crop of generally well-regarded restaurants across the city. We met at his casual Italian place, Otto, down at the southern end of Fifth Avenue, and he arrived wearing cut-off chinos that dangled just below the knee.

Batali is not like most modern chefs, who tend to be lean and bony and pale-skinned from too much time spent in their windowless kitchens. Batali is soft and round. His arms and legs are built of long, fleshy ovals, and he has big, flat hands and a huge head, made to look larger still by the pasture of closely cropped beard and the way his sandy hair is permanently styled into a ponytail. We both perched on the bar stools, bits of us overflowing, and ate silky pieces of prosciutto with our hands. We ate sweet rock shrimps with a sprinkling of red chilli, and marinated artichokes, and slices of his famous thin-crust pizza.

Batali ate angrily and waved bits of food at me as he spoke. He had acquired two Michelin stars in the results announced the day before and he was not happy about it. Everybody knew that his pride and joy was the high-end Italian restaurant Babbo, down in the West Village. Babbo had been awarded just one star when he had hoped for two. The second of his stars had gone instead to the Spotted Pig, a New York take on the British gastropub, of which he was co-owner.

‘I love the Spotted Pig,’ he said. ‘I adore the Spotted Pig. But a Michelin star? Geddoutta here.’

I asked him what he thought of the awards in general.

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He shrugged. ‘What you have to understand is that in the late 1980s three Michelin stars became nothing more than a guarantee that the ultra-rich could eat the same food anywhere in the world.’

I liked Batali. I particularly liked the smooth olive-oil gelato he now served me. But I didn’t want to believe him. Surely this was just sour grapes. Surely the revolution in high-end gastronomy that was sweeping the world was about more than merely satisfying a particular clientele’s hunger for nothing more interesting than consistency. It had to have produced some truly fantastic restaurants. Didn’t it? Why would those chefs go to all the trouble of opening all those restaurants and sourcing all those ingredients and taking all the time it required to run a kitchen if it was just to serve safe food? There had to be more to it than that.

That was when it struck me. Somebody needed to chronicle what was going on by mapping this revolution. I had to find out for myself and, in doing so, I realised, I might well find the perfect meal I had dreamed about. This wasn’t the only reason for going out there. There was another motivation, one that, if I’m honest, it had taken me a while to face up to. I had just turned forty and, reaching life’s midpoint, I had begun to wonder seriously whether being paid to eat was a proper way for a grown man to make a living. If I had found the job even occasionally onerous, I could have convinced myself that the thing from which I took so much pleasure also involved sacrifices, but the truth was, my job had never been a burden. I enjoyed all of it, even the really bad restaurant experiences. They gave me great things to write about. Occasionally I was asked if there were any downsides to being a restaurant critic and I would reply

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that anybody who moaned about doing my job deserved a smack in the teeth. I meant it with perhaps a little too much vehemence. The puritanical part of me, the part that had worn down shoe leather as a reporter covering the evil that men do, wanted to be the one to do the smacking.

In the task I had set myself I sensed a certain redemption. By setting out to investigate the burgeoning new restaurant world, I could stop being an itinerant eater merely pleasuring his taste buds and become something else: an explorer, the one to record an entire movement. That had to be a virtue, didn't it? Plus I could try to answer a few questions about high-end dining. For example, is cookery a craft or an art? How much can we really learn about the world in which we live from the food that arrives on our plate? Is it moral to eat well while others starve? And is globalisation, as Mario Batali claimed, threatening to extinguish the flame of unique creativity that has for so long burned in the hearts of the world's great chefs?

Justifications aside, I couldn't think of a better person for the job. At six I had picketed the family home over a lacklustre meal. At eleven my enthusiasm for snails had almost led me to burn down a hotel. I had spent my entire life campaigning for proper dinner. I was the ideal candidate.

What I needed now, though, was a starting point. I wanted to begin somewhere that encapsulated the modern age. It had to be vibrant, innovative and open to gastronomic ideas. It had to be a city of appetite. It had to be a town that really, really loved restaurants.

There was only one candidate. It had to be Las Vegas.