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Eating for England

Nigel Slater

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Preface

New York, late autumn, and I have just taken the short walk from Central Park to Carnegie Hall, where I am being interviewed for a radio show. It's a bright, invigoratingly breezy day and I'm feeling confident. I know what I am to be interviewed about, and am pretty sure of my ground and even remain unfazed when, at the last minute, I find that the interview is going out live. As I say, I know my ground. And then comes the question, the one I wasn't prepared for, the one where I am asked to describe British food to the listeners.

Do I tell them about the meltingly tender lamb from North Ronaldsay, the famous apple hat pudding with its tender suet crust, or the northern teacake known as the fat rascal? Do I have time to enthuse about the joys of medlar jelly, damson gin and the unpasteurised cheeses made down long leafy lanes in Dorset, Devon and Dumfries? Perhaps I should wax eloquent about Wiltshire bacon, sherry trifle, Christmas pudding, or steak-and-kidney pie with its crumbly pastry and dark

and savoury filling? Will there be time to get in name-checks for Scottish heather honey, toasted teacakes, gooseberry fool and Caerphilly cheese? And will they let me squeeze in the glory that is a decent haggis, Welsh rarebit or Cornish pasty?

Or do I tell them the truth? That for every Brit eating our legendary roast beef and jam roly poly there are a million more tucking into Thai green curry and pepperoni pizza. That more people probably eat chocolate brownies than apple crumble and custard, and that it is now easier to find decent sushi than really good roast beef. Should I mention too that despite our love of all that is local, fresh, organic and 'real', we also have a list of edible icons more eccentric than anyone could ever imagine?

It is well known that we have been arguing for years whether gravy should be thick or thin, if pickled onions should be part of a ploughman's lunch, or whether or not jelly belongs in a trifle. I wonder what they would also make of the fact that different counties argue about whether the jam or the clotted cream goes onto a scone before the other, or that more of us apparently use gravy browning than wine to capture the heavenly pan juices of our Sunday roast.

British food is, of course, about roast beef and Yorkshire pudding; it is about dressed crab, and roast chicken with nutmeggy bread sauce. It is about huge flakes of locally caught fish in crisp batter, eaten from the paper

with the sea breeze in your hair, oysters from Whitstable as fresh as an icy wave, Eccles cakes with soft, flaky pastry, and the best bacon sandwich in the world. But it is also about Heinz tomato ketchup, brown sauce and Cadbury's Fruit and Nut. The biggest names on the high street are not Betty's tea rooms but Starbucks and Subway. There are more Pizza Expresses than traditional pie and mash cafés, and more McDonald's than fish-and-chip shops. Looking at some people's supermarket trolleys (oh, come on, you know you have), I sometimes wonder how you could define this country's tastes at all. The internet, by the way, gives approximately 375,000 entries for roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, but over five million for that other great British invention, the Mars bar.

The fact of the matter is that our food culture is about both the gentle, buttercup-scented cheese made in a village barn the colour of honey, and the childish delight of unwrapping a foil triangle of Dairylea. It is indeed true that we make the most crumbly and agreeable oatcakes in the world, but it is the mass-produced cream cracker that has become the culinary icon. And despite producing some of the most delectable pork products in the world, we still love tucking into a bacon sandwich from a greasy-spoon café.

We have a greater wealth of good food in this country today than ever before. When I go to the market at the weekend for my cheeses, vegetables and meat, I am spoilt

for choice by the food we produce, and often come home with a shopping bag almost too heavy to lift. In that respect I think of myself as being truly attached to the locally-produced, the artisan-crafted and the hand-made. So how come I also regard a plain chocolate digestive biscuit as one of the finest things this country has to offer?

The British have a curiously broad culinary identity. Only the naïve would now try to pin us down as a meat-and-two-veg culture. You could argue that ours is a rich and multiculturally exciting cuisine, reflecting a country of diverse tastes and open minds; but equally, it sometimes looks as if we are in a state of total culinary shambles. If we hold up a pot of tea with scones and jam as a national treasure (and I do), then why is it easier to find an Italian cappuccino and an all-American blueberry muffin on most high streets? And how is it that while the French almost called a national strike over any suggestion of using pasteurised milk in their cheeses, the Spanish all but went to war to protect their fishing, and Italy gave its Parmesan cheese internationally protected status, we British only truly went into meltdown over the repackaging of the KitKat? (And quite rightly, if you ask me.)

What the French or the Italians may get excited about is very, very different from what most of us in these islands are likely to hold dear. We hold a candle for everything from black pudding to the Custard Cream,

feel more fondness for Murray Mints than for a decent veal chop, and are rather partial to leaving our most famous food for the tourists while we ourselves tuck into something from another culture.

This book is my portrait of this curious, often contrary culture, from our adoration of the kipper, the pork scratching and the Rowntree's Fruit Gum to our inability to tip properly in restaurants. I feel that while the heroic efforts of our artisan food-makers have been well catalogued (though still far from well enough patronised), all too little attention has been paid to the food that most of us either actually eat, or at least carry a certain lingering affection for. *Eating for England* is simply a personal celebration of the food this nation cherishes, the rituals we observe, the curious and even eccentric thing that is the British and their food.

Nigel Slater
June 2007

In a Stew

The British make an everyday stew with cubes of beef, carrots, parsnips and onions. They pour a jug of water over it, tuck in a bay leaf and leave it in the oven to do its own thing for four hours. What emerges is grey, meltingly tender meat and gently flavoured broth, comforting and unapologetic in its frugality. It tastes of nothing but itself.

There are formal similarities between our national stew and those of Europe and its neighbours. The knee-jerk shopping list of onions and carrots; the introduction of some sort of benevolent liquid; the convenient habit of leaving the simmering ingredients unattended for an hour or more, are common to all. The southern French recipe will be made with beef rump, its obligatory onions softened in the bright, fruity oil of the region, and its seasonings of orange peel, mauve garlic, sun-scarred tomatoes and, possibly, lavender inevitably breathe sunshine into its soul. Further north, as you potter down the Rhône valley during the *vendange* in October, your

day might be punctuated by a paper-tablecloth lunch of cubed beef that has simmered since breakfast with shallots, strips of unsmoked bacon, rosemary and mushrooms in an inky violet-red wine.

The Italians, though less likely to use alcohol, will add body to the simplest stew of boneless brisket with the introduction of a whole, cheap tongue and a gelatinous, collagen-rich cotechino sausage. The juices that surround the meat may look more like ours than do the mahogany-hued French or the paprika-stained Spanish versions, but will be silkily limpid in the mouth because of the goodness distilled from both tongue and cotechino. If a British stew is rich at all, it will be because of the early addition of flour to the meat, the thickening qualities of which give the impression of suavity but add nothing in terms of flavour.

And then, just as we Brits abandon our stew to the hungry hordes gathered at the table, the cooks of other nations will add a vital snap of freshness and vigour to lift it from its sleepy brown torpor: the French their persillade of vivid parsley, anchovy and lemon; the Moroccans a slick of tongue-tingling harissa the colour of a rusty bucket; and the Italians a pool of hot, salty salsa verde pungent with basil, mustard and mint. The Catalans, who, as history would have it, are unlikely ever to spend a penny more than necessary, will even so stir in a final topping of garlic, breadcrumbs, almonds and bitter chocolate fit for royalty.

The basics are familiar in every place; it is only the details, or lack of them, that introduce into the British version the unmistakable air of culinary poverty. Their stews are the colour of mud, blood or ochre pigment, and taste of thyme and garlic, orange and almonds, basil and lemon. Ours is the colour of washing-up water and smells of old people.

Harvest Festival

Apart from Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, and the time the BBC came to film *Songs of Praise*, my family never really went to church. Yet my father and step-mother always attended harvest festival, usually with me struggling behind with a heavy box of beans, a bag of carrots, and once a wooden crate of windfall apples from the garden.

The little stone church that sat at the bottom of the hill, and where my father's funeral would eventually take place, would have marrows of various sizes, bundles of leeks tied with string, and bunches of dahlias the colour of wine gums stacked outside the door. Inside, loaves of bread and the produce of so many local gardens – pots of asters and bunches of chrysanthemums – were propped around the altar and tucked in the deep stone window

ledges. The smell, of over-ripe damsons and yellow sunflowers, of freshly picked runner beans and home-made raspberry jam, was undercut with a sharp beery smell from the newly harvested hop fields (the church was in the middle of the Hereford–Ledbury–Bromyard hop triangle). I remember feeling that there could be nothing more beautiful than an English church decorated for harvest home. I can't help thinking we still do harvest festival well, although it's a pity that pensioners now insist on bringing tins of Heinz beans. A marrow would be much more pleasing, though presumably a bugger for the old dears to fit in their handbags.

I have always wondered why the sight of a place of worship decorated for harvest thanksgiving is so distinctly British, or at least not especially European. I recently clicked that it is the turning colour of the trees in the churchyards, the honey, orange and deep red leaves, that make the festival so much prettier than it is in warmer climates, whose trees are mostly evergreen (save possibly Vermont, though I have never been there). It is the whole picture, of harvested vegetables, bunches of spiky orange and pink dahlias, and the turning trees that make this a picture of Britain to treasure.

It hasn't always been so. The only reason the Church got involved was to bring a little order to the rampant frolicking and drunkenness that traditionally accompanied the end of the harvest. It may have been a time for the farmers to say thank you to their workers, but

it was also a time for those who toiled in the fields to get off their faces, fight and fornicate. Then a bit of decorum was brought into the proceedings in the shape of the church thanksgiving service. There's the bloody Victorians for you.

The Lunchbox

There is a certain grace with which Indian women glide through the rice fields, lunchboxes in hand. It is as if you are witnessing a slow procession at a religious festival, rather than wives bringing lunch to their husbands. Of course a pink or saffron sari floating in the breeze against a lavender sky will always appear more romantic than one of us popping out to British Home Stores for a cheese and pickle.

School tuck boxes aside, the art of the packed lunch has very much fallen by the wayside. The oblong tin, its lid held secure by a rubber band, is a rare sight now, though the treasures it contains are just as fascinating. By rights the home-made sandwiches should be accompanied by a slice of cake and an apple, though things have moved on a bit. If there is a modern designer version, presumably without the rubber band, it may well now be filled with stuffed focaccia and a little pot

of blueberries, or maybe a slice of panettone. The utterly essential Tunnock's Caramel Wafer has no doubt been replaced by one of Ms Gillian McKeith's bowel-opening fibre bars. Hardly ideal, I would have thought, when you are walking through the Yorkshire Dales.

Toblerone

I have always found a bar of Toblerone almost as difficult to conquer as the mountain peaks its design so clearly represents. But beyond the familiar rattle of the bar in its triangular box, and the ragged job you inevitably make of unwrapping it from its foil, lies a quietly classic piece of confectionery quite unlike any other.

Whatever way you try to tackle it, a Toblerone is an obstacle course. It can take a few attempts to break a triangle from the nougat-speckled bar without actually hurting your knuckles, and then, when you finally do, you have a piece of pointy chocolate slightly too big for your mouth. You bite with your front teeth and find the chocolate barely gives, so you attempt to snap it with your fingers, and find that doesn't work either. The only thing left is to pop the whole lump in your mouth and suck.

The pointed end hits the roof of your mouth, so you

roll it over with your tongue, only to find that it makes a lump in your cheek. It is as impossible to eat elegantly as a head of sweetcorn. The only answer is to let the nut-freckled chocolate soften slowly in the warmth of your mouth while rolling it over and over on your tongue. The nutty, creamy chocolate suddenly seems worth every bit of discomfort, and you decide to do it all over again with another piece.

We persevere because we think we like it, which of course we do, but there is more to it than that. Toblerone is a natural step between the cheap, fatty bars in purple wrapping and the posh stuff with its crispness and deep flavour further up the chocolate ladder. Any child who chooses the pyramid of mountain peaks over a slab of Dairy Milk is obviously on his or her way to becoming a chocolate connoisseur.

One often wonders just who actually buys this delightful Swiss-tasting confection, as you never, ever see anyone eating it. Toblerone also has the curious honour of being present in every hotel minibar I have ever opened. Even the one in Thailand, where the only other occupant was a Tetra Pak of tepid tamarind juice and a bottle of mosquito repellent. It is in fact the mini-bar bar, and as you sit alone in your hotel room, letting the pointy, uncomfortable lump of confectionery melt slowly on your tongue, your bar of Toblerone may well, albeit briefly, become your best friend.

The Kitchen Fusspot

They are, in the kitchen at least, late developers. Often genteel, effete, with a little too much time on their hands. Meals emerge from their kitchens with a sense of expectation, each ingredient having been painstakingly sourced, every direction in the cookery book followed to the letter, and inevitably late. The meal has something of the theatrical production about it, albeit amateur dramatics, as if it has all been so, so much trouble. Which of course it has. And don't we know it.

The kitchen fusspot prepares dinner – a charming though slightly too creamy soup, meat with a syrupy, over-reduced sauce, a dessert as elaborate as an Ascot hat and probably just as indigestible – while his guests get more and more hungry, not to say a little pissed. The kitchen, once tidy enough to appear in the pages of *World of Interiors*, now resembles a bombsite of stacked roasting tins, sauté pans and sieves.

Fusspot is almost always male. He only cooks once a month, if that, and needs endless encouragement and ego massage. The production starts several days before, with working out what to cook with the aid of a pile of cookery books of the celebrity-chef variety, and a shopping list, often taken to bed. There may be a tasting of the wines to be served, many of which have come from his own cellar. The menu will be changed every day,

each dish chosen for its ability to follow its predecessor perfectly, to match the wines, to show the cook at his most competent.

The directions will have been analysed in a way the poor cookery writer never dreamed of, each line dissected and filleted and then given a jolly good roasting. The kitchen fusspot – let's call him, say, Julian – is a follower of orders, and a cookery writer's nightmare. He cooks without any ability other than that of doing what he is told; a cook incapable of using the merest pinch of invention, imagination or intuition. One wonders – briefly – what he would be like in bed.

Perversely, the fusspot likes nothing better than recipes that 'don't quite work'. 'I think it needs something, don't you?' is his knee-jerk response to every recipe he tries. A little more balsamic, a touch of white pepper, a little Béarnaise sauce on the side. The idea that it might be fine as it is is unthinkable.

Black Pudding

Be it in the form of berries, loops or horseshoes, or maybe sliced from one long, charcoal-coloured dong, the black pudding remains adored and loathed in equal measure. As with tripe, gooseberries and junket, there is

no middle ground. Modern squeamishness has led to those of us who turn misty-eyed about such treats being thought of as carnivorous beyond redemption, if not long-lost members of the Addams family. True, our holy grail is a sausage made from the blood of an ox, thickened with pig fat, pearl barley, oatmeal and rusk, but no one should let a little thing like blood and guts get in the way of good eating. What makes the black pudding so delectable, so deeply savoury, so toe-curlingly satisfying, is partly down to good taste, and partly to the pleasure of knowing that our respect for an animal's life extends to the point where we refuse to let even its blood go to waste.

Of course, there is black pudding and there is black pudding. At its worst it is dry, sour and solid. At its best, moist, crumbly and herbal, with a perfect balance of sweetness and deep savour (not to mention being grilled to just the right crispness). I would list a good black pudding as one of the dishes I would want at my last supper, but then it would have to be the very best, and that is where one gets into deep, and very hot, water.

Black pudding fanciers are fiercely loyal, ever ready to challenge anyone who dares to suggest that their butcher's pudding is tastier. The national contests to find the best are always controversial, and cause heated debate. There could even, after a celebratory drink or three, be what used to be called fisticuffs. (A drop or two more of spilled blood is neither here nor there when

you consider that it can take ninety litres of blood to make a decent batch.)

Those who trawl southern shops looking for a good pud may wonder if this piece of charcuterie, or perhaps one should say porkery, is about to disappear from the planet, but northerners, particularly those living around Bury in Lancashire, know better. Despite the occasional closure of an outlet here and there, the blood pudding is showing signs of a renaissance, partly due to its being the current darling of many top chefs, who make the most of its savoury qualities as a garnish for other porky or even piscine delights. Black pudding and scallops is much, much more interesting than one might imagine, and is no more strange than bacon with scallops, better known as angels on horseback.

While the notion of a butcher's kitchen awash with blood and rusk may appeal to the more deeply carnivorous, it should be noted that a certain number of sausages are actually made with dried blood, and this certainly seems to pacify the health inspectors. Whether such practices have an effect on the finished article remains a subject for debate. It should go without saying that most recipes remain a closely guarded secret, especially in the crucial and delicate matter of seasoning. And while thyme, marjoram and winter savory are often mentioned, the actual mix of herbs is something most pudding-makers would fight tooth and nail, and no doubt blood and fat, to keep in the family.