Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Eating for Britain

Written by Simon Majumdar

Published by John Murray

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Eating for Britain

A Journey into the Heart
(and Belly) of the Nation

SIMON MAJUMDAR

JOHN MURRAY

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by John Murray (Publishers)
An Hachette UK Company

1

© Simon Majumdar 2010

The right of Simon Majumdar to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84854-226-6

Typeset in 12.5/15 Monotype Bembo by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

John Murray policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

John Murray (Publishers)
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.johnmurray.co.uk

To Gwen and Eva for teaching me how to cook
and to Pratip and Arthur for teaching me how to eat.

Contents

Introduction: Whetting the Appetite 1

1. Eating for Britain 7

* * * * *

Breakfast

2. The Full British Breakfast 21
3. Black Pudding 31
4. Craster Kippers 39
5. The King's Liver 49
6. The Arbroath Smokie 56
7. Staffordshire Oatcakes 64
8. The Bacon Butty 72

* * * * *

Elevenses

9. Tea and Biscuits 82
10. Yorkshire Parkin 91
11. Welsh Cakes and Pikelets 98

* * * * *

Lunch

12. Lancashire Hot Pot 108
13. Fish and Chips 116

14. Cawl 125
15. Lancashire Cheese 133
16. Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pudding 145
17. Pie and Mash 157
18. Jellied Eels 166
19. Welsh Faggots and Peas 173
20. Balti 181

* * * * *

Afternoon Tea

21. Brown's Hotel 192
22. Clotted Cream 199

* * * * *

Snacks

23. Cornish Pasty 211
24. Melton Mowbray Pork Pies 218
25. Pork Scratchings 226

* * * * *

Supper

Starter

26. Potted Shrimps 241
27. Cromer Crabs 250
28. Smoked Salmon 258

Main Course

29. Rabbit Pie 266
30. Steak and Kidney Pudding 277
31. Chicken Tikka Masala 284
32. Haggis 298

Pudding

33. Steamed Puddings 307
34. Trifle 313
35. Eccles Cake 322
36. Bakewell Pudding 328

* * * * *

Drinks

37. Beer 337
38. Gin 345
39. Whisky 353

Conclusion: Cleaning the Plate 359

The Perfect Day's Eating in Britain 365

Bibliography 368
Resource Guide 369
Acknowledgements 373

Introduction

Whetting the Appetite

As I write this introduction, I have just completed an interview with a German radio station. The interviewer's first question was the almost inevitable, 'Tell me, Simon, why is British food so dreadful?'

I resisted my first urge to circle my eyes with my fingers and respond with a childish refrain of *The Dambusters* theme and began to argue our case. She was having none of it and as she signed off, finished by saying, 'So, now you want to be the saviour of British food? The best of British luck to you.'

I don't want to be anyone's saviour, thank you very much. I doubt anyone would have me anyway. But constantly having to defend British food from the barbs of foreigners is one of the more tiresome elements of travelling around the world and writing about food. *Eating for Britain* is my own small attempt to restore the balance, a chance to prove to myself as much as anyone else that, while we have much to be apologetic about when it comes to food in Britain, we also have some truly exceptional dishes that are prepared from fabulous ingredients by people who really give a damn about what they are doing.

Although this is not a history book, I hope along the way you will glean at least one or two useful little facts and stories about the origins of some of our national

dishes that you can bore your friends rigid with on a rainy day. It is not a sociology book although I hope it will give you some insight into the state of our nation through the prism of the food I sampled. It is not a recipe book although you will certainly find a handful in here where I have decided that your life would not be the same without them. Bloody good they are too: trust me, I have prepared them all any number of times.

Eating for Britain is quite simply my attempt to discover Britain's most wonderful foods and from that to construct the perfect day's eating if, by chance, I could bring any and all of them to my table without concern for price, seasonality or, God help me, carbon footprint. It is the result of a journey that has taken me the best part of a year and has involved over 13,000 miles of driving in a battered Ford Focus, from the coast of Cornwall in the south-west of England to the coast of Moray in the north-east of Scotland; from the rural idylls of the Gower Peninsula to the grim urban sprawls of London and Birmingham.

It was a trip that brought moments of incredible luxury as I tasted whisky costing £10,000 a bottle and it was a trip that also brought unmitigated horror as I practised projectile vomiting for seven long hours off the coast of Norfolk. It was a trip that challenged many of my preconceptions as I met those who hunt for sport, and confirmed my worst prejudices as I encountered dishes for which their manufacturers should be dragged before the local beak.

It was a trip that brought back wonderful memories of my childhood growing up in Yorkshire: memories of Sunday lunches centred around a huge joint of pork or beef; memories of fish and chips on weekend trips to the

coast; and visits to my grandparents in London where my own passion for food was nurtured by my Welsh grandmother's love of baking. And it was a trip that brought me up to date with the state of our nation's food in this modern era, our love of celebrity, the power of our supermarkets and the decline of so many of our renowned food industries.

Despite the dubious reputation our food has earned itself around the world I discovered that we are beginning to fight back and rediscover dishes of which we can be really proud: classic dishes like hot pot in Lancashire; dishes of ancient tradition like the famous clotted cream of Cornwall, brought to our shores by Phoenician traders; and dishes of recent immigration like chicken tikka masala in Glasgow and balti in Birmingham. Some dishes are instantly familiar and recognized worldwide as being British: fish and chips and roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Dishes for so long debased by the use of poor ingredients, but when done well, as good as anything I have eaten anywhere in the world. Then there are the foods you may not have sampled or may never even have heard of such as Staffordshire oatcakes in Stoke or Arbroath smokies in Scotland, which still sell by the bucketload but only to locals in their home region.

It certainly wasn't all positive news. Tales of our declining fishing industry and the struggles of farms and small food retailers all over the country were a constant and depressing refrain. Depressing too was some of the food I was asked to eat and you should all get together and write me a big thank you note for eating a macaroni and cheese pie at the Great British Pie Awards, so that you never have to.

The sighting of the words 'Chicken Tikka Lasagna' on a hotel blackboard in Buckie, in Scotland, was not only enough to send me scampering out into the rain in terror, but also enough to convince me that despite our culture of celebrity TV chefs, farmers' markets, dedicated TV channels and cookery magazines, we still have a huge fracture between what we produce and the food that many people are happy to put in their mouths. During the day I might meet people dedicated to producing food of the highest quality they could, but I found precious little sign of it in the procession of takeaways, pizza restaurants and kebab shops as I walked the high streets of our towns in the evenings. With its roots buried in the ethos of quantity versus quality that sprang from the necessity of years of post-war rationing it is a fracture that will take a long time, if not generations more, to repair.

Despite these horrors and disappointments, it was still a journey from which I returned filled with enthusiasm and hope for the future, certain that although I may not ever be able to defeat the prejudices of so many towards food in Britain, I can at least counter them with knowledge. Knowledge of just how delicious some of our produce and our dishes are and knowledge that there are thousands of people out there who are determined to continue to improve in the face of the very tough opposition from economics and ambivalence.

In the end, as it has proved on all my food travels, *Eating for Britain* was a journey to meet people. As I drove those 13,000 miles I met farmers, fishermen, bakers, cheese makers, hunters, shop owners, chefs, distillers, brewers and fish smokers to name but a few off the top of my head. I met Pakistani businessmen running

restaurants as part of their empire and plump Scottish ladies who had been making oatcakes all their lives. I met the chairman of one of the most famous Scotch whisky distilleries in the world and a fourth-generation farmer who produces bacon so good you want to make a suit out of it and wear it to church. I met two young Brummy boys who served me fish and chips as good as I have tried anywhere and a genial chef who turned out the best Yorkshire puddings ever while turning the air blue with his views on ramblers. I met the men who strove towards European PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) status for Craster kippers and the Melton Mowbray pork pie and the people trying to do the same for Bakewell pudding.

All had one thing in common: they gave a damn and so too, I hope, will you. We have so many things to be proud of in this country and it is about time we realized that food is one of them. So, even if it means cooking a blow-out Sunday lunch for friends, searching for the finest fish and chips in town or simply making the best bacon sandwich ever, I hope the tale of *Eating for Britain* splashes it with a dash of inspiration. If this book can contribute to your own desire to get out there and find the best of British, eating that macaroni and cheese pie will have been worth it.

Just about.

Simon Majumdar
London, 2010

1
Eating for Britain

What does it mean to be British?

It's an odd question to ask yourself as you hit your fifth decade, and it took my American fiancée to bring it into sharp focus. Although her take was that I was 'such a Brit' because, and I quote, 'you have a huge stick up your ass' it did make me wonder what being British might actually mean in the twenty-first century, particularly at a time when our formerly great nation is struggling to find its place in the ever changing world.

For once it wasn't just about me, however. Even the Brits I asked about their own identity were not much help, with one particular friend boiling down our entire culture to nothing more than 'just saying sorry a lot'. There had to be, I decided, more to a whole nation's identity than a permanent state of atonement and I knew that if I was to come to any conclusion about my own sense of identity, I had to try to find out what it meant to be British in the first place.

What better way than through my lifelong obsession, food? By looking at the nation through its stomach and constructing the perfect day's eating in Britain, I was sure I could discover a useful picture of what it means to be an inhabitant of these sceptred isles, not just for me but also for their growing and increasingly cosmopolitan society.

To construct the perfect day's British eating meant that I would have to consider all the options from the moment I opened my eyes and thought about breakfast to the last snatched snack I grabbed before hitting the hay. Along the way there would have to be pit stops for that all too British institution, elevenses, and for lunch, whether it be a long lingering meal when time permitted or a hurried bite on a busy workday. There would be, of course, a break in the afternoon for a little something to refuel for the long drag until the evening meal. This would be a more filling repast of many courses finishing with a gloriously decadent dessert of the sort that only Britain can provide. And there would, naturally, be no other choice than to finish my day with a final dram of Scotch whisky. I am not a savage.

Whether we are a branch on the most aristocratic of family trees or a recent immigrant, whether we kneel before God in an English village church, a mosque, a synagogue or not at all, we all have to eat and my assumption was that what we eat would reveal much about who we British are and where we come from. Dishes are not created in a vacuum, however. Well, in fact, some are, but you would have to buy a book by Heston Blumenthal to read about that. They develop over time and with changes in people's economic and political situations, with the influence of immigrants historical and modern and, of course, with the insatiable British desire to travel and explore, which led to the expansion of the British Empire and, on my part, even a journey around the world for my previous book, *Eat my Globe*. It would not just be about the outbound journey, however. More than almost any other nation, the British have a desire to

relive travel experiences on their return. The production line of tapas bars reflects our ongoing love affair with Spain, and, more recently, the explosion of Thai and Mexican restaurants speaks to our more recent travel trends. Most obvious of all, the thousands of curry houses, which dot our high streets, were initially evidence of the desire of returning expats to recreate the Anglo-Indian dishes of their time in the Raj, and more recently the influx of immigrants from the sub-continent.

As I ate, it would be important too to delve into the roots of the dishes I sampled. I did not want to write a history book, but it would be impossible to taste a dish without putting it in the context of its origins. Was it the result of trade? Was it the result of invasion? Was it the result of immigration, both historical and modern? All have had an impact on the way we eat today.

It is no great revelation that Britain's relationship with food is a complicated one. It has been formed by its geography and religion, its wars and rationing, and has been subjected to years of verbal abuse from just about every other nation on earth for its lack of passion and skill. Had we as a nation lost touch with our food so that it could decline to this extent? Or is the unspoken truth that even before post-Second World War rationing changed everything our food was pretty lousy anyway and the dishes we look to as classics deserve the insults hurled at them by other nations?

What about religion? A few years ago, a food writer once told me, when I was complaining about the dearth of good places to eat in Scotland, that 'John Knox has a lot to answer for'. Did the victory of Protestantism over Catholicism condemn us always to think of food as fuel,

or is it the simpler truth that if you live in a damp, cold, northern European country you are always going to think about food in more functional than celebratory ways?

Some might argue that the recent emergence of a new generation of chefs who had travelled the world heralded a new golden age for British cuisine; others that they were merely feeding the nation's love of celebrity rather than teaching the nation to feed itself. And what about the growing power of the supermarkets? Did it sound the death knell for independent high street shops and serfdom for the nation's suppliers? Or did they bring with them all the benefits of vast ranges of product, great prices and convenience?

I turned my attention to what it might mean to eat for Britain. Which regions of the country should I visit and what dishes should I look for? I did what I always do when faced with such a challenge: I began to make a list. I knew that there would be meat involved. I had eaten enough of it in my forty-five years to know that Britain produces some of the finest anywhere. Superb lamb and pork and, most famous of all, the roast beef of Old England, so renowned a dish that the French sobriquet for the British, 'les rosbifs', was, I was told, originally offered up in admiration for our animal husbandry rather than in damnation of our lack of culinary talent. Not just the fine cuts, however; what about the offal, the blood and the dishes made from what is left after the prime pieces have been taken away? What about pies? My God, pies. How could you write about Britain and its food and not write about pies: pork pies, steak and kidney pies and steamed savoury puddings? Then there would be seafood, caught off the coasts of Norfolk, Scotland or

Ireland, where the quality is incomparable and considered so highly abroad that much of what is landed never finds its way to our tables but is rushed to the markets of Spain and France. I wondered what happened to the fish that remained on our shores and whether anyone actually wanted to eat it.

There would be traditional dishes in the day's menu, of course, both sweet and savoury: Lancashire hot pot and Bakewell tart – or as I found out more correctly, Bakewell pudding – Cornish pasties and spotted dick. There would be dishes that had their origins in the Middle Ages and whose recipes had changed little in the intervening centuries. There would be dishes that were a direct result of Britain's pre-eminent military and trading status through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and there would be dishes whose recipes had been handed down from generation to generation.

However, as in other areas of life, Britain's cuisine is not ossified like a museum relic. New arrivals from other countries have always brought their ingredients and culinary skills with them, so my journey would also take me in search of dishes brought to our shores by immigrants. Nordic invaders, for instance, brought their knowledge of smoking fish, which gave rise to the production of kippers and Arbroath smokies. Also from the same region came methods of slow-cooking simple ingredients, which gave us lobscouse, Irish stew and cawl, the lamb stew that brings a happy tear to every Welshman's eye. Jews fleeing Portugal in the eighteenth century brought with them the ability to fry fish and by happy accident combined with Huguenot refugees from Belgium and France bringing their own passion for fried

potatoes. End result, Britain's and my favourite dish. Without the Dutch, we would not have jellied eels. Some may consider that a good thing, but if they dare to say the same about gin, for which we owe the same nation a debt of gratitude, they will incur my violent and vengeful wrath.

More recently, immigrants from the Asian subcontinent brought with them versions of dishes that had proved popular during the days of the empire and altered them to work with local ingredients and appeal to local tastes. In Glasgow, cubes of marinated chicken, normally served as a dish on their own, were combined with a spicy tomato sauce to become chicken tikka masala, now considered as a contender for our national dish.

In modern Britain, an invitation to a meal could just as easily see you sit down to a bowl of cholent stew, challah bread and some chopped liver as it could a roast dinner. It is just as likely to see you being offered a bowl of fiery curry with a wicked slick of ghee or a glistening piece of jerk chicken as it is to include a dainty cucumber sandwich and a stiffening gin and tonic. And you are just as likely to be presented with a Chinese New Year moon cake as a Christmas card. Our food, like our country itself, never stands still.

One thing that I fully expected to remain intact, however, was the much admired British eccentricity. Britain is, quite frankly, a nation of oddballs, freaks and nut jobs. Nowhere is this more in evidence than when it comes to our food. Other countries might be true nose-to-tail eaters, making sure that no bit of the animal gets wasted, but none would turn a mixture of lung, heart and livers in a lamb's stomach into a living 'beastie' to be serenaded

by the skirl of bagpipes and the lamentations of a poet. No other cuisine would take a century-old condiment containing over fifty ingredients and simply dub it 'brown sauce' and I defy anyone to find the French equivalent of the Bedfordshire clanger, a hefty suet pudding with meat at one end and jam at the other so no time is wasted between courses. I hoped that the people I met on this journey would have a story to tell: the farmers and fishermen, the brewers and the distillers, the Michelin-starred chefs and the café owners, in fact anyone who could give me a glimpse into our relationship with food, whether they were directly involved with its production or simply as passionate about it as I was.

I was also certain, however, that it was not all going to be good. To many people, meals are still predicated on cost rather than quality and, added to a deeply embedded puritan ethic that had people sailing to worlds unknown to escape it, it is easy to see why Britain and the British have never been known for treating food with passion and joy in the same way that some of our European neighbours, France, Italy or Spain, have done for centuries. I knew that among the great there would be the God-awful, the badly made and the downright shameful, the sort of dish that once had me staring open-mouthed at a pub blackboard near Victoria Station in London that offered a daily special of a 'Thai Vegetarian Schnitzel'. None the less, I dared to hope that such horrors would be few and far between, but I was far from certain.

At the very least, I hoped that on the *Eating for Britain* trip I would get to fill my face with some delicious foods and, if that was the case, it would all have been worthwhile.