

MIND, BODY & SOUL FOOD

RAY McVINNIE visits Oxford and discovers a new academic world devoted to the many-faceted beauty of cooking

I don't care what anyone says. If anyone had predicted that I would be so fascinated listening to topics such as "A Vegetable Zodiac from Late Antique Alexandria" in the dry confines of Oxford University, I would have been more than dubious. But these clever, amusing, interesting people had drawn me in. As it happens, I was one of them, but more of that later.

One of the things I have always liked about cooking for a living is that it demands intellectual and manual dexterity in roughly equal proportions. That spells job satisfaction to me.

Cooking even the simplest dish stimulates mental enquiry. It is never just a mechanical chore. Yet professional cooking is still seen as an easy option for the non-academic. Fortunately, this quaint perception is changing.

A former fulltime professional chef, I now work as a food editor at *Cuisine* and chef-lecturer at the Auckland University of Technology, where part of my job is to research and publish. While I'm not yet at the "publish or perish" phase, AUT does like its staff to get on with it - it keeps you sharp, and promotes the institution. So I decided to look into kumara.

Thanks to the encouragement from AUT, my efforts resulted in a paper, "Sweet as! Notes on the Kumara or New Zealand Sweet Potato as a Taonga or Treasure", which I was invited to present at the vegetable-themed 2008 Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery by the editor of the symposium papers, publisher Susan Friedland.

This annual conference on the history of food was founded by the celebrated food writer Alan Davidson when he was a fellow at St Antony's College in 1978-79. His appointment was initially viewed rather sceptically, as his field of study, food, was widely considered



unsuitable by the entrenched powers at the illustrious Oxford University.

Assisted by culinary luminaries such as Elizabeth David, Anne Willan Paul Levy, Claudia Roden and Richard Olney, Davidson won over the Oxford doubters, and the first full-scale symposium was held in 1981. The rest, as they say, is history.

For my paper, a 5000-word narrative on the kumara from its arrival with the Maori to its current treasured status with both Maori and Pakeha, I was given a slight advance on the Andy Warhol tradition of 15 minutes of fame: my presentation was to take just 20 minutes and simply reading the paper to the audience, I was warned, was a hanging matter.

Off I went for the weekend at St Catherine's College, Oxford... and another first. Although I had technically

been to Britain several times, this would be the first time I would see more than the confines of Heathrow Airport. When I related this to Kiwis afterwards they looked at me with shocked sympathy.

Fiddle dee dee! I have no English family to draw me to London; while my contemporaries were in London squats on their OE, I was helping run a restaurant. Since then I have been busy ticking off visits to more exotic world capitals, although I did enjoy my pre-Oxford visit to London immensely.

My only previous experience with culinary gatherings had been taking part in masterclass weekends for smart amateur cooks. And I had never attended an academic conference. It did not help that I had one of the last presentations. For much of the conference, unable to fully relax,

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I kept dashing off to my room, feeling terrified, to go over and over what I was to present.

But I soon found out this gathering was not a fashionable way to turn a profit or promote economic entities or their brands nor about dour academic point-scoring, but more about savouring the pleasures of shared conversation and ideas, mixed with lashings of the ancient tradition of the shared table. It was meant to be enjoyed.

So I tried to go to as many of the presentations as I could. I very much liked “The Potato in Irish Cuisine and Culture” given by two Dublin chefs – Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Pádraic Óg Gallagher – coupled with another on the carrot, by Joel Denker, tracing its history from its origin as a purple vegetable to its familiar contemporary orange. I was riveted by the rather aristocratic Dane, Anna Marie Fisker, who presented her research on the famous Flora Danica tableware from the Royal Copenhagen Factory, made since 1790. She looked at tableware as an architectural platform on which to eat meals and used the Flora Danica as an ultimate example with its decoration of 1260 motifs of Danish plants, herbs, flowers and vegetables.

And little did I know, until the presentation of the aforementioned “A Vegetable Zodiac from Late Antique Alexandria”, that there had been an alternative Christian zodiac, which instead of having “pagan” signs, had fruit and vegetables corresponding to the signs we are familiar with.

I was equally enchanted by Gillian Riley’s paper tracing the “Visual Delights from the Vegetable Kingdoms of Italy” through the art of the Renaissance.

These were but a few among many. My own, I am relieved to say, went off smoothly.

In the end, the gratuitous pleasure of enjoying erudition in a field I love was like a welcome holiday for the mind (maybe, you may say, I should get out more, yet many of those attending these sessions were neither cooks nor scholars, but people simply there to be entertained).

The practical expression of what this symposium was about came in the food served over the weekend. Rereading the programme sets me drooling. Writer Elizabeth Luard donated summer truffles that went into a sensational vegetarian lunch conceived by another presenter, art collector and Middle Eastern food writer Anissa Helou, with bread from Raymond Blanc’s legendary restaurant, Le Manoir aux Quat’ Saisons. Peter Lehmann Wines from Australia did the wine.

Food writer Camellia Panjabi ordered up a brace of Indian chefs, crockery included, to work with the college catering staff on a grand thali Indian dinner that the Great Moghul wouldn’t have sniffed at (wine by Penfolds this time).

If I thought the food had already peaked, the real climax came on the last day when, with the sponsorship of the region of Emilia-Romagna, the Italian Trade Commission, Santini and restaurateur Laura Santini, we had an excellent, long Italian lunch. This ended at a large table covered in tranquillising dessert wines and grappas.

Far from being a gang of crusty academics wittering on about not much, this symposium undoubtedly nourished both the body and the soul of everyone there. What better diet is there? ●

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