



To Oxford, to Feed the Brain

The Oxford Food Symposium is many things—a recipe swap shop is not one of them

BY CAROLE LALLI

In Vincenzo Campi's painting *The Fruit Seller* (pictured), from around 1580, a young woman displays fresh produce both humble and luxurious, from cabbage to asparagus—and far more varieties of cherries than we ever expect to find today. The fruit seller herself is a Renaissance ideal, with a serene face and wistful eyes; she could easily step off the field where she has set up shop and into an annunciation scene.

But Campi is otherwise interested and he draws our eyes to the fruit

seller's wares: the voluptuous split melons, a basket of fava beans festooned with roses and the lapful of perfect peaches.

This is the Italian way, according to the scholar Gillian Riley, whose paper "Visual Delights from the Vegetable Kingdoms of Italy" was presented recently at the Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery. Riley, author of *The Oxford Companion to Italian Food*, is a tiny woman with white hair pulled back into a bun. Her principal point was that in art—Italian art in particular—produce is as beautiful as anything.

The charitable Oxford Food Symposium is a gathering of academics, authors, restaurateurs and journalists. The group tilts Anglo-American but is large enough to be fairly diverse, with participants from as far away as Brazil

and Australia. The regulars gather annually on a college campus—in this case, St Catherine's College—and suffer a couple of nights in dormitory beds.

The symposium was founded in 1979 by Dr Theodore Zeldin and the late Alan Davidson, when Davidson was a fellow at St Antony's College. Zeldin is a social historian of France, while Davidson was a diplomat, historian and accidental food scholar responsible for *The Oxford Companion to Food*. Zeldin was the force behind both the companionship and the seminars that evolved from it, even in the face of considerable faculty hostility. The notion of food as a subject of serious study and as central to any culture was not yet widespread. From the 21 who attended that first seminar, as many as 200 now participate (this year's subject, "Vegetables", pulled in around 140).

To begin with, there were seminal

figures such as Elizabeth David, whose chatty recipes introduced French and Italian meals to home cooks who had had their taste buds piqued on the Continent. Anne Willan, who established the La Varenne Cookery School in Paris, and Richard Olney were there too. In *The French Menu Cookbook* (Ten Speed Press), Olney described the huge kitchen fireplace where he did his cooking. He sometimes climbed up on the roof and suspended some delicacy—a rolled boar's belly, perhaps—down the chimney to be smoked.

Many at Oxford this year were veterans from those first days. The Kentucky-born food journalist Paul Levy, who attended Oxford as a student, was at the first seminar; author Claudia Roden was at the second. Levy and Roden are now the symposium's co-chairs.

Unlike some gatherings, where participants show up mostly for networking and snub the programmes, people here are keenly interested in the variety of subjects. Which lecture should you attend? "The Rise & Fall of the English Allotment Movement", "The Potato in Irish Cuisine", "The Role of Vegetables in Conquering Space" or "The Roman Vegetable Garden"? Darting among rooms is the accepted solution.

What we learned in the end is that food is fundamental in human history. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Pádraic Óg Gallagher spoke of the Irish and the potato. Of this, much is known, but the details of the rise of this crop and its consequences were riveting. The potato came from the New World and seemed

a godsend: easily cultivated and sustainable—the labour of a single farmer working one acre for two weeks could yield a year's worth of food for a family. The Irish abandoned their previous diet (cereals, dairy, meat) in favour of this single crop. It worked its way into Irish literature and place names (Ballyporeen means "little potato"). The population exploded from one million in 1590 to more than eight million by 1840—and the tragedy of famine, poverty, the deaths of millions and massive emigration followed.

There was also the story of sugar beet before the American Civil War—not so sexy-sounding at first. But Cathy Kaufman, an American food editor, spun out a social and economic history of embargoes, blockades, official manipulation of markets and the suppression of alternative sources. The sugar-beet story intersected with a prevailing moral issue of the day: abolitionists favoured the sugar-beet industry for its use of "free" labour and agitated against the slave-dependent cane-sugar trade.

The Oxford Food Symposium opens a window on the past and present. Philip Iddison shared the meticulous diary he keeps as he tills his London allotment, while another presentation described the English kitchen garden from 1650 to 1800. A mid-14th-century fiscal document gave an immediate

Food has always been part of fashion. Even da Vinci drew illustrations for carving citrus fruit



"I'm making sure I get my five daily portions"

sense of life in a Florentine monastery in the post-plague years. And who knew that da Vinci drew illustrations for carving citrus fruits? Apparently, carved produce was all the rage; food has always been part of fashion.

Consider the salad: June di Schino described “insalata” during the Renaissance as a broad concept; meals were made of cooked or raw leaves, truffles, artichokes and items such as hearts of palm and the newly discovered tomato. The aristocratic 16th-century Italian menu could be as stylish as any modern restaurant’s: asparagus dressed with olive oil, grilled and finished off with Seville orange juice sounds good and may also be at your local Italian.

Every year, around 50 to 75 papers are submitted for the symposium; this year, of the 60 or so submitted, 34 made it


on to the programme. A committee of three makes its decisions in a process that is more intuitive than scientific—good writing, interesting subjects and originality catch their attention.

Len Fisher, a popular science writer, came up with the most original subject: “Listening to Vegetables”. Fisher’s talk ranged from “the screams, groans, and agonised poppings that root and leaf vegetables make” to a performance of “Carrot Crunch”, in which a raw carrot was rhythmically munched in a way that some took to be a jazz piece. Fisher himself drilled through an impressively large carrot, turning it into a flute-like instrument from which he managed to produce some notes.

Does this sound a bit goofy? Perhaps, but the important thing at Oxford is not to be dull or predictable. Whimsy in the pursuit of ideas is just fine.

FACT OR FIB?

FOUR OF THESE STATEMENTS ARE TRUE AND ONE IS A FIB—BUT WHICH ONE? ANSWER BELOW



A In the 16th century, turkeys were marched to market from Norfolk to London while wearing special boots to protect their feet.

B Tinsel was once banned in the US by the government because it used to contain lead.

C In Italy, children are brought presents by a friendly witch as well as Father Christmas.

D It took Charles Dickens nearly two years to write *A Christmas Carol*.

E Bethlehem can also be found in Carmarthenshire, Wales.

FACT OR FIB? BY DANIEL MITCHELL