

Thorne's Crowning Achievement

Certain authors have the gift of transporting us into a world of their own creation which we are happy to occupy for a while in preference to any other. They are Virgils to our Dante, showing us around the territory and introducing us to the natives. In these magic realms, strangers speak to us immediately as old friends; arriving unexpectedly at dinner time, we find a place already set for us.

If we are indeed fortunate, the page itself is a reflection of its content. It is free of irrelevance, vulgarity and self-aggrandisement. Like the products of a fine arts press, its visual composition shows the same care and attention to detail as the structure of its sentences and the sequence of its argument.

In these days of cheap mass production it is rare indeed to find such a book or magazine; to come across a web site thus tastefully assembled seems utterly anachronistic and incongruous. And yet here it is: <http://www.outlawcook.com/>, John Thorne's classically designed Simple Cooking, in which he shares lengthy excerpts from his newsletter and books, detailed reviews of obscure publications we may well have missed, favorite recipes, memorable quotations – and more. There are generous recommendations of other food letters he enjoys. There are readers' pages where those who have dropped in have expressed their appreciation. It's like a guest book from Mount Olympus: along with notes from people we've never heard of are friendly contributions from such culinary divinities as Julia Child, Alan Davidson and Patience Gray.

Has recognition made him arrogant? I once took mild exception to something he had written and received an immediate reply which began, "God. You're absolutely correct. Where did I write this wretched nonsense?" Such modesty seems to have gone out of fashion with Wordsworth: "When I wrote that, God and I knew what it meant. Now only God knows."

What is most attractive about Thorne's writing is the extraordinary degree to which his title is his working principle. You will search in vain for Leaning Towers of Pizza, those quasi-edible structures which modern chefs raise like monuments to their overweening, transitory ambition. His recipes are as level as his prose, down-to-earth creations which follow a long tradition of unostentatious simplicity. He can linger for pages over a cup of cocoa or a bowl of porridge. In his hands plebeian macaroni cheese becomes a creamy marriage of cheddar and pasta, light years away from the floury "white sauce" with a suggestion of cheese flavor that one endured through so many school dinners.

Such simplicity is as deceptive as a Mozart piano sonata – in the words of Artur Schnabel, "too easy for children, too difficult for artists." Thorne takes up culinary clichés, working them over like clay images and breathing life into them until they dance of their own accord.

This magnetic attraction to simple tradition may not be unrelated to the fact that Thorne is by family heritage a Down East Yankee. Though he grew up near El Paso Texas, he spent his summers in Maine, where he eventually withdrew to a wintry coastal town so small as to be off the map. After a decade, driven by the environmental schizophrenia that commonly afflicts writers, he sought a compromise in Northampton, Mass, the genteel home of Smith College and of Calvin Coolidge.

And there he remains, with his wife and meticulous editor Martha, trudging between the kitchen and the word processor. So how does he gain experience of the world's gastronomic Meccas? "I am not, and never have been, a gourmet," he wrote in 1992. (How John Hess must have applauded those words!) "I possess no curiosity about world-class restaurants. . . ." Even if Thorne were to be spied mopping up the jus at Taillevent, the principle is salutary, for most of our successful food writers are either living high off the hog or sucking up to the industry. (As new technology brings these apparent opposites closer together and the middle ground disappears into a black hole, it becomes almost obligatory to straddle them.)

Thorne's world is introspective and ambiguously apolitical. He is not a Hebrew prophet like John Hess, warning us (accurately) of culinary corruption and impending disaster. Nor is he primarily a scholar, except in little boxes, functionally divorced from his text, in which he sends his readers off on literary funghi forays. Rather, he is a sculptor, whose most profound relationships are with his ingredients and the tools with which he manipulates them. No, manipulates is the wrong word – he makes himself vulnerable and coaxes them to reveal their inner nature.

IT is curious that America, which has done so much to corrupt our diet, has also given us some of the most eloquent defenders of good simple food: M.F.K. Fisher, Waverley Root, A.J. Liebling, Roy Andries de Groot, Richard Olney, John & Karen Hess, Alice Waters. It produces more than its share of evangelists, dedicated advocates of endangered causes. A land of widespread (though far from universal) prosperity, it is a milieu in which maverick members of the prosperous middle classes can survive on the economic fringes, where they can afford the luxury of habitual integrity. Once they have withdrawn from the rat race, another luxury they can afford is time; thus John Thorne could spend years intermittently learning how to make an artisanal loaf of bread, a search that would be passed on to Jeffrey Steingarten. (It's ironic that this laborious process, forced upon peasants through the ages, is loftily dismissed by some readers as "elitist".)

England too once had a tradition of upper/middle class eccentricity, wittily documented by Sir Osbert Sitwell; but it has been overtaken by a brutal iconoclasm which is itself the new orthodoxy. (One surly London restaurant critic's chief claim to fame was being a drug addict.) Among Britain's knowledgeable and eloquent food writers, those who earn their living by it must typically don the motley of the popular journalist, conveying their real opinions by wit so abstruse as to escape the notice of all save their fellow-jesters. The most prestigious British food magazine requires the support of a supermarket and is so ardently devoted to sensuous photography that, for the inattentive browser, the text could be replaced with the telephone directory.

MEANWHILE John Thorne, indefatigable defender of tradition, has brought his newsletter, Simple Cooking, into the twenty-first century with an expanded electronic edition, whereby far-flung subscribers may receive it instantly and without the added cost of an air mail stamp. This month's featured food: falafel. How simple can you get?