

Two Domestic Feasts

This week we drove to Sheffield for a funeral. It was a journey in time as well as space – men in heavy dark suits and black ties, women in sober dresses. (Where can you now buy a sober dress? I thought of the Boston lady who was asked where they bought their hats: “*Buy* our hats? We already *have* our hats!”)

The funeral was in the Methodist chapel, taken by its 87-year-old pastor. Then a slow procession to the cemetery, where the coffin was lowered into the grave and a few single flowers dropped in by the immediate family. I realized with a shock that it was many years since I had been to any sort of funeral other than a cremation. Burials, no matter how up market, are starkly primitive and conducive to open grief. Cremations, on the other hand, are neat and instantaneous and take place out of sight – as impersonal as sticking a frozen dinner in a microwave.

Back at the bungalow much of the food, like the burial, was homemade. Most of the guests, apart from us, were local and there was evident competition among the women in what they brought for tea. The table groaned with sandwiches, quiches, pasties, cheesecakes, mince pies, lemon curd tarts, angels on horseback. All very inviting – until you bit into them. Every bit of the home cooking, without exception, proved to be a clumsy imitation of the industrial glop which constituted the rest of the meal. Flavors were bland and insipid, pastry was thick, tough and doughy, sandwiches were mean scrapings on Mother’s Pride. We nibbled politely and disposed of half-empty plates.

On the way home an accident produced a long tailback that forced us off the M1 onto a small by-road. At the ancient village of Grafton Regis we stopped at an inviting pub for a spot of refreshment. It proved to have a serious kitchen manned by the publican’s son, with a long list of blackboard specials including three kinds of homemade soup. We settled for tomato and home-grown herbs – thick and intensely flavored – and lentil with ham. Our hunger unsatisfied by the grimly memorable tea, we savored these simple soups as if they were a gastronomic revelation somewhere in the heart of rural France.

THREE days later there was another domestic feast, this time the 78th birthday of a retired headmistress who lives across the street. Once again, the greater part of the guests made us feel like children let out of the playroom to join the grown-ups.

But this time the table was laden as for a modest Babette’s Feast. The centerpiece was a cold baked salmon with cucumber-slice scales set in mayonnaise, flanked by two surrealistic bushes of jumbo shrimp impaled on cocktail sticks stuck into orange halves. There were hot densely-packed spring rolls; a stir-fry of vegetables, chicken and chinese noodles (“What tiny spaghetti!” exclaimed one old lady); a mixed salad with French dressing on the side. The birthday cake was a springy American sponge like my mother used to make in a deep pan with a funnel in the middle so it would cook through from the inside, with three legs projecting from the top to let it cool upside down and not collapse. Later, bowls of fruit salad were passed around, with lychees, kiwi and cubes of coconut jelly.

You will have guessed by now that the cook wasn’t English. She was in fact part of the family of Phillipinos who provide our neighbor with 24-hour care. In addition to being a skilled cook, she’s a trained nurse and an expert hairdresser – for all I know, she’s also an acupuncturist and a judo black belt.

So let’s give three cheers for our Asian immigrants. Without them, chicken tikka masalla would never have become our national dish.