

*. . . the food that cures all hunger . . .*

"A bit of what you fancy does you good," says an old English proverb. And now science is opening up an area of common ground between medication and self-indulgence. According to Chris Mihill, *The* [London] *Guardian's* Medical Correspondent,

Scientists today are reporting that the common wildflower known as St John's Wort is an effective treatment for mild and moderate depression.

The plant, *Hypericum perforatum*, performed significantly better than dummy pills in treating depression and was as effective as conventional anti-depressants in some studies. [. . .]

According to a recently published book on herbal medicines, by Penelope Ody, editor of the magazine of the Herb Society, St John's Wort has traditionally been used for inflammations and burns, but is also useful for depression, nervous tension, and emotional upsets associated with the menopause.

She points out that St John's Wort is an excellent example of the Doctrine of Signatures - a medieval theory which maintained that, on the grounds of their appearance, plants would suggest their beneficial properties.

The time has come to open a restaurant specializing in medicinal cuisine. (*Chez Panacea* springs immediately to mind.) Our favorite foods could thus be justified as essential to our physical as well as our emotional well-being. Chiles, for instance, have long been regarded as a powerful stimulant and an aid to digestion. Taken together with beans, however, their effect is both noisy and noisome. This might be ameliorated by the addition of fennel, which was believed to be a cure for flatulence.

Tansy is definitely an acquired taste, but it was once so highly regarded that its very name was a corruption of the Greek *athanasia*, or immortality. It was commonly used in making omelettes, perhaps because its pungency helped to mask the sulphurous odor of rotten eggs. Without this unpleasant necessity, it might still be taken as a tonic and a stimulant, with the added bonus of destroying worms in the body. (You never know . . .)

As for the Doctrine of Signatures, we post-Freudians could, as it were, have a ball. A cornucopia of stimulants suggest themselves, which could be served below stairs in a private club. (But "club" carries its own sado-masochistic luggage; "fellowship" takes us into the realm of the homoerotic and "sodality" points in an even more unfortunate direction. Perhaps that time-honored Berkeley institution, the "co-op", could be revived.)

But just as my dreams of *la cuisine medicinale et érotique* are taking shape, there comes a shattering blow from the British Medical Controls Agency. Robin Young reports in *The* [London] *Times*:

SARDINES contain so much vitamin B12 that, according to medical regulations, they ought to be available only on prescription, it was claimed yesterday.

Maurice Hanssen, director of the Council for Responsible Nutrition, said that British regulations concerning health foods and medicines were full of such anomalies. Mr Hanssen, author of the best-selling book *E for Additives*, said: "Many other natural products could be reclassified as medicines if the Medicines Control Agency continues as it has since last December. [. . .]"

"An ordinary can of sardines contains 28 times the recommended daily allowance of vitamin B12. A health product with so much vitamin would be likely to be banned in many European countries unless it was registered

as a medicine. We are in danger of being told here that sardines should only be eaten under medical supervision."

Mr Hanssen added that pork liver contained 60 times the recommended daily allowance of vitamin A; a litre of orange juice 6 1/2 times the recommended daily allowance of vitamin C; a kipper eight times the recommended daily allowance of vitamin D; and brown rice up to nine times the recommended daily allowance of vitamin B1.

Thus our altar of the appetites would be threatened with demolition before it could be erected. Obtaining a prescription would become even more difficult than getting a reservation. As for the kitchen staff: where would one find an army of pharmacists who would be prepared to undertake the rigors of alchemy without its mediaeval rewards? The *chef de cuisine*, of course, would require advanced medical qualifications, and the soporific effects of a post-prandial cordial would necessitate the attendance of an anaesthetist. By the time we had staffed and equipped our gastronomic pantheon, its running costs would make it cheaper to spend a relaxing weekend in a private sanatorium.

Perhaps we had better stay with the traditional motivation for frequenting a gourmet restaurant: sybaritic excess piously justified as biological necessity.

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