

Macho Nacho

The first program in a new BBC2 series, “Foot in the Door”, shows us what it takes to get a start in a top restaurant kitchen. The title gives us a clue: an aggressive imperviousness to rejection that refuses to take no for an answer. To bear this out, Gordon Ramsey was given the task of advising three young hopefuls and choosing which of them would be taken on as trainee in a new venture – yet another old-fashioned pub being shoved up-market into the posh nosh category.

You wouldn’t expect Ramsey to take a softly-softly approach, and he didn’t let us down. One gentle young girl was immediately rejected behind her back because she was too short to see easily into the eye-level grill. (History’s procession of short fat chefs wouldn’t get a look-in here.) By the test night she was sufficiently overwrought to break down in tears, but pulled herself together and came up on time with her three courses.

Throughout the program Ramsey told us repeatedly how tough the profession (as exemplified by himself) was on those wimps who were not sufficiently macho to survive the rigours of the factory kitchen. This was a he-man’s world; the girl who came up trumps at the end of the contest was enough of a tomboy to qualify as an honorary male.

BUT it was not always thus. In fact, a culinary bisexuality runs through recent history, in which we schizophrenically line up domestic cuisine, the backbone of our sustenance, against the fashionable restaurants, those glamorous arenas where the survival of the gladiators is as precariously balanced as the ingredients on their outsized plates. On TV we have the lads – mostly competent cooks who are urged to cavort like trained bears – and the ladies, prim and proper as their recipes, producing familiar and reliable food that conservative husbands won’t reject as “mucked about”.

There are also the Two Fat Ladies who, though now separated in this world, will be forever united in endless reruns; but they embody the revenge of history, riding roughshod over the effete fashions of *cuisine légère*. Like the Valkyries, the Amazons and the Furies, their sexuality is potent but ambiguous.

Since TV is all about advertising and the essence of advertising is aggressive bullying, the tone is set by the lads, and so it features more chefs than cooks, more lads than ladies. But among the shrinking ranks of housewives who still want to have a go in the kitchen, there is a steady demand for basic instruction from someone they can identify with. And so year after year Delia continues to top the charts. The ironic thing is that in today’s world of television she is a remnant of a bygone era: if she were to walk in unknown and propose her programme, she’d be laughed out the door by experts who could see that she was, like – well, yesterday.

BUT the greatest chefs understand that the variety and complexity of all our world cuisines is ultimately derived, not from the sleight-of-hand of a few glamorous professionals, but from a regional integrity whose preservation and transmission is ultimately in the care of those generations of women who have tended our domestic kitchens. One important document is *Cuisine du Terroir: The Lost Domain of French Cooking*, in which the Master Chefs of

France set down some of the regional recipes that they consider to be endangered species. As the jacket description makes clear, this is “great French home cooking of the past”, now even more endangered than when the book was published in 1984. (Being out of print, this book is itself a member of an endangered species.)

In the last half-century, women have addressed themselves not only to instruction in domestic kitchen chores but to the history and the preservation of their legacy. A book might usefully be written about the influence of Elizabeth David, Jane Grigson and Dorothy Hartley; in America the historian Joan Reardon admirably performed this service for M.F.K. Fisher, Julia Child and Alice Waters in a book subtitled “Celebrating the Pleasures of the Table”. Like Elizabeth David, all three gained their inspiration from exposure to regional French cuisine at a time when Anglo-Saxon food was at its lowest ebb. Alas, this important book never appeared in a British edition and has gone out of print in America. There seems to be a rule that, the better a food-related book may be, the quicker it is remaindered. Which is fine for us impecunious collectors but bad for cultural continuity.

BUT even restaurant culture need not be governed by the rich, the trendy and the sensational. For those prepared to explore London’s ethnic communities, there is a wealth of family establishments catering for those of modest means who are accustomed to lingering over slow food which is long in the preparation and the partaking.

And even a few of our finest chefs have deliberately eschewed the London rat-race (both figurative and literal) to serve modest feasts to a few discerning diners. Last week Mary and I joined Charles and Lindsey Shere in a pilgrimage to Ludlow in Shropshire near the Welsh border, where we met Mirabel Osler for dinner at Shaun Hill’s Merchant House.

Shaun must live as happy a life as it’s possible for a chef to lead. The two small dining rooms on the ground floor of his Jacobean house seat a mere twenty-four diners; the rest of the splendid edifice is his family home. He took on the project against professional advice, with the fall-back option of pulling in his horns and converting the ground floor into additional family rooms. But the world (including the Michelin inspectors, who have awarded him a macaron) has beaten a path to his door and reservations, particularly for weekends and holidays, must be made well in advance.

At £29.50 for a set meal, his prices during the past five years have hardly kept up with inflation. Almost uniquely, this includes service – a policy which even Chez Panisse, for legal and psychological reasons, has not been able to maintain. For this modest sum we were offered a choice of four items for each of three courses, most of which we sampled and approved. (Charles went so far as to comment in his travel diary, “Dinner was superb, the best in England.”) The menu was sufficiently interesting to be included below.

And so at least one world-class chef who could be cooking up an ulcer has opted for a quiet life in a civilised community. If he gets bored he could utilise the knowledge picked up during his university fellowship as a classical scholar. Make mine the *vulvulae botelli* [stuffed pig’s uterus], and please pass the *garum*.

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The Merchant House, Ludlow, Shrops.

Menu: £29. 50 per person

ragoût of artichoke, local asparagus and fresh morels with Hollandaise sauce

sautéed monkfish with mustard and cucumber sauce

steamed lobster with chick pea, coriander and olive oil sauce

calf's sweetbreads with potato and olive cake

grilled sea bass with basil and crème fraîche

rack of lamb with red wine sauce

bourride of Graig Farm chicken (organic chicken braised in saffron stock then thickened with
garlic mayonnaise)

Aylesbury duck steamed then crisp fried with wild mushroom sauce

raspberry crème brûlée

iced nougat parfait

local strawberries with mascarpone ice cream

apricot tart with amaretto ice cream

cheese - Gorgonzola, Pont l'Eveque and Brèbiou

coffee - tea - tisane £2.50

cheese as an additional course - £5. 00

VAT and Service included