

## *Tastlessness*

Now that so many of us in the developed capitalist countries are handicapped by boredom and addictive acquisition—I SHOP, THEREFORE I AM—our official public sympathies go to those whose handicaps are physical and immutable. Ritual acknowledgement demands that they be immediately apparent: to be grossly deformed or abbreviated takes first rank; then blind, if led by a German Shepherd (*Der Herr ist mein Hirte*); totally deaf only a distant third, particularly if the sufferer can lip-read. Far to the rear and almost out-of-sight are those who suffer from invisible handicaps such as an inability to smell or taste. In fact, in a modern city the latter impairments may even be considered assets rather than liabilities.

Seeing my contemporaries described in print as “elderly”, I unashamedly take my pleasure from frivolous but harmless stimuli. My diary, free of encoded entries, may be left open at any page, on any table. Essays which provide no useful information, but amuse with their dexterity, are a pleasant way to read myself to sleep. Alone in my sound studio, since I am not a performing instrumentalist, I may by way of compensation spend a couple of hours comparing the Bach keyboard interpretations of Ralph Kirkpatrick, Edith Picht-Axenfeld and Gustav Leonhardt. And in the kitchen, I like to explore just how many heads of garlic may accompany a brick-roasted free-range chicken before its flavor is annihilated.

BUT suddenly my life is impoverished. Ignoring a rather bad cold that was settling into my chest, I went away with Mary last weekend to join a friend at a promising French restaurant in Winchester. It was a fool’s errand; by the time we arrived my tastebuds were already nodding off. I ignored the more subtle items on the menu and went for virile and aggressive flavors. A Thai crab cake starter, though of a pleasant consistency, proved to be too tamely Westernized to make its point. A leg of duck confit, however, was so richly concentrated in its essence as to make a major impact. Likewise a densely caramelized *tarte Tatin*: even the corpse of Curnonsky would have stirred and sniffed the air.

It was my last olfactory sensation. Our unlucky hostess took us to her home, where I went immediately to bed—fortunately isolated on an upper floor—and alternately coughed and slept through the rest of the day, the night, and the luncheon party she had arranged for us on the following day. Poor Mary had to make my apologies, consoling the guests with warnings of the terrible puns they had escaped.

The next day, safely home, I shuffled down the street to our local surgery. The nurse immediately referred me to a doctor, who, virtually deafened by the roar of my wheezing chest through his stethoscope, diagnosed acute bronchitis and sent me off to the chemist for an inhaler and a course of antibiotics.

Bronchitis—what a let-down. Lenny Bruce used to do a skit on diseases. Some, he claimed, sounded really hip: “Yeah, like, man, I’ve got pellagra.” Others, he insisted, were totally square, inexorably uncool: “I got bron-*chy*-dus,” he would whine in a New York Jewish school-boy voice. Well, no use kicking against the pricks, as St. Paul used to say. You got it—so live with it.

But it’s not that easy. It’s a sort of gastronomic impotence. I start the morning by grinding the mocha-java beans, tapping the grounds into the *caffetiere*, pouring in the off-the-boil water, stirring it, covering it with the plunger: all those actions, each accompanied by a detectably different aroma, are now merely a ritual. I might as well be emptying the vacuum cleaner. And finally, after a couple of

minutes' steeping, the plunger goes down and then comes the first sip of fresh brew. . . Well, at least I can say for certain that it's not tea.

Time for lunch; something subtle. How about a chopped onion, mixed with a little of the left-over oil from yesterday's sardines (maturing in the can on the kitchen counter), together with a splash of vinegar and a large dollop of *fromage frais* to give it a creamy texture so it feels like mayonnaise? Pile it on a thick slice of German sourdough rye, brought back from Berlin, and you've got a dose of culinary Spanish Fly to start an old man's juices flowing.

What to do this afternoon? A few days ago I was stuck in a traffic jam beside a market stall and leapt out to buy a little sack of garlic for only a quid. (The archetypal impulse purchase—it should have been a bag of beans. *Pulses! Geddit?*) They're still firm and haven't started to sprout. Richard Olney's *Simple French Food* tells me exactly what to do with them: wrap them in foil, bake them in a 400F (mark 6) oven for an hour, let them cool enough to handle, squeeze the soft cloves out of their skins, put them through a sieve, mix with a bit of salt and olive oil, and refrigerate. *Voila!* A lifetime supply of roast garlic puree.

Everything goes perfectly. As the end of the roasting time approaches, I can even catch a faint familiar whiff from the kitchen. But as they cool, so does my gastronomic passion. I can see the cloves with my eyes, feel them juicy in my fingers, but that's it. Even a dollop on the tongue tells me only that I'm in the presence of something vaguely potent. I could devour the entire half-pint of essence and saunter forth to slay dragons.

My prize will keep covered in the fridge, but for how long? A few years ago, when food and wine were merely arrows in my sensory quiver, I had a chest infection that left me tasteless for almost a year. If history repeats itself, this time I will be haunting the curry joints, seeking out ever more scorching vindaloos. I will make up salads of chopped *habanera* peppers swimming in tabasco sauce. Breakfast will consist of *harissa* omelettes, my tea-time snacks of thousand-year-old eggs.

AMONG the rich gourmets of ancient Rome, the most popular condiment was *liquamen* (or *garum*). Reay Tannahill, in *Food in History*, gives the definitive recipe:

*It is best to take large or small sprats, or, failing them, take anchovies, or horse-mackerel, or mackerel, make a mixture of all and put into a baking trough. Take two pints of salt to the peck of fish and mix well to have the fish impregnated with salt. Leave it for one night, and then put it in an earthenware vessel which you place open in the sun for two or three months (or up to eighteen months if made with larger fish), stirring with a stick at intervals [Who got **that** job?!], then take it, cover it with a lid and store away. Some people add old wine, two pints to a pint of fish.*

Tomorrow I'll establish Ye Olde Whiting Fishpaste Factory. Supplies should be no problem; I know where our fishmonger keeps his garbage cans. Mary has loads of earthenware pots she normally uses for plants; maybe she'll trade me a few for a load of fish manure. Of course Hampstead Garden Suburb is rigidly controlled by the Trust, so I won't be allowed to put up a sign. But somehow, I don't think my customers will have any trouble finding me . . .

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