



The Way We Eat Now

Sheila Dillon, who presents 'The Food Programme' on BBC Radio 4, once came to lunch, a couple of years ago. She was doing a piece on the Irish Food Revolution (we tend to think of such phrases as having capital initial letters) and was starting her quest in County Cork. A few weeks before her visit the *Daily Telegraph's* food writer, Tamsin Day-Lewis (Daniel's big sister), had written a paean of entirely justified praise for Cork's English Market under the rather neat headline, 'The Tuck of the Irish'. It was becoming clear that the message to our brethren in Britain was that Ireland had been undergoing a tumultuous change in its attitude to food and how it is produced and presented. Well-intentioned as these stories were, they did seem to imply that if it was not impossible to throw a brick at random in Ireland without hitting an artisan producer, the day was not far off.

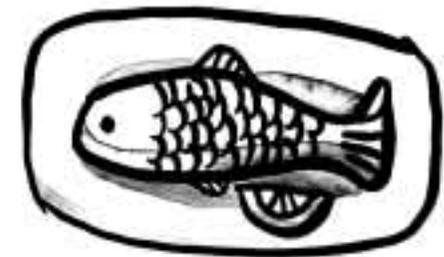
After Sheila and I had lunched frugally but well off lentil soup made with organic chicken stock, hunks of excellent

brown soda bread (both of which Johann had left ready for us) and a makeshift salad from the garden, we proceeded to record an interview. The process was not helped by the fact that our dog had secretly devoured the sponge microphone cover as a snack, but we spoke softly to compensate.

The interview never saw the light of broadcast day, through no fault of the BBC; they were trying to do an upbeat piece on Irish food and there was me saying that, yes, there were scattered outbreaks of excellence, but the balance was still pretty unexciting. I would love Ireland really to be The Food Island, to use Bord Bia's admirably aspirational phrase, but I did feel – and still do – that we have quite a way to go. So does England, Wales and Scotland, of course. Put it like this: you need a really good guidebook to eat consistently well when making a tour of these islands. In Italy, you just follow your nose, sometimes literally.

So has there been an Irish food revolution? Well, perhaps there has, but we are exceptionally eager to congratulate ourselves on anything that we do even vaguely well. Hence, where a few but growing number of far-sighted people decide to produce wholesome, natural, handmade food in Ireland and when a modest proportion of our chefs cook supremely well, we tend to exaggerate the picture.

The pioneers of real food in modern Ireland,



starting with Myrtle Allen in the early 1960s, have had to struggle against all the odds, and many of them still do. We live in a country where small, high-quality producers have it rather tough. They are prey to the Draconian application of EU food safety laws (which don't seem to operate in quite the same way in places like France and Italy), where government policy always seems to favour large-scale, factory-based production, and where we are still conditioned to expect all food to be cheap. Despite being still an essentially rural country, your chances of buying food that has been produced within a few miles of your home are slim and taking food seriously continues, unfortunately, to be regarded as an élitist, middle-class affectation. Even today in Ireland, an enthusiasm for fine food is seen as something rather alien and above our collective station; no wonder so many of the pioneers of real food here have been foreigners.

As is the case in so many other areas of our national character, our approach to food comes heavily laden with historical baggage. We have a guilt about eating well because we are the descendants of the people who survived the Famine, the ones who not only avoided starving to death, and somehow didn't succumb to cholera, but who managed to stay in the land of their birth. We are here because our forebears had enough to eat – maybe only just enough in order to cling onto life and produce children. In this context it is no surprise that our attitude to food is rather short on joy and celebration.

And so it dredges up uncomfortable collective memories if we decide to spurn inferior food. It seems faintly indecent to

demand the best that we can afford because the stock of which we are born survived by eating what they could. And when we failed to clear the plates of childhood meals we were told – if we were Roman Catholic – that the starving children in Africa would give anything to be offered such nourishment. Not having achieved an adult level of logic – or what passes for it in the grown-up world – we would fervently offer our congealed meat and three veg (especially the veg) for immediate transfer to Africa on the basis that we were not starving. That way lay a clip around the ear.

Add to this kind of experience the obsession with calorie-counting and the alleged evil of fat and it is no wonder that we bring to food a curious combination of rather twisted emotions. It is alright to eat to live, but living to eat is sinful.

In most Irish families you don't have to delve very far back into the ancestry to find dire poverty. It is very much to our credit as a people that we have always prized education as an engine of advancement and that whole generations of Irish parents strove against appalling odds in order to give their children a leg-up the social ladder. But woe betide the upwardly mobile who got 'notions'; the consumption of wine and fancy foreign food would elicit a sharp condemnation: 'Sure, t'was far from that you were reared!'

Times are indeed changing, but slowly. These days the national staple is no longer potatoes, it is pasta. Wine is consumed not just at Christmas but weekly in middle-class homes throughout the land. The Jacob's Creeks and Piat d'Ors have come to be accepted as part of normal behaviour. It may not

be much of a revolution, but it's a start. We eat and drink very differently at the dawn of the twenty-first century than we did when I was growing up the 1960s and 1970s – largely thanks to television and travel.

While we bring home from holidays abroad a braver palate and a willingness to eat foods of which our parents may never have even heard, we don't import what I think is the most infectious aspect of food culture in Europe: the passion, the excitement and the demand for quality. The French, the Italians, the Spanish will happily debate food for hours on end – ideally over a table laden with various dishes – and they will go the extra kilometre and the extra few euro to get the best they can afford. Watch them in the markets, even in the super-markets, as they prod, sniff, squeeze, consider.

Our Continental cousins take so much time and effort to select the raw materials for cooking not just because this sense of discernment is bred in the bone but, I believe, because they have retained the sense of sharing and communion that used to be part of breaking bread together. Many Irish families sit down together around the dining table on only a handful of occasions throughout the year. Most people, according to the statisticians, eat in front of the television, so that the consumption of food is a communal activity only in the sense that the family eats more or less the same food while watching the same programme. As multiple televisions become the norm in Irish homes, even this sense of communion may well be lost as the younger element watch 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' while parents settle down in front of 'Sky News'.

Most houses these days still come with a dining room, but it is usually deployed for some purpose other than eating. If a family eats together it is probably in the kitchen, something which I have never been keen to do. I believe there is a greater sense of occasion and significance if the meal is carried through into another area and seen and consumed in isolation from where it was prepared. Not always, of course. We eat in front of 'The Simpsons' from time to time and have been known to refuel in the kitchen, but we like to have several, proper family meals in the week. Apart from anything else, it's an opportunity for conversation.

As a restaurant critic, I always try to approach each meal with enthusiasm and high expectations. However, despite great strides over the last decade in particular, the norm remains pretty uninspiring. The function of the average, bog-standard Irish restaurant seems to be to convert mass-produced ingredients into tarted-up pictures-on-a-plate, and to charge an arm and a leg for the privilege. They are mind-numbingly predictable. When a waiter asks me, yet again, the extraordinary question, 'Do you want to see the menu?', I want to reply, 'No, I'll just guess'. In fact, I have been doing a few trials runs by leaving the menu closed and choosing by ESP. I turn to my companion and say, 'I'll have whatever they have managed to do to goat's cheese to start, followed by whatever they have done to the lamb.' It rarely fails.

The predictability of Irish restaurants has changed, of course, and it now hinges on doing silly things with the raw materials. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the

raw materials are often pretty dull and bland, the second is because chefs feel that they have to justify their existence and produce something that the punter is unlikely to do at home. Cheffing about is a very common practice and is sometimes, tragically, extended to excellent raw materials, whereupon it becomes a crime.

Too many Irish chefs and Irish customers appear to have a horror of simplicity. There is nothing – simply nothing – as good as spanking fresh fish dusted with flour and cooked in a little butter until it is just done, served with a wedge of lemon. A piece of beef that is well-reared and properly matured by a craft butcher (as distinct from mass-produced and vac-packed in a vast factory) needs only to be lightly anointed with olive oil, salt and pepper and placed on a very hot grill. A salad of fresh, organic lettuce needs just a drizzle of olive oil and a squeeze of lemon juice.

Bread needs to be made slowly using the best flour and a lot of skill; it does not require sundried tomatoes, curry powder, fried onions or chunks of cheap olives. (If Shakespeare asked today, ‘Where is fancy bred?’ he would be directed to the nearest restaurant.) Mashed potato



needs to be made from a variety of potato suitable for boiling or steaming, into which a lot of hot milk and melted butter is whisked. If the spuds are good it doesn't really need to be

flavoured with mustard, or sage, or bits of bacon.

This feverish desire of chefs to appear clever seems to desert them as soon as the vexed question of vegetables arises. Most will have recourse to what they can buy pre-prepped: chunks of potato, lumps of calabrese broccoli, batons of woody carrot. This is vegetables as wallpaper, as muzak, as a token gesture. In many European countries there is a tradition of serving vegetables as a separate course, where they have to sing for their supper and keep up with the meat or the fish. Of course, in such places vegetables tend to be grown with pride, with an emphasis on flavour, texture and, above all, freshness. They are not produced as a commodity.

We have dozens – perhaps hundreds – of small-scale, organic growers, producing stuff like cavolo nero (the Tuscan cabbage), myriad squashes, asparagus peas, proper sprouting broccoli (not those big heads of calabrese which are supposed to be so good for us), tiny courgettes, okra, all sorts and colours of tomato, artichokes, green onions, baby leeks, dozens of salads, lots of different kinds of oriental brassicas. And what does the typical restaurant do? It serves the kinds of vegetables which would not be out of place in a 1950s' factory canteen.

This sort of attitude reveals that restaurants in Ireland almost invariably serve vegetables – and other foods, too – not because they are any good, or because they are in season, or because they really compliment whatever else is on the plate, but simply because they are there, day in, day out, and are sold cheaply. There are restaurants in West Cork – a dwindling

number, thank Heaven, but present nevertheless – where the chef buys his vegetables out of the back of a van that has travelled all the way from the Dublin market. Meanwhile, within a few miles there are organic producers who are ignored because they have to charge more to make a living and cannot guarantee a year-round supply of red peppers and courgettes.

Great chefs care deeply about their raw materials, vegetables included. It is, perhaps, invidious to name some personal favourites, and I'm sure I will leave out many who are doing wonderful things. But amongst the visionary chefs of Ireland I would have to mention Derry Clarke of L'Ecrivain, Guillaume Lebrun of Guilbaud's, Ross Nugent of Chapter One, all in Dublin; Paul Flynn at The Tannery in Dungarvan; Rory O'Connell at Ballymaloe House; Denis Cotter at Café Paradiso in Cork. These guys are superstars, but there are dozens of good, modest restaurants which do a superb job and rarely get much recognition for it: places like The Farmgate in Midleton, Grapefruit Moon in Ballycotton, 101 Talbot in Dublin, The Crawford Gallery Café in Cork, The Wine Vault in Waterford, Country Choice in Nenagh and La Dolce Vita in Wexford. The good news is that they are a growing band, but you can travel long distances between them.

I once found myself in a small town in Umbria with a couple of fellow wine writers – one English, the other American – getting peckish. Although it was well into siesta time, we decided to find a restaurant the American had visited some years before and which he said was eccentric but very good. We came across it eventually in a side street off the sleepy

piazza and entered the cool, empty, dim interior. The elderly owner looked surprised and a little embarrassed. She told us that she had nothing to give us and that fresh supplies would not be delivered until later in the evening. Would we like to come back then? We said that some bread and cheese with a bottle of wine would do fine and she potted off to see what she could find.

The crusty rustic bread arrived in no time, along with a round of a local semi-soft cow's cheese and two bottles – a nice touch – of something red and palatable. As we ate we were gradually surrounded by a wafting, delicious smell and shortly afterwards our hostess emerged with duck breasts which had been grilled over wild fennel, and a vast bowl of crisp salad. She told us that we looked hungry and she had managed to produce these few morsels. The bill came to a little over ten quid a head, and we tried to assuage our guilt at having interrupted her afternoon's rest by pressing a large tip on her. She refused and said that it had been a pleasure to prepare such a simple snack for such appreciative foreigners (the implication being, I suppose, that English-speakers rarely show much appreciation).

It reminded me of Elizabeth David's story of stopping at a wayside *auberge* somewhere in deepest France and being told that there was nothing – *rien* – to eat, but that she and her companion would be welcome to some bread, some *charcuterie* and some of the local wine. They gratefully accepted, gorged themselves on *saucisson* and were somewhat embarrassed to find a *daube* of beef plonked on the table at

the point where they felt that they had eaten their fill. Followed by a *coeur de crème*, salad and cheese. I like the Continentals' idea of 'nothing'.

Eating abroad is fraught with potential embarrassment. Maeve Binchy tells a wonderful story about leaving her hotel in Taiwan in order to avoid the hideous imitations of western food served there. This was thirty years ago when tourists rarely ventured beyond the air-conditioned comfort of their accommodation. She found a place which appeared to have a menu in the window and went in to find that it was, indeed, full of people – all men, as it happens – eating and drinking. Not knowing how to read the menu she looked around and saw someone eating what appeared to be stir-fried prawns accompanied by a beer. She pointed and indicated that she would like the same, whereupon, frozen with horror, she saw the waiter snatch up the poor man's bowl and beer glass only to plonk them down in front of her. She ate quickly and left, with many thanks and abject apologies, and had her offer of a generous bundle of US dollars politely but firmly refused. She is still, she says, not sure if it really was a restaurant.

In rural parts of Europe and even, to some extent, in the cities, many restaurants are family businesses; the premises have long been paid for and everybody, young and old, has a role to play in what they see as a kind of community service. This is the key reason why it is relatively cheap to eat in countries which put a high value on food. Such restaurants have an organic link with their environment; in Ireland, for the most part, restaurants lack this sense of personality and place. Most

are glorified sandwich bars and many of the rest are élitist and somewhat alien.

In many Irish restaurants we seem to suffer from a kind of Emperor's New Clothes Syndrome. The kitchen is pretending that the food is special and the customers are concerned to appear sophisticated. Look around you in a restaurant on the Continent and consider that communal sense of purpose and mutual respect that infuses every action that you witness. In places like that, both punters and staff know what they are about.

It may seem perverse to describe the average Irish restaurant – with all its silly cheffing about – as conservative, but considering that eating out is a relatively new experience for most of us, the typical menu is remarkably traditional. How many of us ever consider eating a starter, main course (meat or fish with three veg) and a dessert as the main meal of the day at home? And yet virtually every menu in the country is based on the idea that we do. Tapas bars and noodle houses, where you order a range of dishes which are served as they are ready, are much more in tune with the way we eat today and they are becoming more common. Wagamama's communal tables and decree that you get your dishes as they are ready are revolutionary, but it does a roaring trade.

The conservatism of Irish restaurants is most clearly expressed in their approach to wine. A few brave pioneers (an unfortunate phrase, in the context, I suppose) charge a standard mark-up on a bottle of wine, which makes trading-up an attractive option. Rather than having your bottle of house

wine, you can have something quite serious while still paying €10 or so as a margin to the restaurant. However, in virtually every establishment in the land you will pay a percentage mark-up, which means that while you are being ripped off for a bottle of house plonk, you are being mugged and left for dead if you decide to have a bottle of half-decent Burgundy.

There are some monumental, legendary wine lists in Ireland. Places like Kelly's of Rosslare, The Lord Bagenal Inn in Leighlinbridge, Kenmare's Park Hotel and Delphi Lodge in Connemara maintain vast, eclectic lists. Even before you open the wine list you know that you will be able to drink something interesting and well-made from any major wine region in the world and that, should the humour take you, you can choose from a huge range of great classics. These restaurants are driven by a passion for wine and, to some extent, by missionary zeal. Not only are the lists big and eclectic, they often offer outstanding value for money, especially for older vintages.

This kind of wine list is a labour of love and nobody is really in it for the money. Offering mature wines is the sort of thing of which accountants strongly disapprove. This is why most restaurants don't even bother to offer serious wines that are ready to drink – with the occasional exception of some posh Bordeaux label with an extortionate mark-up – and source everything from a couple of the big wine distributors. Hence you open the list and see all the usual suspects from every wine-producing country you can shake a stick at – and none of them particularly good.

In places like New York, London and Sydney, many of the better restaurants have long ago abandoned the idea of organising wine lists on the basis of country: they prefer to offer a short list, carefully chosen, with interest and quality as the object, and comprising a range of styles rather than a clumsy geography lesson. This kind of restaurant will have a wine waiter who knows every single wine intimately and can tell you anything you want to know about any of them. He, or she, will expect you to ask for advice rather than plumping for the Irish favourites, *viz.* Sancerre, Fleurie, or 'a bottle of the house red'.

Such restaurants can provide you with a full bottle of wine, of course, but they are used to most of their customers ordering by the glass. By the generous glass, of course, not the mingy little thimbles we tend to get here. If you want to get a flavour of this kind of wine list (and some excellent, simply prepared organic food), try the Ely Wine Bar in Dublin, the success of which has yet to spawn any serious imitations. I find this curiously reassuring in that it suggests that the average restaurateur is aware of his or her limitations.

The limitations seem to be legion. The shunning of simplicity extends far beyond the sheer cheffiness of menus. Try ordering a green salad. Pretty straightforward, you might think: some lettuce, perhaps even a couple of kinds, a few leaves of rocket, maybe even a bit of basil. Is this what you get? Rarely. On most occasions the colour definition is by-passed and you will end up with cherry tomatoes, beansprouts, every conceivable colour of pepper, slices of cucumber (moderately green, I

know), chunks of red onion, layers of tough, leathery radicchio, shreds of red cabbage, lollorosso ... nothing limits the list but the resourcefulness of the kitchen.

Even leaving aside the fact that nobody in their right mind could regard this concoction as being green, it is also a total nightmare of tastes and textures. The Irish mixed salad is whatever comes to hand, and, unfortunately, an awful lot comes to hand. The most complicated salad I like to create involves some lettuce, some rocket, a few snips of fresh herbs (especially chives and chervil, but when did you last see the latter in a restaurant, let alone the supermarket?), perhaps a few marigold petals and the odd nasturtium flower or leaf for a touch of pepperiness. Yes, yes, I know I am admitting that the desire to cut all the greenness with colour is a national characteristic which, at heart, I share, but I insist that this is real salad, a salad that has been thought out.

The average restaurant serves lettuce-dependent salad (with all the other, inappropriate ingredients) right through the winter. When did you last see a seasonal offering of beetroot and orange salad, or winter cress, which provides the crunch and refreshment for which we look to salad as a palate-cleanser? Or a little bowl of lamb's lettuce and winter purslane with a simple dressing? Or little strips of blanched celeriac tossed with a touch of *remoulade*?

When I consider ideas like this I sometimes wonder if I should be let out on my own. Perhaps I eat too well at home. Indeed, I have given up eating chicken, except in restaurants where I know the raw materials are sourced with considerable

effort and pride. Your typical chicken fillet, I'm afraid, tastes of sawdust to me, because I eat the real thing back at the ranch. But the blandness seems to be spreading. However well a piece of beef may be cooked – crusty outside and moist and rare within – it usually tastes of very little. Again, this is a case of poor raw materials, of meat that has not been aged for flavour and which, more likely than not, was produced in a farming system that rewards yield rather than quality.

Any system that works on that basis ultimately fails both producer and consumer, while it undoubtedly lines the pockets of those who come between them. And it is not confined to agriculture. Far too many restaurants look to yield (bums on seats, portion control, 'competitive' margins) rather than to quality and the giving of pleasure. Far too many of those who are involved in the complex process of feeding us, whether at home or when we eat out, have had a passion bypass. Why? Because too few of us care: never mind the quality, look at the quantity; and when we eat out, give us fashion, not passion.

