

WAKEFIELD PRESS

LOOKING FOR FLAVOUR



BARBARA SANTICH is an author, researcher, teacher and internationally acknowledged authority in food history. Fundamental to her work is a belief that what, how and why we eat is intimately connected to our culture. *Looking for Flavour*, recognised by the Food Media Club of Australia as the best soft-cover food book in 1996. is not only an individual adventure but also a key to understanding other societies.

Barbara Santich is also a respected academic at the University of Adelaide where she introduced postgraduate courses in both food writing and food history and culture.

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BARBARA SANTICH
— / —
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F O R A . E . D .



*'When you wake up in the morning, Pooch,' said Piglet at last,
'what's the first thing you say to yourself?'*
'What's for breakfast?' said Pooch. 'What do you say, Piglet?'
'I say, I wonder what's going to happen exciting today?' said Piglet.
Pooch nodded thoughtfully.
'It's the same thing,' he said.

A . A . MILNE , WINNIE - THE - POOH



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LOOKING FOR FLAVOUR

What's the smell of parsley? – Dylan Thomas



I DIDN'T THINK SO at the time, but I recognise now that in the environmentally sensitive 1990s the title I had chosen for one of my articles was highly provocative: 'Flavour first, rainforests second'.

Reflecting on it later, I realised that if there has been one constant in all my years of writing around and about food, it's been the importance of flavour. Not just any flavour, but authentic flavour, the flavour of things tasting as I they should – or as I remember them tasting. The flavour of oysters straight from the sea . . . as I can still taste them, when my grandfather carved them from the rocks at Sydney's Palm



Beach, washed them in the brine and introduced his four year-old grand-daughter to a flavour she will never forget . . . these were the essential oysters.

Years later, in Spain, I wrote about tomatoes. After a morning on the beach, when the others had all retired for their siesta, I would sit on the balcony with a glass of Tarragona wine and fresh crusty bread heavy with olive oil and thick crimson slices of tomato. Looking towards the invisible sea, beyond the railway line and the biscuit-coloured boxes of the new suburbia, I read, and wrote, and relished my solitude as I relished my tomatoes. Those Spanish tomatoes, which we bought every second morning from a farm on the rural outskirts, ten minutes walk away, became imbued with the pleasure and joy of an hour all to myself, and the memory of their flavour is suffused with a feeling of deep contentment. They became the essential tomatoes.

Not every food has its benchmark in my imagination, but the essential chocolate is there, and it comes from the Paris shop of Christian Constant, on the Left Bank, rue du Bac. One Sunday morning, on the way to visit a friend for lunch, we passed by his shop, and left with a selection of the most exquisite, intense and refined chocolate petits fours I have ever experienced. For sharing, we cut each diminutive cube into quarters, but so complex and subtle were these gâteaux that a quarter was more than enough. I revisit the shop every time I am in Paris, just to remember them – and though Christian Constant chocolates have never been quite the same since, the souvenir remains as the yardstick against which all other chocolate may be judged.

Because flavour is important to me I cultivate a summer garden. Perhaps ‘cultivate’ is too flattering a description for a higgledy-piggledy



backyard that has beans mixed up with tomatoes and melons threatening to strangle the clothes line, but it's enough to keep me in fresh produce throughout the summer. In spring, it yields sweet, young radishes that demand nothing more, and nothing less, than fresh crusty bread, good butter, and proper salt, and in all seasons it offers fresh herbs for flavouring an omelette, a salad, a dish of potatoes. I haven't always cultivated a garden, but wherever I've lived I've left a legacy of herbs: mint at Jean-Pierre's, its North African ancestors brought to France by itinerant farm workers; tarragon, the soft and delicate true French tarragon, outside the kitchen window near Compiègne; and ineradicable comfrey in the tiny backyard in inner-city Lilyfield. It's not that I like gardening – better to think of it as exercise, less enjoyable than sex but infinitely more satisfying than jogging – but its rewards, anticipated and enjoyed, make the effort worthwhile. When I can wander by the garden and check the slowly ripening tomatoes, crush some thyme between my fingers and inhale its uplifting aroma, or crunch on a tiny bean, then I know a garden is a wondrous thing.

Both at the instant and in retrospect, flavour is a distinct but integral part of the eating experience. Sometimes it represents the whole experience, as if taste had dominated the other senses. At other times, though the necessary props are called up, the flavour remains elusive. Try as I may, I can never make my palate recall the taste of my first Bresse chicken, the paragon of flavour in the poultry world. I can remember buying the chicken at the Saturday market in Beaune, in the square next to the wood-and-plaster structure of the centuries-old covered market. It came from a stall next to the second-hand books stall, where I found, and excitedly bought, a long-coveted 1922



two-volume edition of the *Larousse Universel* illustrated dictionary for the bargain price of 100 francs. I don't remember what the chicken cost, but I know that it was a big bird, as chickens go, and that its neck was still covered with white feathers, which, together with its blue legs and authenticating red label, patriotically assured me that this was a genuine *poulet de Bresse*. I remember cooking the bird with loads of my best butter and perhaps a sprig of the tarragon that was just shooting outside the kitchen window, and seeking out one of our better Bordeaux to drink with it. And I remember the firmness of the flesh as I carved it, and how white it was. But its flavour, the essence of that *poulet de Bresse*, eludes me.

Scientists might resolve flavour into its separate components by gas chromatography or other sophisticated techniques and, subsequently, attempt to recreate flavour in the laboratory by working backwards from the results of these analyses and putting together a blend of the identified chemical compounds in the appropriate proportions. Such syntheses never work. The blend is never the same as nature's original. I disliked banana Paddle Pops as a child, and later at university I learnt why: banana was one of the first (and easiest?) flavours to be identified and subsequently synthesised. Convinced that flavour has to be more than chemical formulas, I viewed this advance in chemistry with great scepticism.

Flavour is an evocation, epitomising whole experiences. Particular flavours are associated with particular settings, people, and moods. Looking for flavour is, unconsciously, a personal quest. Certain flavours come to mean friendship, or contentment, or comfort. Chocolate might represent the soothing luxury of self-indulgence; a lemon-sharpened cup of tea the satisfaction of a job well done.



I cannot think of any flavours I associate with anguish, or anger, or disappointment; perhaps these have been selectively culled, or perhaps they never made it to the memory bank in the first place.

The flavour fanatic Dr Max Lake has developed a theory to explain all this. Primitive animals, such as the earthworm, began with simply a ‘taste brain’ that responded to chemical sensations – the five basic tastes of sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami (a savoury quality represented by MSG). Later came the ‘smell brain’, which reached its greatest development in the koala, one of the most particular of animals in its choice of food. We still possess a rudimentary ‘taste brain’ and ‘smell brain’, though these are overshadowed by the intelligent brain. The ‘smell brain’ complex includes a component known as the hippocampus which, amongst other things, preserves our past; Max Lake calls it ‘the library of long memory’. This elegantly complex organ serves as a logical base to the magical power of flavour and smell – aromas that construct whole cities, tastes that call up friends as effectively as Aladdin’s magic lamp. It’s the hippocampus, sparked by messages from a sip of lime tea and a crumb of madeleine, that started Proust on his nostalgic reverie. Further, the integration of the ‘smell brain’ with various other parts of the cerebral system means the involvement of emotions, so that a particular aroma or flavour might influence the way we feel. Reciprocally, our emotional state also has a bearing on how we taste; absorbed in the monochromatic underworld of self-pity, we lose all sense of smell and flavour.

Half of flavour is aroma, and smells, according to Max Lake, are absolutely fundamental to life. Food smells provoke appetite and help ensure survival of the individual; our own body smells (pheromones) provoke sexual attraction and help ensure survival of the species.



Aromas can serve as a warning to animals, toxic compounds effectively saying ‘Avoid me’; they also deliver a cautionary message in my kitchen when they let me know that my beautifully golden apricot jam is starting to catch on the bottom! (The single greatest obstacle to acceptance of the microwave is its indifference to the senses.)

Whenever we smell something, the sensation passes through the olfactory nerves to the ‘smell brain’, or olfactory cortex, which includes those parts of the brain containing the highest concentrations of beta endorphin. Beta endorphin is also known as the ‘happy hormone’, since it promotes feelings of pleasure and contentment. It’s understandable, then, that the ultimate in flavour experience, whether the ‘essential’ oyster, or tomato, or chocolate, will bring about a generous endorphin response. And since the endorphins are natural opiates, any other oyster, or tomato, or chocolate, with less of a flavour hit, cannot hope to evoke the same degree of satisfaction and contentment.

Because you know and enjoy the ‘high’ of the authentic flavour, you keep looking for that ‘high’, and perhaps the circumstances that surround it: the holiday mood that accompanies the small, sweet school prawns fresh from the lakes, or lazy summers of sun-blessed apricots from a backyard tree. And you are less likely to accept a product of inferior flavour – or only in the full knowledge that it will be less gratifying. When you appreciate the zing of proper coffee, you buy freshly roasted beans and grind them yourself, because as soon as it is ground, even stored airtight, coffee loses the intensity that is part of the ‘essential’ experience. You know, if you make coffee at home, that its flavour quality also depends on the water (rain water is preferable to Adelaide tap water), on the material of the coffee pot (glass is preferable to plastic), and you will probably think twice about coffee