



*The Fine Art
of
Feasting*

***Patricia Latham and Paul Marsden
Partners in Your Kitchen***

67 Otter Street, Derby, DE1 3FD

Telephone, fax and answering service on 01332 380093

Mobile on 07802 887365

Electronic mail to partners@paul-marsden.co.uk

Web site at www.paul-marsden.co.uk

THE FINE ART OF FEASTING

This little book is designed to tell you as much as possible about our attitudes and approach to the whole business of cooking and eating, using descriptions of some of the dishes we enjoy most and the kind of meals we love to present (and eat).

It will give you some idea of what we feel we do best (not all of it exotic) and, we trust, communicate something of our total love of good food. We hope you will find it as mouthwatering to read as we found it to write.

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A LITTLE ABOUT THE PARTNERS

Patricia Latham has brought up two sons and done a number of very different jobs, but she has always been a dedicated cook. For some years she ran her own guest house in Normandy's beautiful Calvados countryside, where both paying guests and French friends enjoyed – and learned to respect – her cooking. More recently, she managed and cooked in a large country house for a successful restaurateur and hotelier. She not only survived over three years cooking for this most exacting employer – on a four-oven Aga, with only a Baby Belling for backup – but left with a glowing testimonial. Paul Marsden's lifelong enthusiasm for cooking and eating began in sixties London, while he was working in advertising. Since then he has been a teacher, a teacher-trainer and a freelance educational IT consultant. The kitchen has always been where he relaxes after long, stressful days. Italian and French cuisines are his favourites, but he will try anything - to eat or to cook. He loves baking bread, and his latest interests are curing and smoking meats and making his own sausages.

Patricia and Paul share a wide range of interests, many centred on France and its wonderful food and wine. The most important is their passion for cooking, but they particularly enjoy visiting wine-producers in remote corners of France and Italy, buying their products in bulk and bottling them at home. Recently, *Living France* magazine published a series of Paul's articles on the subject, and he and Patricia spent their 1998 summer holiday in Provence researching the next series. They returned with over 200 litres of wine and recollections of many delightful tasting sessions, memorable restaurant meals, mornings spent shopping in real markets and long evenings in the kitchen and on the terrace.

THE FINE ART OF FEASTING

We British seem to have lost the fine art of feasting – if we ever had it. Instead of making every main meal a celebration (because that is what a feast is) of good food and wine, company and conversation, many of us cannot wait to get away from the table (assuming we actually bother to sit down at one) and get on with Something More Important.

*For vast numbers of French, Italians and many other nationalities – in spite of gloomy predictions based on the growing world-wide popularity of burger and other fast-food establishments – there is **Nothing More Important**. The main meal of the day is the main social event of the day, to be enjoyed over a number of hours. French parking meters still give us two hours free-of-charge at lunchtime, and in many gîtes you find dining chairs but no easy chairs.*

That is the kind of meal we prefer – one consisting of several quite-small courses with long pauses between so that we digest our food almost as fast as we eat it and never feel really full. This is important, because it means that, whether we are eating intensely-flavoured Continental food or simple but delicious British fare, we enjoy the last course just as much as the first – and our favourite puddings definitely deserve to be enjoyed to the full.

BREAKING THE ICE

We like to begin with an informal gathering that allows new acquaintances to get to know one another and old ones to exchange news while enjoying something to coax the digestive system into action – aperitifs and les amuse-gueules.

For everyday pre-dinner drinks, Paul enjoys a gin-and-tonic while Patricia favours a dry vermouth with lemonade. Some of our male French friends opt for Scotch whisky because it's still a little exotic to them (as are some of the mysterious brands sold to them in French hypermarkets), but others

prefer a pastis: Pernod or Ricard, diluted to pearly perfection with iced water, tastes as innocent as a glass of milk but packs a serious punch.

On more than one occasion, a simple glass of Champagne has lifted us instantly out of the dizzy exhaustion you feel after a whole day roaring down the autoroute and allowed us to enjoy to the full our dinner in yet another intriguing provincial French restaurant.

But our favourite aperitif is kir. Once this was simply a dry white wine (traditionally one made in Burgundy from Aligoté grapes) flavoured with crème de cassis, the rich liqueur made from blackcurrants (which Burgundians seem to grow on any scrap of land that won't raise good wine grapes). Today the kir family has many members. Using sparkling wine makes a kir royal and Champagne a kir impérial (though we prefer to drink our Champagne without additions and let kir royal mask the shortcomings of less splendid fizz). Nowadays, kirs are mixed with liqueurs made from every fruit you can imagine – we love crème de mûre sauvage (wild blackberry). In Normandy they make the local version of crème de cassis by steeping the blackcurrants in young (and therefore frighteningly strong) Calvados, the cider-makers' answer to brandy, then mix it with fizzy farmouse cider for a kir Normand. On a recent visit to Provence we were introduced to le myro – a blend of the powerful local vin rosé with crème de myrtille (bilberry), which is delicious.

'Gueule' is a slightly vulgar French word for 'mouth'. An amuse-gueule (amuse-bouche in more genteel circles) is something to keep your mouth entertained until the real food arrives. Posh French restaurants give you elegant scraps of puff pastry or croissant dough turned into tiny pizzas and tarts. We make these as near weightless as possible with really intense flavours, so that they titillate the appetite without spoiling it. Before more everyday meals, we enjoy mild green olives stuffed with anchovies, and our French friends (whose gueules are still amused by all the mass-produced corn-puff cocktail snacks that have now appeared in their supermarkets) are terribly impressed when we serve Walkers' ready-salted crisps brought

from England; it seems that, like the French, we British tend to keep the best for ourselves.

COCKTAIL PARTIES AND BUFFETS

Cocktail parties – or, less formally, drinks parties – are really an extension of the aperitif and amuse-gueule phase of a full meal. Whether anyone ever moves on to the meal proper depends partly on the hosts' intentions and partly on the quality and quantity of the 'nibbles'.

Again, the division between the cocktail party and the buffet meal sometimes becomes a little blurred. We have spent many uncomfortable hours trying to juggle a plate (often a floppy paper one) containing a variety of food-items that seem determined to roll off it, with a fork, a roll-and-butter and a drink, while standing in conversation with a group. This experience has convinced us that the sympathetic host should decide whether the guests are to stand or at least have the opportunity to sit down, and should serve appropriate food. If they can only stand, then they should be able to pick everything up with their fingers (without mess) and the event is a cocktail or drinks party. If the food demands plates, then guests should be able to sit down to eat and it is a buffet – a full meal at which the courses should be designed to be served and carried to the table, hopefully without mishap, by the guests themselves.

We have literally hundreds of recipes for cocktail snacks, including a range of tiny but authentic pizzas crisp enough to be picked up cleanly in the fingers and small enough to be eaten in a couple of bites...unusually presented home-made sausage-meat bites that disguise the familiar but popular tastes of the overworked sausage-on-a-stick and sausage roll in something that looks quite different...conversely, ordinary-looking home-made sausages that taste nothing like ordinary sausages...tiny, crisp tartlets containing all sorts of tempting mixtures from salmon mousse and prawn cocktail to rilletes, terrines and even curries...miniature kebabs...satays with their own peanut sauce hidden inside...the possibilities are endless.

THE MEAL BEGINS

Finally, we take our seats and the real meal begins. It goes without saying (or should) that there will be plenty of fresh bread on the table, at least until the dessert is served. This is needed to balance dishes served without starchy vegetables, and to mop up the sauces which are often the most important part of the dish. For reasons we cannot understand, it is very difficult to get good French bread in Britain, but there is plenty of good Italian-style bread such as ciabatta and focaccia.

Water is also essential - preferably a choice of still and naturally-sparkling, both well chilled, even (or, perhaps, especially) for those who are drinking wine.

SENSATIONAL STARTERS...ECSTATIC ENTRÉES...

Finely-chopped garlic, salted anchovy fillets and generous quantities of coarsely-ground black pepper are fried gently in rather a lot of extra-virgin olive oil until the anchovies vanish mysteriously into the oil. Whole Kalamata olives are pitted and roughly cut up. Salted capers (much better than the ones in brine or vinegar) are rinsed. A little fresh chilli (if you like it) is finely minced. Then tender pasta sheets, golden from free-range egg-yolk and freshly rolled from dough made by hand earlier, are cut into ragged-edged pappardelle, so typically Tuscan, and boiled until perfectly al dente. The chilli (if used) is added to the hot oil and cooked for a moment. Then the pasta, olives and capers go in, and the whole mixture is turned briefly to coat the ribbons with the aromatic oil before being served with generous quantities of freshly-grated, fully-ripened Reggiano Parmigiano – the real Parmesan. Pappardelle alla Puttanesca (una puttanesca is a Lady of the Night, but why should they should have a monopoly on this excellent dish?) has the feel of authentic Italian cooking – simple combinations of superb ingredients creating intense flavours in minutes. A larger helping makes an excellent main course for lunch or an informal dinner.

Slices of ripe tomato, not too cold so that they ooze fresh fruit flavour, form a simple circle on your plate. The cool whiteness of buffalo Mozzarella, artfully arranged on top, is speckled with coarse black pepper, its soothing blandness perfectly balanced by the bite of salted anchovy fillets. The whole arrangement is scattered with plump whole leaves of sweet basil, picked moments ago from the growing plant, and drizzled with green-gold drops of first-pressing extra-virgin olive oil. Insalata Caprese takes its name from the Isle of Capri in the Bay of Naples, but it is now a Pan-European classic. We have found versions everywhere from a neighbourhood restaurant in the Paris suburbs to halfway up a mountain in German-speaking Switzerland. To make it our very own, we like to add slices of our special roasted red peppers, skinned and soaked in their own delicious, caramel-rich juice for at least a couple of days and finished with just the right touch of balsamic vinegar.

The French have their saucissons secs and the Italians their salame. The Italians have their prosciutto di Parma and the French their jambon de Bayonne. All are sublime products of the art of salt-curing and air-drying the meat of pigs reared the old-fashioned way, their quality protected by stringent appellation and denominazione regulations. We love to while away half an hour before the main course with an assortment of charcuterie, and one of the best-kept secrets we know is that the ‘bite’ of some of the saltier sausages and hams is perfectly offset by cold unsalted butter, which is served with the meat rather than the bread in Provence. If some of your guests find the idea of ‘raw’ pork a little hard to handle, they may prefer rillettes – duck, or goose meat stewed slowly in its own surprisingly healthy fat (which is said to have similar cholesterol-busting properties to olive oil, as, even more surprisingly, is the softened fat of the air-dried hams and sausages) and then roughly shredded to form a creamy alternative to pâté. Any visual similarity to our own ‘potted meat’ will be forgotten with the first delectable taste. A richly seasoned home-made terrine of pork and liver will make the less adventurous feel even more at home, especially if we call it pâté maison and serve it with a reassuring rack of fresh, hot toast.

*Toast goes well with our very special two-salmon mousse, too. Tail fillets of choice Scottish salmon are gently steamed and blended to a purée with good mayonnaise, dill and a few leaves of gelatine. Whipped Jersey double cream is folded in to give a rich, smooth and faintly marbled mousse base. More salmon is steamed to milky perfection, and the carefully-separated flakes are layered with the mousse and sprays of fresh dill in a mould lined with finely sliced **smoked** salmon. Chilled and served on a bed of watercress or little spinach leaves, with just a touch of our light yet piquant Marie-Rose sauce, this is a truly elegant way to bring jaded taste-buds back to life. A simpler version leaves out the smoked salmon and coats the outside with dill.*

SALAD TIME

The salad course provides a natural break between two savoury courses, and in the French households where we eat it usually consists of nothing more than fresh, flavoursome lettuce, lightly dressed and eaten with plenty of bread. The aim is to rest the digestion and clean the palate – very necessary after salty saucisson, unctuous rillettes or pungent pasta – so the dressing will be a mild sauce vinaigrette made from a little mustard, oil and vinegar, perhaps with just a hint of garlic and maybe a touch of basil and...

Well, go much further and you might as well serve a more ornate mixed salad – such as Insalata Caprese – as a starter. Naturally, if you do, the salad course is omitted so as not to unbalance the meal.

MARVELLOUS MAIN COURSES...

Having amused our gueules, given our digestions a light work-out on the entrée and taken a short break with the salad (with appropriate wines, of

course – though water is more sensible with the salad because of the acid vinaigrette, and it helps to clear the palate) – our systems and taste-buds should be in good shape for the main event.

Please consider fish pie. No – we are quite serious. One of the very best dinner-party main courses we know is a totally special fish pie first described by that excellent chef and teacher Sonia Stevenson, which has undergone a process of evolution as a much-requested speciality of Patricia's. Forget every fish pie you ever tasted (or avoided) – this is no hasty confection of cod boiled to extinction in a floury white sauce and buried beneath lumpy mash. First, the sauce: a roux, made after white wine has been fiercely reduced with quite a lot of butter, thickens the milk. Nutmeg, mustard and Parmesan add subtlety and intensity. Now the fish: three different varieties are carefully chosen from whatever looks best at the fishmonger's today. One will be undyed smoked haddock or cod. The others will be fresh white fish. Each will be steamed just enough to allow it to be flaked. Next, sautéed mushrooms are finished with a reduction of lemon juice. Fish and mushrooms are delicately folded into the sauce. The whole is covered with an elegant pattern of potato slices, which have been boiled and lightly coloured in butter. Chopped spring onions are tossed in the remaining hot butter and sprinkled on top. A final topping of mixed grated cheeses (Gruyère, Emmental and Parmesan, usually) is browned to provide a dish that looks beautiful, tastes sensational and totally justifies all the painstaking work that has gone into it.

Authentic Bolognese sauce (as cooked in Bologna) bears very little resemblance to the unholy mixtures of sloppy tomatoes, fatty mince and too much (or, worse, too little) unbalanced seasoning that have stolen its name. A true ragù Bolognese will contain at least two and preferably three different minced meats, with less tomato than you would expect. It will be cooked very gently for three hours with onion, carrot, celery, salt and pepper, but any herbs will be added only when the ragù is combined with the other ingredients of the final dish. Lasagne al Forno (literally 'lasagne in the oven') has been a cliché since the sixties, but – with good pasta, perhaps

interleaved with wilted spinach and/or an aromatic mix of field and porcini mushrooms, true ragù seasoned with freshly sautéed garlic, oregano and basil, and a rich, creamy Béchamel sauce, topped with cheese and gently browned in the oven – this dish remains a real show-stopper. For a touch of cliché-proofing, we can roll the pasta and spinach round the ragù to turn it into canelloni, which incidentally makes the dish much easier to serve tidily.

For an authentic taste of Gascony, you might prefer duck breasts fried to a rosy moistness, sliced onto an intense fruit sauce and served with a concentrated ‘jam’ of caramelised onions. Duck with orange is another well-worn cliché, so we like to explore other fruits whose acidity nicely balances the richness of the duck. Morello cherries are an excellent choice and make a sauce that looks quite beautiful on a white porcelain plate.

For clients who prefer a more traditional main course, we are happy to produce a roast with all the trimmings. Our butchers deliver very fine meat, and the use of a roasting thermometer ensures that its will be cooked exactly to your taste (and to a safe temperature). We have a very special trick that makes the crunchiest golden roast potatoes, which marry perfectly with a mixture of other roasted root vegetables. We can promise a gravy of real depth and character, whatever the meat, and if you choose beef, this will be complemented perfectly by Patricia’s Yorkshire puddings – crisp, golden and feather-light.

VEGETABLES

Vegetables are taken for granted – and therefore treated at best unimaginatively and at worst barbarically – by many British cooks. Good vegetables – and they should always be good – deserve to be taken more seriously.

We hate the habit of tipping the main dish onto the plate along with a variety of vegetables if it is a ‘sloppy’ one like fish pie or lasagne that engulfs them and swamps their flavours. Many dishes are natural

combinations of a number of elements – meat, sauce and garnish, for example (or roast beef, crunchy potatoes and Yorkshire pudding) – but where separate vegetables are needed to balance a dish we believe that they deserve some respect. We buy fresh (and often organically-grown) vegetables and steam them carefully to preserve their flavour – all rather pointless if we are going to serve them swimming in gravy. The alternatives are to serve them on a small side-plate, to be eaten alongside the main dish so that the contrasting flavours constantly refresh one another, or – as is often done in France – to serve them as a completely separate course in which their flavours can be fully appreciated.

CHEESE COMES NEXT

*We will serve the cheese after the pudding, in the traditional British way, if that is how you want it (it is **your** dinner party, after all), but we really prefer it to come first in the French style. That way, we get the fullest pleasure from the wine we drink with it, which won't taste half as good after one of our diabolical desserts. We will discuss your cheese preferences with you and serve a balanced mixture of fine British and Continental varieties, but we will take a lot of persuading not to include the sublime Brie de Meaux, made in the same way for 1200 years (yes, we were amazed, too), and blue Stilton from Colston Bassett near Nottingham. If you are lucky, we may just be back from Normandy with some Camembert, Pont l'Évêque or Livarot which we've bought direct from a farmer in the market. We like to serve our cheese on leaves in a large wicker tray, with a few small bunches of grapes.*

We go to suppliers we have been using for years, who respect both the cheeses and the Food Hygiene Regulations, but it is important to emphasise that real, live cheeses can upset delicate stomachs. If you have misgivings, we will be happy to choose something less challenging.

We like to eat our cheese alone (except for wine, of course) or with fresh bread, but if you prefer biscuits we will happily supply a good choice. There

is a long-standing tradition that all cheese is eaten with full-bodied red wines – a convenient way of using up what is left after the main course – but we have found that some cheeses taste far better with a rosé or white wine. Our favourite cheese book, written by an Englishman but with a foreword by Philippe Olivier of Boulogne, probably France’s leading maître fromager, describes nearly 300 cheeses from France and recommends everything from Châteauneuf du Pâpe, a red of real power and authority, through Burgundies and rosés to light whites, Champagne, cider and even Calvados, to be drunk with different cheeses.

***SUBLIME SWEETS...DELECTABLE DESSERTS...PERFECT
PUDDINGS...***

*Imagine a real Tiramisù sitting in the middle of your table. A base of Italian Savoirdi biscuits, each dipped for just the right number of seconds in corrosively strong pure Arabica coffee (bought in France because they keep the best for themselves) and generously drizzled with Amaretto, the delectable Italian almond liqueur. A thick covering of Mascarpone, Italy’s uniquely unctuous cream cheese, which has been beaten with fresh free-range egg-yolks and vanilla sugar, its dense texture actually needing to be **lightened** with a carefully-judged addition of rich Jersey double cream. Finally, pure cocoa powder sprinkled over seconds before serving gives a covering like brown velvet. Tiramisù means ‘pick-me-up’, and the dish derives its tonic powers from a potent blend of alcohol, caffeine and monstrous numbers of calories. (This dessert contains uncooked egg yolks. We use fresh free-range eggs and believe that the risk is small, but you may choose to avoid such dishes, however delicious they may be.)*

Imagine a classic Norman Tarte Fine aux Pommes – except that, having eaten many in good Norman restaurants, we have yet to find one even half as good as Patricia’s. A flan case of the most delicate pâte sablée – the most difficult pastry of all to make well, but she has the cool fingers and the feather-light touch needed to produce this lighter cousin of our traditional shortbread. A filling of Bramley apple purée (because some British produce

really is the best), cooked not in water but in butter, then finely sieved, sweetened just enough and laced liberally with farmhouse Calvados, the cider country's answer to brandy, bought direct from the producer. And a topping of elegantly-sliced dessert apples, their edges quickly caramelised and still crisp when the tart reaches your table. Served with Jersey double or Cornish clotted cream, this tart is a dream. More traditionally, its richness is perfectly balanced by the subtle acidity of crème fraîche from Isigny on Normandy's Côte Fleurie. Or, for the most sublime re-interpretation of the classic apple-pie-and-custard, each slice can be served on a glossy pool of pale yellow Crème Anglaise.

Or you might prefer your apples in a Tarte Tâtine. Peeled, cored and quartered apples are caramelised in a rich mixture of butter and sugar, then covered with a sheet of pastry and baked to produce an upside-down tart. This is inverted onto a plate to reveal the plump, rounded shapes of the apples, dark and glossy with the rich toffee sauce in which they lie, half-submerged. Again, the richness is perfectly offset by crème fraîche. We also make this tart, in season, with peeled ripe peaches or nectarines – probably no nicer than with the best dessert apples, but refreshingly different and maybe a little more luxurious.

We've all seen puddings called things like 'Death by Chocolate', but our domestic re-working of the legendary River Café's best-selling dessert, 'Chocolate Nemesis', really is the chocolate pudding to die for. If you thought the Tiramisù was rich... This is a baked mousse made firm by unsalted Normandy butter, light by beaten free-range eggs, sweet by sugar and sensationally seductive by a startling quantity of Lindt Excellence dark chocolate (the kind real chocolate connoisseurs buy for eating all by itself). This awesome dessert is perfectly balanced by a dollop of crème fraîche, a sprinkling of red fruits – fresh raspberries or cherries in season, or morello cherries in a compote of summer fruits when the fresh produce has gone – and a light dusting of icing sugar on the way to the table.

Then there is trifle, an English classic - the Italians call their version zuppa

Inglese: *English soup. Paul's variant has the alcohol (white wine and brandy) in the topping – a fluffy, heady lemon syllabub developed from a recipe by Elizabeth David – leaving the pure fresh-fruit flavours safely sealed between the sponge base and a layer of crème pâtissière.*

(Notice that the finishing touches are put to many of these puddings moments before they are served. We are happy to prepare parts of dishes in advance where this will not compromise the quality or presentation; but, where leaving something even for a few minutes will destroy its freshness, we like to do the job properly. If we deliver prepared dishes for you to serve, we will offer you the option to handle the finishing touches yourself.)

AND TO FINISH...

A fine cup of coffee is the perfect end to a fine meal – but when did you last have one in a British restaurant? The simple, sad truth is that good coffee is expensive and needs to be strong (and therefore even more expensive). Somewhere in our history, thrift got the better of taste and the tradition of weak and milky British coffee was born. We would rather drink no coffee at all than bad coffee.

Such devices as cafetières and filters are considered to be French inventions, but every French restaurant we have eaten in serves espresso – tiny, black and concentrated, with that wonderful golden foam the Italians call crema. This shows that the coffee has been made under the mighty pressure only a proper pumped or lever-operated machine can deliver – the ones that rely on steam pressure alone simply cannot do the job. The reason a good espresso needs such apparent brutality is that it must be made very quickly, so that all the high-notes of pure coffee flavour are carried to the cup but most of the bitterness and – surprisingly – much of the caffeine are left behind in the grounds.

We hope to be able to bring a serious espresso machine to clients' homes soon. Meanwhile, we use the next-best thing: cafetières and Carte Noire

coffee, which we buy in France because it really is a lot better than what the same company exports to Britain, and store in the freezer.

*And to go with the coffee, if you have a tiny space left, some dainty petits fours, our **very** special chocolate truffles or just a simple tablet of the finest dark chocolate...*

THE NEXT STEP

We hope that you have enjoyed reading this little book and that you have found our philosophy to be in tune with your own tastes and expectations. We would like to assure you that we apply the same high standards to every job we do, from delivering a single ready-made dish to providing a complete meal, and from the most straightforward traditional British dish to the most exotic Continental or Oriental one.

If you are planning a dinner or other kind of party and think you would like us to support you in any way, please give us a call. We will be happy to talk over the possibilities with you, without any obligation. Naturally, the more notice you can give us, the more likely we are to be available on your chosen day.

LOOKING FORWARD

In future, we hope to be offering one-day specialist cookery courses for small groups in our own kitchen, working with a colleague who specialises in bread and yeast cookery and who is married to an international expert on spices and herbs.

Beyond this, for the holiday season, we are planning longer residential cookery courses at our 'real' home in Normandy, with shopping in traditional markets where we can buy food direct from the people who produce it, many on a very small scale in their own gardens. These gourmet holidays will include visits to farms producing the famous cheeses of the region (Camembert, Pont l'Évêque and Livarot), cider and Calvados, and while most meals will be eaten on the premises – outdoors whenever possible, and with the products of our wine-hunts, of course – we like to take our groups out to at least one really good local restaurant. While you are refining your culinary skills, your family can be enjoying the many tourist attractions of the region – the delightful resorts of the Côte Fleurie (stylish Deauville, quaint Honfleur and bustling Trouville) or its miles of clean bathing beaches, the great basilica of Ste-Thérèse in nearby Lisieux, the sites of the historic Normandy landings, le Mont St-Michel, la Suisse Normande...

Of course, if you prefer you could pass on the cooking lessons and simply enjoy our simple but comfortable rooms, our delicious breakfasts and dinners and the delights of Normandy as part of a more lazy holiday. Please ask for our separate Chambres d'Hôtes brochure...



Designed and produced by Paul Marsden
