

Comment

Last month we made some severe and rather moralistic remarks about how 'every luxury we eat is at the expense of the poor'. Eric John, whose skills extend far beyond medieval history, offered to reply to this. So now, for the Lenten season he suggests that our penitential practices should not be a matter of eating inadequately or less pleasantly but of taking the time and trouble to eat without depriving others.

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Taking the world food shortage seriously means changing our eating and drinking habits pretty drastically. If, like Dr Johnson, we believe that anybody would sooner kill a cow than do without beef, we are in for a miserable time. To use cows—and chickens—as staple items of diet, in view of the number of people who could be kept alive on what these creatures consume before they get to table, is irresponsible at the very least. Sooner or later there will have to be legislation and/or special taxation to cut this kind of meat production down. But this need not open up a prospect pleasing only to food faddists and the proprietors of those profiteering health food shops. We can still eat and drink well but for most of us it will have to be differently. Traditions of good basic cooking depend on the persistence of a class of moderately prosperous peasants. In the industrial revolution England lost this class, which moved up or down the social scale. Thus whilst France and Italy—and the Mediterranean lands in general—have retained traditions of eating and drinking, England has not. Here the new rich latched on to status eating of the kind immortalised in Mrs Beeton's *All About Cookery*. This was always a bad book and always a book dedicated to culinary status symbols. Even so it is startling to realise how impermanent this kind of thing is. The centenary edition of Mrs Beeton, published a few years ago, contained not a single receipt from the original book. Again one has only to look at what the English do with their allegedly national dish, roast beef, to see what status cookery as against rational cookery means. Most Englishmen overcook beef in covered pots in ovens or wrapped in polyfoil. But the point of expensive cuts of beef is that they are so tender they require only the minimum of cooking to render them edible with little loss of flavour. During the conventional process the flavour goes into the gravy to be improved by Bisto, an odourless compound made of powdered potato flavoured with yeast extract and artificially coloured. I cannot believe this sort of dish will be much loss. If the present austerities get rid of the English joint along with Aston Martins this will be something to be thankful for.

We shall have to re-learn the traditions of peasant cookery, of using food in season and what is to hand. The place to look is the Mediterranean where thrift and relative poverty have preserved the right sort of traditions. I should recommend Elizabeth David's *Italian Food* and Claudia Roden's *Book of Mediterranean Food* for a start. Here we find what can be done with sheep, admirable beasts that live off the local grass. We need to rediscover the wonderful, slowly simmered, Levantine stews, or the Italian meat sauces for *pasta* dishes, in which, by English standards, a minute quantity of meat will provide a delicious meal for a hungry family. We need to learn about beans—here we have retained only the not very useful butter beans—which contain surprising amounts of protein. Most traditional cookery has receipts for bean dishes, including, perhaps surprisingly, the cookery of the United States, where Boston Baked Beans and Baked Beans, Southern Style, can easily be adapted to the English kitchen. Pork, we need not do without. Many of us will remember the efficient collection of food waste in the last war on which a surprising number of pigs were reared. No animal is so versatile as the pig of which every member, from ears to tail, from jowl to trotter, can be eaten. We shall have to retain some cattle and hens, but for dairy products and eggs. The Italians can show us what can be done with cheese and pasta and Arab cooking has some wonderful dishes for combining eggs with beans. We shall have elderly cows and hens to eat. Indeed even now an old boiling hen has much more flavour than a battery roaster, as well as producing about half a gallon of stock. A pound of tough old beef minced and cooked with baby vegetable marrows—grown here now and reasonably cheap all the year round—in the manner of the Greek *moussaka* can be a revelation.

Of course such dishes require more time than grills and fry-ups and we shall have to learn to spend trouble rather than money, but in the end we shall be better. Nor need Chesterton turn in his grave at the thought that christian charity requires a teetotal England. It is true that beer and whiskey are made of cereals that could be eaten, but whether in sufficient quantity to cause problems I am not sure. Gin presents no problems, even in the last war it was seldom short and brandy and wine use nothing that could reasonably be used for anything else. We are not called to savage austerity if we base our eating and drinking on intelligence and prudence instead of status.

The Church could help here. It is ironic that just when abstinence from meat became really meaningful, days of abstinence disappeared as 'irrelevant'. Of course Friday abstinence on smoked salmon and champagne (which has been known) was ludicrous; but is not the Church's tradition of penitential fasting and abstaining, rather differently directed, at least part of the answer?

Eric John