

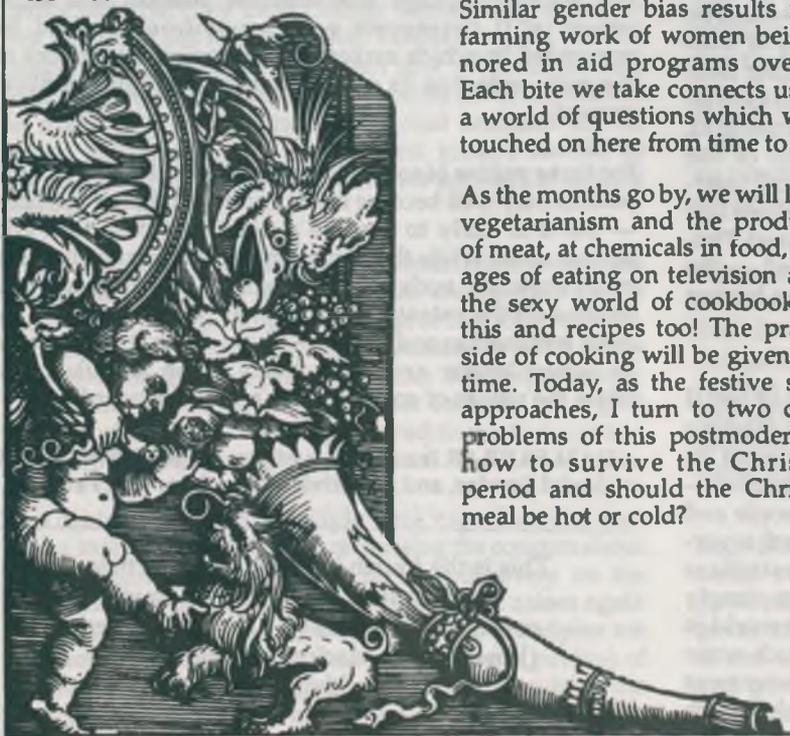


## CONSUMING PASSIONS

### *Correct line cooking*

Welcome to the newest and definitely the tastiest column to grace the pages of this august journal in quite a while. Be prepared to salivate as we deal with that subject nearest to the heart of every progressive Australian: FOOD. A veritable melange of sage and timely critique awaits you as we explore the pleasurable and political world of the kitchen.

Eating is our first pleasure in life, from our earliest moments. It is the



pleasure from which all others follow, and the focus of this column will be on the celebration of eating and cooking. Too often 'political' discourse tends to assume we exist on ideas and vitriol and ignores our bodies and pleasure.

As we focus on the activity of eating, we shall also look at the production, consumption and meaning of food in our culture. The production of food is linked with questions of the appropriate use of land, and conservation, both here and overseas. Food is marketed in Australia in ways that endanger our health, and even fruit is chemically 'improved' to give it a longer shelf life. Taste and safety are sacrificed in the process, as are foodstuffs that are the 'wrong' shape for display on supermarket shelves. Varieties of seeds are owned by companies which also control the fertilisers necessary to grow them.

Meanwhile, while we try to 'burn off' fat, much of the world subsists on too little. Nowhere is the question of gender roles raised more acutely than in the preparation of family meals on a day-to-day basis. Cooking is not seen as 'work', but as a natural, unskilled activity when performed at home. Women are expected to provide food, yet to deny themselves the fruits of their labour, sometimes to the point of starvation. Similar gender bias results in the farming work of women being ignored in aid programs overseas. Each bite we take connects us with a world of questions which will be touched on here from time to time.

As the months go by, we will look at vegetarianism and the production of meat, at chemicals in food, at images of eating on television and at the sexy world of cookbooks. All this and recipes too! The practical side of cooking will be given equal time. Today, as the festive season approaches, I turn to two central problems of this postmodern era: how to survive the Christmas period and should the Christmas meal be hot or cold?

### *Pickled Prunes*

If, like me, you despise the commercialism of Christmas, why not rediscover the pre-industrial world in the privacy of your own cottage and make presents? I now present a very useful recipe that is so easy that literally anyone could make it.

First, locate a bottle of port. I usually have several bottles foisted upon me by a diversity of political groups bearing allegedly humorous labels. It is often inadvisable to drink the contents of such bottles direct. Buy a packet of prunes. You know, the healthy things that usually end their lives rotting away in the fridge. Put the prunes into sterilised jars and pour the port over them, filling any spaces between the prunes and covering them. Seal and leave for six weeks, or three to four if you are reading this now and want to eat them at Christmas.

These make good presents with those cute little pieces of material on top, or with your own designer labels. Pickled prunes are also great as a cold pudding on Christmas day with cream. (That answers one of the above questions.) The prune stones add the element of dental danger more commonly provided by small change.

All of us get bloated and plump at Christmas, rather like these prunes, which are pickled only in the sense that you will be. Alcohol consumption is all but compulsory during Christmas, as a means of being 'sociable'. However, if you start serving the above on muesli while looking through your presents it may be time to seek help.

### *Hint of the month*

Vegetarians who want to prepare a Christmas feast may find Sarah Brown's *Vegetarian Cookbook* (Doubleday) useful for suggesting menus which will please "all but the most die-hard traditionalist". The emphasis is on hot food.

Next month: The Rise and Fall of the Potato. Send in ideas, comments and recipes.

*Penelope Cottier.*