

# Pleasures Of The Fresh

Howard Guille

Eating well is a pleasurable activity. It is also a collective activity and a chance to savour food, ideas and conversation. Eating well is more than a matter of taste. It is a positive act of transcending commercial constraints. Preferring fish to meat is an individual matter; having horizons limited to the frozen food cabinets of Coles and Woolworths, however, is another thing altogether.

I would also distinguish eating well from dining out. Not that one cannot eat well in restaurants — though it is harder, and probably more expensive, than one thinks. But it necessitates putting one's entire trust in others. The customer's discretion is limited to basic preference — Chinese, Thai, English, Australian cuisine — and to choices from the usually uninformative menu. From there matters are in the hands of owners, operators and staff. They choose the ingredients and determine the care in cooking, carving, slicing, serving and so forth. Perhaps only in operating theatres and aeroplanes is one less in command of one's fate.

The trust can be misplaced. Some examples, from Brisbane. A Sri Lankan restaurant which put five sets of curries from a long menu, on the table, within five minutes of ordering — doubtless, courtesy of the freezer and the microwave. Either that, or all the sauces were the same and the substantive part — chicken, lamb, beef, prawn, vegetables — were pre-cooked. The freezer-microwave theory is more



charitable. Yet, a twice-cooked (and probably twice frozen) prawn lacks any of the qualities of crustacea. Still, the powered chilli of the sauce suitably sand-blasted tastes.

Another Brisbane restaurant: lunch on a hot day. The simplest of the dishes suited to a sweaty day appeared to be 'marinated fish in a coconut and lime dressing served in a conconut shell'. With due temerity I asked was it fresh fish? Certainly. What sort of fish? After a delay: the cook thought it was sea perch. (This is the orange roughie dredged from mid-Tasman which has to be skinned; it is invariably frozen). It hardly made any difference to ask whether it had been marinated frozen or thawed.

Such restaurants survive because too many of their customers do not know about food. It is one of Australia's worst inheritances from industrial Britain, now reinforced by American values. Yet it is possible to have a food-loving culture. Italy is one example. Eating in Italy is pleasurable because Italians value food. Spaghetti with garlic and oil is a pleasure because each of the three items is carefully selected. Durum wheat pasta, not over-boiled, Lucca

oil, white plump garlic. Sufficient excitement added by fresh ground black pepper. Its delights are increased by a glass of fresh chianti and salt-free bread.

To make a meal, add a little anti-pasto; cold grilled egg-plant, olives, tomato salad, Tuscan salami; each carefully herbed. A first plate of pasta followed by a second meat plate of herb-stuffed roast pork or beef. A green salad to clean the tongue followed by a peach or nectarine. As a menu it sounds unexciting. Yet for three weeks last year such meals provided me sustained eating pleasure. Moreover, not in a restaurant or trattoria, but in the refectory of the European University Institute in Florence. Three weeks without the same pasta dish being repeated, and with no evident cycle such as 'it's Monday so it's roast beef.'

As if these pleasures were not enough, a memorable lunch in the Tuscan Hills at Ristorante La Calcinaia, San Casciano Val di Pesa. Anti-pasto of home-made sausage, eggplant, pepper (grilled over a flame and skinned and put in oil and lemon), followed by three pastas — ravioli with fresh ricotta, spaghetti

with oil and garlic, penne with tomato and chillie (penne all 'arrabiata; the fierce or angry). Then a large tray of vongole (pipis) and another of mussels; plain steamed open. Then the mixed grill: pigeon, turkey, chicken, charcoal-grilled. Simple, perfect and fresh; though there is nothing easy about grilling poultry.

The simplicity stems from a reverence for ingredients. This is made possible by the supply: tomatoes sold brilliant ripe on the stalk, bundles of mixed leaves for green salad, fruit sold ripe to eat, bread baked twice daily and sold by the piece. Such food is easily appreciated; shopping takes a little longer than the dash round the supermarket but there is more to see and smell. Indeed the Medici had, by the Thirteenth Century, bred some hundreds of varieties of lemons, peaches and nectarines at the Villa della Petraia. It is a world away from the Australian experience of buying fruit which has still to ripen and a situation where apples are about the only fruit sold by variety.

Since ingredients are the essence of Italian cooking, the quality of a restaurant is readily assessed. Little wonder that it is the departure point for other Western cuisines. I still savour the crostini — toasted bread with a dressing of fresh oil and crushed garlic. Any resemblance to the ubiquitous garlic bread of Australia is accidental.

Good food should be part of the everyday life. It is not something to be appropriated along with large white plates by the aspiring and upwardly mobile. Food is a cultural and a social issue. Lack of awareness about food in our society reinforces the low value of domestic labour. It also encourages the proliferation of 'fast food' outlets which are conquering the taste-buds of a generation of workers' children. In contrast, Italy prefers to wait for the seasons, to respect its materials and produce natural eating. Here are culinary and political lessons to be learnt.

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### The view from the community sector

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blinker evangelists.

No rational person doubts the need to vastly increase our skill base, or doubts that the labour market for unskilled workers has gone for good. Education and training is the answer; and education and training which is more flexible and responsive to consumers' needs. But on whose terms? The view that it must be hitched onto high value added industry is simply wrong. At the bottom line, as in Sweden, employment in these areas will continue to fall.

But the government has another goal here. It is to use training to replace the social security safety net, currently sagging under the weight of the extra 10% of the work-age population no longer supported within families, with a springboard to work. However, the additional time spent in training only reduces the demand for extra jobs slightly; so where are these jobs to come from? The answer is in the missing chapter — like Sweden it is in the public sector and the broad community services industry. Even more important, how are the very special disadvantages and needs of these potential workers to be met?

*Australia Reconstructed* is sensitive to this problem. Indeed,

in this section it specifically expands the definition of tripartism to include "education and training institutions and community and social welfare groups". The present steamroller, with both its union and government drivers, simply hasn't understood the point.

But the document may be useful for the community sector for precisely this reason. Put bluntly, the union movement doesn't yet recognise that all its talk of full employment, of income (including social wage) distribution, of participation, skill enhancement, and an integrated approach to planning, founders on a serious lack of understanding of the problems of distribution and the role of the public and service sectors in this. But this very demonstrable weakness in a necessarily integrated package — one which calls for *common* objective — gives the community sector the best opening for an educative dialogue with the union movement that has ever appeared.

Perhaps this is the real opportunity offered by the document for the public and service sectors — a chance for a deeper integration of the goals of the different progressive social forces; so that, when we do win a measure of the control *Australia Reconstructed* promises, we will be a bit clearer about where we are headed.

Adam Farrar.

### ALR Price Increase

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