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COOKING

The Joy of Food

Restaurateur, epicure, author, feminist: Penelope Cottier spoke to Stephanie Alexander about her new book of culinary travels.

Stephanie's Australia: Travelling and Tasting, Stephanie Alexander's new book (Allen & Unwin/Susan Haynes, \$49.95, photographs by John Hay) is an ambitious and beautiful work, recording the author's journey to every part of Australia (excepting the ACT, an understandable omission on any culinary tour). On her trip, Stephanie sought out the producers and preparers of food. The latter range from Blissys's Tuckerbox, a Northern Territory takeaway with an exclusively rabbit menu, to some of Australia's best-known restaurants. This book is a mouthful by mouthful description of the country in which we live.

Your new book tends to focus on the smaller producers of food. Why is this?

I have dealt with some of the larger industries as well. What I wanted to do was give a cross-section of food production in Australia, for lots of reasons. Firstly I wanted to make us all better consumers. I wanted to appeal to all food lovers, and to help people understand that producing high quality food raises all sorts of complex social and economic issues such as packag-

ing, labelling and marketing. Another thing I hoped to do was show Australia to Australians, to give a picture of ourselves.

I found the section on Phil and Jenny Smith, peach producers, particularly interesting. You make the point that most peaches which reach the market are transported in a way that is harmful to the fruit, and are stored with apples which actually make them wrinkle up, through the release of gas. You suggest that consumers should be more active in demanding better produce. But is this a realistic proposition for most people? The power of restaurants which order from the Smiths is very different from the average consumer.

I was trying to suggest that ultimately the consumer does have tremendous power if it's used properly. I believe that the way to start this process is at the domestic level, by speaking to the greengrocer or butcher. You'll be surprised to find that these people are usually experts in their field but they're not used to having their expertise called on at all. If we start tapping into this we will learn a great deal.

For example, we don't understand enough about seasons. Consumers demand all things all the time. People don't seem to realise that apples grow on trees which are dormant for six months of the year and that hard, crisp apples all the year round can only be achieved through their being in a cool store, which detracts from the quality. People have lost the sense of fruit coming from a growing thing. We can either decide that there is a time of the year when we eat apples or, as in France, appreciate that apples can be stored in different ways (on straw for example) which means that they have a different appearance, and a different character—which is not a bad thing, it's just different.

You make a similar point in the book with regard to the different geographical regions of Australia. You recall an English woman in Darwin complaining that she couldn't get peas in the midst of markets full of Asian vegetables. Do you think it's more accurate to speak of regional Australian cuisine rather than Australian cuisine?

I think that's what we all should be aiming for. It is difficult because we do have very efficient transport in Australia and it is possible to get a gorgeous mango picked in its prime and delivered to Melbourne. And I couldn't bring myself to say that one should never eat such a thing. But that is different from having asparagus flown in from California so that it's available in the middle of winter. I think regional cooking, and using what is to hand, is the way to go. If we cooked more in tune with the weather, it would be fantastic, and this is how the regional richness of other countries has developed, with people responding to landscape, climate, their own lifestyle.

It's not going to happen in a minute because we are a very derived culture, but I think this is the way things will go, and you'll find a person running a house in Wagga cooking very different things from someone in Fremantle. It worries me that glossy magazines suggest that we should all, wherever we are, rush out and buy fresh coriander (I'm not talking about growing it at home here).

Moving to the question of indigenous or native food, I would like to raise the spectre of the macadamia nut. You point out that these are more popular in the United States than in Australia. Are white Australians still very conservative about the use of such foods, to the extent that using grevillea in a dessert seems more exotic than decorating a sponge with geranium?

A year or so ago the use of native food was an issue and was taken up by writers in every type of journal. But at the back of all this I could hear a sneer, which I thought was totally unnecessary. These are interesting resources which are available to some of us. It does make sense to me at least to look at these foodstuffs. So yes, the majority of us are very conservative. Also we have been used to extremely refined foods, and the taste of a lot of bush food is very intense, so a little will give a very strong reaction which does not seem appealing at first to those used to a bland diet. Some, such as bunya nuts, which we use a lot, are instantly pleasurable to any food-loving person and strike a chord with other things in our diet to which we can relate them.

It's important in making people realise that this is not a totally barren environment, and that Aboriginal people have lived well on these foods for a long time.

Yet you also express some concern that a fad might be developing in relation to such plants, and animals, and that they might be depleted by this.

I think those who are interested in making kangaroo commercially available, or in proposing agricultural systems based on indigenous plants are very aware of this obvious criticism, and I don't think there's any wanton raping of the bush going on. Also, some Aboriginal communities I visited are very keen to use these things which they know well as a commercial resource and to overcome social dislocation through controlled industry.

How did you develop your passion for food?

I had a very unusual childhood in that my mother, who was a very good cook, was also very interested in food as an expression of culture. She would accompany a meal with information about food in a social context, for instance, with a Japanese meal she would describe rituals associated with a particular dish. I believe that this has given me an understanding that food was not just something that you stuck in your mouth. This was a great advantage to me.

I didn't know that I knew so much about food from Europe and Asia. I loved food and all sorts of things that seemed to be involved in it, like art and gardening. It was like mother's milk to me, and when I travelled I took a view of the world with me which developed from this. Yes, I'd visit churches and things, but I also noted what was growing alongside the road, and the edible resources generally.

That's quite an unusual way to look at things, or at least to look at Australia...

Unusual for an Anglo-Saxon, anyway. The more I look at it the more I realise that the biggest thing holding us back from being a truly food loving nation is the preponderance of Anglo-Saxon culture. It's just tragic that Anglo cul-



Stephanie Alexander.

ture says that all that matters is what's in your head, not what's on the table.

And that plants are there to look pretty, or to be useful, as if the two ideas can be totally separated.

Or that gardening is all right because it represents effort—and masculine effort, preferably. We don't have a population turned on to the joy of food, so that every meal is a pleasure. The implications of this just flow on and on, and one of the things I wanted to show through the book is what a gorgeous thing food can be.

What were your ideas in creating Stephanie's?

I wanted to have a restaurant that was for special occasions, where people can cherish an occasion, and get dressed up. I've always had very grand notions. Whenever people think of very special occasions, it's often associated with a special meal, particularly if you speak to Europeans, or Asians. Anglo-Saxons tend to have one big 'pigout' at Christmas, and little else. I except the north of England where baked goods provide a sense of special event. Perhaps there's some hope for the north of England.

Do you think that your recognition as Australia's best chef has changed the position of women in the industry?

I hope so. It's not a calculated thing, but it's a fact that we have more women in the kitchen here than men these days. I am a feminist, and I believe that when women are good they're very good. Feminism shouldn't downgrade the role of the kitchen, as it's a way of passing on culture through a nurturing role. Obviously, the load should be shared, but the rituals associated with food should not be belittled.

Is it at all frustrating to work with food, in that the best meal you could ever prepare lasts only a short time, whereas a painter, for example, creates something permanent?

It doesn't frustrate me; I accept the nature of the art form in which I work. I do see many parallels with painters in the work I do, even if it sounds a little pretentious to say so. I feel a little like Cezanne, who painted Mont Saint-Victoire fifty times, in slightly different ways. I think of approaching something slightly differently each time. I don't like to see the young ones in the kitchen trying to replicate absolutely everything I do, down to the arrangement of the plate. I never worry that a meal will go, because there'll be another one there. It's still there in my head for another time.

Food is still not seen as a matter for deep thought or discussion in this country, is it? I don't mean that it should be regarded as grimly serious, but that it should be taken seriously. Some people think that a journal of ideas shouldn't contain a cooking column, for example.

I couldn't agree with you more, and it's tragic. It's necessary to keep saying, quietly, that food is of essential importance to life. There are commentators around who find it trivial to admit an interest in food, and who refuse to deal in such 'non-political' matters. I consider that the types of issues raised around food are absolutely critical, and vitally important to our culture.

PENELOPE COTTIER is ALR's culinary conscience.