



## CORRECT LINE COOKING

### *Not the Readers' Digest*

I want to marry Marion Halligan although I've never actually met her. I know she lives in Hackett which, dear reader, is a suburb of Canberra, not a million miles from the desk where I now sit. I know she can write, after reading her book *Eat My Words* (Angus & Robertson, 1990, rrp \$14.99). Her brain as revealed by this strange, sinuous food book mixes history and anecdote, recipes and poetry and would, I think, never cease to interest. And, inasmuch as a mere book can reveal that most important attribute, it sounds like she can cook.

I was attracted to *Eat My Words* for several reasons. Firstly, I had read Marion Halligan's fiction through the anthology *Canberra Tales*. I have been voraciously devouring everything I can find about the bush capital, hoping to make some sense of it. A food writer who has voluntarily remained in Canberra for years and years thus holds a special fascination for a recent refugee from Melbourne. How can someone who deals in flavour and taste stand this seemingly insipid place for so long?

I didn't exactly find the answer to this question. (I suspect that frequent trips elsewhere have something to do with

Marion Halligan's long residence in the ACT.) However, I found much else of interest in *Eat My Words*.

While the scope of the work is quite broad, it manages to avoid sounding like an unrelated collection of anecdotes or reflections. Indeed, *Eat My Words* is to the *Readers' Digest* what homemade pesto is to a Big Mac, tasty and not totally smooth.

Halligan's unifying theme is pleasure, and she traces her palate's frissons from childhood days of jam and cakes to dinner party days in Canberra and Paris. Along the way we get some insights into changes in diet and food fashion in Australia and elsewhere over the years, and some great recipes too.

The history of the author's changing appreciation of food over the last 20 to 30 years is an illustration of some of the changes that have occurred in the eating habits of Australians. For example, Halligan can recall her first olive which she ate (perhaps recalling Eve reaching for wisdom?) as a university student. Her children (Halligan's, that is, not Eve's) have eaten olives "since their first year of life". One wonders what will represent 'sophistication' for them when they look back; the easy referent of the olive will not be available.

The education of the author in such 'exotic' foodstuffs now reads as almost quaint or contrived but these changes are also charted by Michael Symons in *One Continuous Picnic*, a history of the 'national tuckshop'. Pesto was my olive; a green thick sauce which bore absolutely no resemblance to the spag bol which had previously been my experience of pasta. My tongue still tingles at the memory of my first pesto; now it is hard to enter a house in Brunswick without seeing a jar of the stuff in the fridge next to the beer. But I digress...

Some might feel that Halligan's recounting of banquets held for the Symposia of Australian Gastronomy overstates sophistication to the point of vulgarity. However, Halligan is discussing "professionals pushing their skills to some sort of limit...food of course is essential; it's also marginal." The deliberate playing with food to bring out irony or to make a statement is an art. There is no reason why the limits of taste cannot be explored

through such events or descriptions. Why should art be comforting?

Halligan states, correctly, that like art, "cooking needs its autonomy". However, the question of where autonomy ends and exclusion begins is not the subject matter of this book. I felt uncomfortable (that word again) reading the banquet descriptions against Halligan's later discussion of the "happiness" of beggars in Paris. Perhaps this represents a return of the author's repressed Australian childhood of scones and junkets crying out "let them eat trifle"?

Halligan constantly returns to the ironies of food; its necessity and its ephemerality. She examines cake decorating, nouvelle cuisine, the changes in the kinds of recipes provided in magazines and the violent language of food (all that beating, carving and separating). I would suggest that this is not a book for those hoping to be introduced to food or to cooking. However, for those already interested in the area or for anyone wanting to sample an original mind combining disparate ingredients in an entertaining way, I would recommend *Eat My Words*. Here are two recipes from the book.

#### *Lamb with Apricots*

Chop two onions, cook gently in butter, add 1 kg of lamb in cubes, brown, add 500g apricots, halved, two tablespoons raisins, scant teaspoon cinnamon, pepper and cook gently till lamb is done. Serve with rice. (This will make quite a lot, you could cut the quantities down—PC.)

#### *Strawberry Icecream*

500g strawberries, juice of 1/2 lemon and 1/2 orange, 100g icing sugar, 300 ml stiffly whipped cream.

Puree fruit, sweeten with icing sugar and add juices as desired. Fold into whipped cream, freeze in a sorbet maker or icecream machine, or in your freezer stirring occasionally.

Halligan states that, partially as a result of nouvelle cuisine, "writing about food, in all but the most technical recipe communicating terms, is in danger of becoming a lost art". *Eat My Words* places the meanings and joy of food back on the menu.

*Penelope Cottier.*