Baudelaire's words from Poor Belgium could have been written for Canberra, at least as far as the lack of cheap restaurants goes. There are virtually no good cheap restaurants in Canberra, despite local government propaganda to the contrary, which boasts that the ACT has the highest ratio of restaurants per head of population in Australia. All of them are frequented, I suspect, by unfortunate souls being dragged around the Mint and the War Memorial. Apart from the central business district, still called Civic, all shops and restaurants here in the ACT must be confined to small areas marked down for 'shops', lest a café descrate Anzac Avenue, or even, God help us, a sushi bar spring up next to the eternal Flame as if to mock our war dead by the preparation of cool uncooked fish.

This means that each little shopping centre has one or two restaurants. There are at least five in Dickson which makes my suburb of residence pretty damn urban, let me tell you. There is even a McDonalds in Dickson which explains the saddest bumper sticker I have ever seen: "Time for a McDonalds in Civic". This is the real Canberra, dear reader, as opposed to the exciting one on the news.

I reached the nadir of my culinary experiences recently in a restaurant in a shopping precinct on the south side of this fair town. I ordered antipasto in an Italian restaurant and was served one type of meat with Jatz biscuits. Not very misto, I thought to myself. I was charged $9. But why try to improve things? The lack of competition allows for such appalling behaviour, and the average Canberra resident only argues about policy, not important things like food.

I have taken Baudelaire's advice, at least as far as the cookbooks go. The Women's Cookbook (Heinemann) contains a useful recipe for Grissini—which, for the benefit of the restaurant discussed above, are cylindrical Jatz biscuits, otherwise known as breadsticks. This book, released last year, commemorates a fundraising dinner held for The Victorian Women's Trust where chefs donated their skills to produce food for 800 guests. Many of the recipes are worth having and the book looks particularly attractive, being interspersed with paintings of women artists from the turn of the century and superb photographs of food by Bobbi Fabian.

The Women's Cookbook is intended as a celebration of women's creativity and is dedicated to the women of Australia. "Through your cooking, may you experience the pleasures and joy of sharing, comfort, nature, celebration, and friendship." And may you also enjoy eating and being served, I would add. The fine line between celebrating women's creativity and celebrating unreconstructed notions of feminine activity is highlighted by this book.

Marion Halligan's foreword touches briefly on the ways that women's work as preparers of food has rarely been acknowledged in the way men's work in the culinary world has. Marieke Brugman, the convenor of the Women's Trust, sees the recipes in the book as a celebration of cooking in the Australian context which, for her, lacks "the constraints of heritage and tradition that bind older societies". A strange comment, given the variety of culinary traditions drawn on in the book. The Women's Cookbook is well worth having because the recipes are lovely. However, I would have liked a little more emphasis in the accompanying essays on the role of The Women's Trust in improving the position of women in society, rather than this constant assertion of 'celebration'. This easy term tends to question the need for an organisation such as The Trust in the first place. Either this or no essays at all, and more photos.

One thing I have to say for Canberra is that avocados are very cheap here. I was horrified when I first arrived to see flies in the fruit shops, hovering over the merchandise, and I was equally shocked to find that suspect groceries from other states were dumped here because there were no 'use-by' date rules until recently. And food is generally dearer here than down South. But avocados are an exception, so I was pleased to pick up a second-hand copy of A glut of Avocados by Ann Carr (Merehurst Press).

The obsessive cookbook is a genre I love; it takes one item of food and does more things with it than had ever occurred to the innocent mind. Avocados, it seems, are not only good as dips and soup, but in sweet dishes too. I have yet to pluck up the courage to attempt Avocado Custard which even the obsessed Ms Carr warns is for the adventurous, but I may yet, given that outside it is Jatz or McDonalds. And with these cookbooks, and remembering past repasts, I have been almost coping with Kafkaland—which I now think of as Little Belgium, ACT.

Penelope Cottier.