

The Reluctant Cannibals

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On gastronomy and the origins of this book

This novel is set in Oxford in 1969. Both the time and the place have great relevance. Most obviously it was an important year for mankind as the 21st of July marked the start of humanity's exploration of another planet when Neil Armstrong took his first step on the moon. It is also important as on Friday the 14th March that same year, the distinguished professor of physics at Oxford, Nicholas Kurti gave a lecture titled 'The Physicist in the Kitchen' at the Royal Institution in London. Professor Kurti was a low temperature physicist who was a fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford. During World War II he had contributed to the Manhattan project by devising a method of purifying uranium-235. At Oxford, he discovered a technique for cooling objects to within a millionth of a degree of absolute zero. As well as these achievements, he was an enthusiastic and experimental cook. During his lecture, Professor Kurti cooked a chartreuse soufflé while providing a live read-out of the temperature inside. Keeping up the link between gastronomy and space exploration he said: "I think it is a sad reflection on our civilization that while we can and do measure the temperature in the atmosphere of Venus we do not know what goes on inside our soufflés."

In this historic lecture, which was shown on television later that year, Professor Kurti created a reverse baked Alaska (a frozen Florida as he called it) that was cold on the outside and hot on the inside, a feat achieved with a new fangled machine called a microwave oven. Huge and fluffy meringues were created with the aid of a device that created a low-pressure vacuum. He also demonstrated the impact of injecting pineapple juice as a tenderiser to pork. Sadly it seemed to remove almost all texture from the meat once cooked and the famous chef Michel Roux, who had been called in to pass judgment, could only find one good thing to say about the professor's roast pork: 'but the crackling is superb'. Young as I was in 1969, I have clear memories of seeing both the moon landing and the professor's pineapple juice injected pork on television. Both events clearly made an impression on me as I have now written one book on space (*Journey by Starlight*) and this one on gastronomy.

In creating the eccentric collection of fictional gastronomes that feature in this book I have certainly drawn inspiration from Professor Kurti but he has had a far greater influence on the development of what we eat than he could ever have imagined back in 1969. While manned exploration of our solar system stalled after the Apollo missions, progress in culinary matters has continued apace. Professor Kurti has certainly contributed to that process and can reasonably be claimed to have given birth to the movement that has become known as molecular gastronomy. Many years after his lecture at the Royal Institution, he teamed up with Hervé This, a French chemist who had been scientifically testing many of the precepts of traditional French cooking. In 1992 they organised a workshop in Erice, Sicily on 'Science and Gastronomy' that brought together scientists and professional chefs. This meeting fully set in motion a new approach to cuisine that was initially called 'Physical and Molecular Gastronomy', but later simplified to just 'Molecular Gastronomy'. The rest of the world came to hear about this movement from the rise to international fame of chefs such as Ferran Adrià and Heston Blumenthal. Despite following the spirit of Nicholas Kurti's early endeavours, some of the leading proponents have tried to distance themselves from the term, 'Molecular Gastronomy', arguing that it makes the creative process of cooking sound overly complicated and elitist. Whatever name is given to our newfound love of experimental cuisine it has certainly transformed our attitudes to food.

In many ways, I too feel that the term molecular gastronomy fails to accurately capture the spirit of Professor Kurti's, or indeed the Shadow Faculty of Gastronomic Science's, approach to food, which is one of enthusiastic experimentation with the primary purpose of entertainment and enjoyment. The philosopher Jeremy Bentham, an historical figure who features in this book captures one part of this approach in his 'principle of greatest happiness'. The other historical figure who inspired this book and gave birth to the modern concept of gastronomy was, of course, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. His rather curiously titled *Physiology of Taste* (to give it its short title) is a wonderful read. It is a strange but delightful combination of autobiography, philosophical

musings, anecdotes, aphorisms and above all enthusiasm. Many of his aphorisms are now widely quoted and indeed Professor Kurti opened his lecture with one of Brillat-Savarin's best known sayings: 'the discovery of a new dish does more for human happiness than the discovery of a new star'. It seems that in differing by only one letter, astronomy and gastronomy are forever going to be intertwined.

The *Physiology of Taste* is also full of other wonderful details. One portion of this book that rarely gets quoted, meditation XXII, addresses the cures of obesity. Brillat-Savarin acknowledges the usual advice that 'anyone who wishes to reduce his weight should eat moderately, sleep but little, and exercise as much as possible¹.' But he then shows his keen insight into human psychology by explaining why us weak humans can never maintain such a regime. His solution is to avoid 'everything that is starchy or floury'. He also recommended total avoidance of beer. My favourite tip, which I still find myself following in restaurants, is eating only the crust of the bread, more of the flavour and less of the carbohydrates. So it seems a rarely acknowledged fact that Brillat-Savarin beat Robert Atkins to the low-carb diet by 150 years. Brillat-Savarin also claimed other benefits from following his regime that might still be appealing today – 'soon as you begin you will find yourself fresher, prettier, and better in every respect'. Admittedly some of his other pronouncements might have less resonance today. He roundly claimed that 'every thin woman wants to grow plump', an aspiration that may have had more relevance in the days when consumption was rife.

Some aspects of molecular gastronomy, for the want of a better term, hark back to the era that was my character Arthur Plantagenet's area of expertise – ancient Rome. Banquets two thousand years ago are described featuring giant eggs or a roast pig that is opened to release live birds. Many of the exotic creations of Heston Blumenthal would not look out of place in such a Roman banquet. For all their attachment to exotic food such as the tongue of the

¹ This and the following quotations are, naturally enough, from M.F.K. Fisher's 1949 translation of *The Physiology of Taste*.

nightingale and fried dormice, some aspects of Roman cuisine are less likely to catch on today. Despite liking anchovy paste on toast, I find it hard to imagine that garum, the Roman sauce that Arthur recreates from rotting mackerel intestines, is terribly palatable. As described in this book, Rome also provided one of humanity's earliest examples of the consequences of excessive exploitation of the natural environment by harvesting the herb silphium into extinction. One can only hope that its popularity was to mask the taste of garum, in which case the loss would not be too severe.

As well as taking examples from the ancient Roman cookbook *De re coquinaria*, the dishes presented at the various dinners of the Shadow Faculty have a variety of origins. Some are taken from the pages of historical figures such as Brillat-Savarin or Auguste Escoffier and these sources are noted wherever possible. Others pay homage to important events in gastronomy, some of general relevance and a few from personal experience. The chartreuse soufflé served at the second dinner of the Shadow Faculty is a nod to Professor Kurti's 1969 lecture though it combines chartreuse with chocolate, which for those of you who have not yet tried it, is a match made in heaven. The full heritage of this dish also draws on my own time at Oxford University (many years after 1969). Back then a young chef called Raymond Blanc, before he became internationally famous, had a small restaurant in a non-descript row of modern shops in an area just north of Oxford called Summertown. His signature dessert at the time was, if my memory is to be trusted, a Grand Marnier soufflé that was presented to the table and then the liqueur added through a small funnel. I'm sure the members of the Shadow Faculty would have been impressed as I was when I first tasted this wonderful creation.

Nicholas Kurti was a great enthusiast of using a syringe to inject food before cooking or eating. For example he also demonstrated injecting rum into mince pies. Injecting an emulsion of truffle oil and Worcestershire sauce into quail's eggs is my own extension of this technique, the result of an entertaining Friday evening of personal experimentation. These eggs are well worth trying, as are the martini oysters. I have experimented with many of the other new dishes

and cocktails invented for this story but many are more conceptual and rather hard to find at a local supermarket or even delicatessen, so I have yet to taste beaver tail. I did suggest trying Fugu when we visited Japan a few years ago but, as with the Japanese ambassador in this story, this plan was sensibly vetoed by my wife Jean. Needless to say, Arthur's own preparation is entirely an exercise of literary imagination!