

### PAM IN PORTLAND by Pamela Fry

This month I have decided to write about food and eating it - at home and in restaurants. Not, perhaps, the happiest of subjects at a time when I - and a good many of my friends - are trying to lose weight. (That awful Baring on the Beach looms just ahead!) Perhaps that's why I have a deep, subconscious urge to enjoy splendid - and not so splendid memories of food, at least on paper.

Let's start with cooking at home. My mother, with all due respect to her memory, always resented it. Cooking depressed her, and she, in turn, depressed the food. Disconsolate meals appeared: tired meat; exhausted vegetables; shrivelled fruit pies. Very early, I decided that if you wanted to do any job well you had to do enjoy the doing - as well as respecting your tools. Surely there must be some way of preventing a cheerful carrot from turning into a tasteless mush?

Well of course there was, although it took quite a few years to learn the tricks of the trade. But the combination of an enquiring mind, a growing collection of cook books, and the advice of many generous friends eventually brought results. And oh! the delight of turning out my first, delicate lemon meringue pie; my first authentic Southern fried chicken with crisp, puffy corn fritters.

Soon, I was experimenting with more exotic European dishes and discovering, to my astonishment, that they were far easier to prepare than I had ever imagined. But the secret here, of course, is that many of the most delicious European recipes were created by people with very little money but lots of imagination. Meat was often in short supply - especially the best cuts - and therefore far too expensive for ordinary folk. Thus it came about that inventive seasoning and marvellous sauces could turn a meagre little into a savoury abundance. Of course, my own path to good cooking was lined

with many pitfalls. That time in England, when I wanted to make genuine North American pork and beans for some English friends - both of whom were exceptional cooks. To this day, I do not know what went wrong, but although I cooked those beans into the ground they remained, to the bitter end, sort of chewy. Also the Christmas turkey (a huge one, sent by my in-laws). No aluminum foil in those days, so I used well-greased brown paper and thrust the enormous bird into my small oven.

Well, I had had some misgivings from the start, but I will never forget the sudden smell of burning, the opening of the oven door - and lo! the turkey was on fire and bits of charred paper were floating all over my galley-size kitchen. Or that other Christmas when I made my usual batch of mincepies, with my very short-crust pastry.

Except I forgot to add water, so the pastry dissolved into sad little puddles around the mincemeat.

Restaurant cooking is, of course, another story. When I first came to Canada just about every small town I happened to visit had about one restaurant - Chinese. It served mostly terrible Western-type food. And chopsuey. Even in the cities, unless you could afford one of the fancy hotels, the situation was more or less the same. Not to downgrade the immortal Murrays, which really has maintained its standard for good, plain cooking.

But in the last fifteen years or so a transformation has taken place. Montreal was always good of course, but Toronto and Ottawa have undergone a revolution. Every imaginable type of restaurant, European, Asian, Middle Eastern, has suddenly sprung into being. Ethnic food is in - not to forget all those crunchy granola, yoghurt-to-your-eyeballs, smoke-if-you-dare establishments. Some of all the above are very good and very expensive; others are very good and surprisingly cheap; others are very expensive and frankly awful.

But now there is also the trend that I am forced to call trendy. Restaurants so hung with plants that they are practically tickle your ears. Often adorned with huge posters of mostly-dead film stars. And with menus so huge and so full of super-adjectives that you are exhausted by the effort of reading them. When you finally boil it all down it is always something like the following: steak and hamburgers; fried chicken and chicken fingers; quiche (I used to love quiche); spareribs, of course; sandwiches stuffed into pita bread; plus enormous, predictable desserts. Even if you have a real urge for something sweet and succulent at the end of a meal, who can face a piece of Black Forest Cake large enough to satisfy Snow White and all seven dwarfs? In many such places, the final touch is provided by music. Very, very loud, so that all conversation - intimate or otherwise - must be conducted in a kind of muted shriek.

Then there are those tables, placed so close together that they create instant togetherness between perfect strangers. About this, I have a story to tell. One day I was having lunch in Ottawa with a good friend whose book I was also editing. It was typical Capital city lunchtime, the restaurant jammed to the doors and the tables not more than a couple of feet apart.

Alixé and I were very busy discussing the plot of her book. It was a mystery, and the main character was a R.C.M.P. officer, very happily married. But she had now introduced his sergeant, who was also living in connubial bliss.

Not to cast any doubts upon the R.C.M.P.'s capacity for making happy marriages, I felt this was getting a bit boring.

"I don't think much of the sergeant's wife," I began. "I think we should get rid of her. What he needs is a girl-friend."

"You don't like his wife?"

"No. I think she's dull."

"You think we should kill her off?"

"I'm sure of it. She's dull as ditchwater."

Well, we argued it back and forth, until we suddenly became conscious of a lady, sitting next to us, only a foot or two away. She was staring at us with a kind of restrained horror. Obviously, she had been listening to every word.

We smiled at her nervously, she looked blankly back, grabbed her bill, and left her table. She hadn't even finished her coffee. It grieves me to think that, to this day, there is some nice woman in Ottawa who is firmly convinced that she heard a conversation between two would-be murderers. It may well have put her off restaurants - and even food - forever.

It is, I suppose, a sign of the times.



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