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A History of Food in 100 Recipes

Written by William Sitwell

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A HISTORY OF FOOD IN 100 RECIPES

Collins

For Laura

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William Sitwell

Following an early career in newspapers, William Sitwell came to prominence in the food world after he joined the magazine *Waitrose Food Illustrated* in 1999. He became editor in 2002 and won a string of awards for the magazine's writing, stories, design and photography (including 'Editor of the Year' in 2005). He divides his time between editing the magazine, now re-named *Waitrose Kitchen*, and writing about food for a variety of other magazines and newspapers and making forays into television. He has appeared on a variety of programmes as food critic and presenter, and currently is the resident expert on BBC2's new evening show *A Question of Taste* with Kirsty Wark. He spends his spare time growing vegetables, cooking food and making cider at the home in Northamptonshire that he shares with his wife Laura and their children, Alice and Albert. This is his first book.

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Introduction

After an auction at Sotheby's, in the summer of July 2010, I came away with an armful of nineteenth-century cookery books and a smattering of food-related paintings and cartoons. They had been a tiny part of a vast culinary collection owned by one Stanley J. Steeger and now, as I took them home to Northamptonshire, they would be a large part of a rather small collection of one William R. S. Sitwell.

There on a shelf in my study, a room filled with giant photographs of food – ripened figs in a bowl, peas in a pod and a Damian Hirst-style 'shark in jelly' – the books added intellectual and historical weight to what I already had. There were cookery books sent to me by publishers and PRs over the years hoping for coverage in the food magazine I edit, autobiographies penned by famous chefs I know and the odd food tome that I had actually paid for.

I started leafing through the old books I had bought, slightly wondering if, while they certainly gave character to the shelf, they would be as dry to read as they looked from their tired bindings and browned paper. But I was quickly struck by the characterful writing that leapt from so many of the pages. Where I had expected placid cooking instruction I found verbose opinion. Entries in the nineteenth-century *Cassell's Dictionary of Cookery*, for instance, were filled with radical opinion and comment. 'It is a shocking thought that many die annually of absolute starvation, whose lives might have been saved twenty times over,' wrote the editor, A. G. Payne, in a long and ranting introduction.

That view sounded rather familiar, I thought. 'Scraps of meat, fag ends of pieces of bacon, too often wasted, with a little judicious management, make a nice dish of rissoles,' it continued, making the idea that using leftovers was 'fashionable' – as promulgated in magazines such as mine – seem laughably prosaic.

I came across the writings of Dr William Kitchiner in his hilarious 1817 *Cook's Oracle* in which, aside from describing in every gory detail some of the cruellest cooking practices he had ever heard of (don't worry – I've also conveyed it with no stone left unturned on page 180), he lambasted those who had written cookbooks before him. Most, he wrote, were of no more use 'than reading Robinson Crusoe would enable a sailor to steer safely from England to India'. He despaired of those who suggested of 'a bit of this – a handful of that – a pinch of t'other – a dust of flour – a shake of pepper – a squeeze of lemon'. Such recipes left him bewildered. By contrast, Kitchiner promised that he would give the reader 'precision [that] has never before been attempted in cookery books'. In a similar vein was Jules Gouffé – chef de cuisine of the Paris Jockey Club – in whose *Royal Cookery Book* of 1868 he attacked 'the perfect uselessness of

such cookery books as have hitherto been published'.

This all sounded very familiar. Didn't every PR sending me a new cookbook from the latest culinary sensation claim that there hadn't been one quite like this one, that no previous book had been written with such clarity, that the recipes in this book really worked, that it was a new style of cooking guaranteed to capture the public's imagination?

Deciding to delve a little deeper, I soon came across Hannah Glasse who had published *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* in 1747. It could have been 2011. Her book, she declared, 'far exceeds anything of the kind ever yet published. I believe I have attempted a brand of cookery which nobody has yet thought worth their while to write upon.'

Then back in 1500 there was *This Boke of Cokery* in which the anonymous author stated: 'Here begynneth a noble boke of festes ryalle and cookery a boke for a princes household or any other estates and the makynge therof according as ye shall find more playnely with this boke.' The inference is clear: this boke was plainer, simpler and clearer than any other boke.

As well as such bold claims of authenticity and brilliance, it struck me that across the centuries the characters making these claims were as strong as the sentiments they expressed. In other words, there is nothing new about chefs today being mad, bad, passionate, obsessive, foodie fanatics. Furious rages echo out of kitchens throughout history, as does a passion for the best ingredients. Just as in the late 1980s Marco Pierre White was throwing the contents of a badly arranged cheese board at the wall of his restaurant, back in 350 BC the Sicilian Archestratus was losing his rag. If you wanted good honey, he said, it was only worth getting the stuff from Attica, otherwise you might as well 'be buried measureless fathoms underground'. And if you didn't cook simply and poured sauce over everything, you might as well be 'preparing a tasty dish of dogfish' (a fish variety considered as inedible then as its translation reads today).

Just as the passions of chefs, producers and consumers of food have brought the subject of food alive for me over the years, so this book is an investigation into, and a tribute to, the passionate people who have driven its story forward over the centuries. Were it not for a few rampant gourmands like the sauce-loving Apicius who in AD 10 wrote the only surviving cookbook from ancient Rome, or cheese-obsessed Pantaleone da Confienza sniffing his way around the dairies of Europe in the mid fifteenth century, the dim and distant past would be a great deal dimmer and considerably less tasty.

The history of food is coloured by the individuals who enveloped themselves in the subject and who wrote the recipes that help to tell its story. This book is my partisan choice of what I reckon are the 100 best stories: the biggest characters, the occasional culinary villain and some of the most delicious food in history. The recipes range, unashamedly, from the dead simple ancient Egyptian bread (page 11) to the downright complicated 'meat fruit' (page 339).

It's a history skewed to what interests me as an English food writer from the early twenty-first century, working in London and living in the English countryside. It's the story of constant stealing of recipes – from Platina's pilfering of the works of Martino de Rossi in 1475 to the theft of content from Epicurious.com in 2011. It charts the

birth, death and early rebirth of British food culture (we're not quite there yet, but we're on our way). It follows the rise of consumerism and considers the delights of supermarket convenience versus the well-being of the planet. And it's the account of the influences of kings, queens, conquistadors, cooks, restaurateurs and greedy pigs like me who live, breathe and talk food and are constantly on the lookout for as good a meal as we can lay our hands on.

William Sitwell
Plumpton, Northamptonshire
March 2012

A note on the recipes

Unusually for a volume entitled *A History of Food in 100 Recipes* not every one of the ensuing chapters has an actual recipe and neither are they all eminently or indeed easily cookable. My ambition for the book is to take you on a journey where each stop gives you a colourful insight into the food scene of a particular period. Unfortunately in the early stages of this history not all the key players were as diligent in writing down their recipes as a cook might be today. As you'll discover, for example, there are no Viking recipes, so I've relied on evidence from an Icelandic saga, which details the various marauding shenanigans of Grettir the Strong and his rival Atli the Red, who might not have been foodies but surely ate a lot of dried fish. Neither, indeed, is there a recipe for bread in the early stages of English history – we have to wait until the fifteenth century for that. But of course people were eating bread centuries before then, which is why you'll have to forgive me for instead describing details of the Bayeux Tapestry to provide a glimpse into alfresco pre-battle catering from the eleventh century.

In other words, rather than give a modern interpretation of what someone might have cooked at a particular moment in history, my aim has been to provide an exact contemporary reference. And where I have dug up some ancient method of roasting beef or poaching mussels I haven't updated it – except to 'translate' some of the trickier terms and old spellings – or provided a modern version of the recipe in question. I want you to simply read and enjoy the recipes as they were written down. So, perhaps uniquely, this is not a book where every recipe has been triple-tested, where the ingredients have been tweaked, changed and replaced so you can knock them out after a quick trip to your local supermarket. Denis Papin's steam-digester-prepared mackerel from the seventeenth century (see p. 115) will, I freely admit, be hard to reproduce at home, but then again so will Heston Blumenthal and Ashley Palmer Watts's bang up-to-date 'meat fruit' (see p. 339). This may not a recipe book that promises practical cookery, but I hope you nevertheless find it a delicious read …

1

Ancient Egyptian bread

AUTHOR: Unknown, FROM: The wall of Senet's tomb, Luxor, Egypt

Crush the grain with sticks in a wooden container. Pass the crushed grain through a sieve to remove the husks. Using a grindstone, crush the grain still finer until you have a heap of white flour. Mix the flour with enough water to form a soft dough. Knead the dough in large jars, either by hand or by treading on it gently. Tear off pieces of the kneaded dough and shape into rounds. Either cook directly on a bed of hot ashes or place in moulds and set on a copper griddle over the hearth. Be attentive while cooking: once the bottom of the bread starts to brown, turn over and cook the other side.

On the hot, dusty sides of the hill of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, overlooking the Nile valley near the ancient city of Thebes – now Luxor – you'll find the discreet and humble entrance to the tomb of Senet. Carved into the limestone mountain, it is one of hundreds of burial chambers in the area. The tombs were the funerary resting places of the nobles, officials who wielded power under the Pharoahs in ancient Egypt.

Painted onto the walls of their tombs are scenes from daily existence that they wished to be replicated in the afterlife. So everything that was pleasant – happy memories, experiences and rituals – is recorded in detail, giving us a clear picture of everyday life 4,000 years ago. There are scenes of hunting, fishing, the harvesting of crops and grapes, feasting and general rural life.

Almost all of the tombs were for men, but Theban tomb number TT60 is the resting place of Senet. Hers is both the only known tomb for a woman dating from Egyptian Middle Kingdom period, between 2055 and 1650, and the oldest burial chamber whose decorated walls have survived in good order. In addition to images of hunting, ploughing and sowing, there are depictions of bread-making. These are so detailed and colourful that those who have seen the wall paintings attest to their overwhelming power. 'We are,' wrote Egyptologist Thierry Benderitter on viewing them in the 1970s, 'in the presence of the exceptional representations of actual cooking in the Middle Kingdom.'

But who was Senet herself? It appears that she was either the wife or mother of Antefoqer, a vizier – the most senior of men who stood between the pharaoh and his subjects – who served both King Amenemhat I and then his son Sesostris I at the start of the Twelfth Dynasty, between 1958 and 1913 BC. That she was accorded her own hypogeum, or private underground tomb, attests to Antefoqer's importance. Yet

the entrance today has no majesty. Less grand than others on the same hill, it now has a brick entrance with a simple wooden door added in 1914 by the English Egyptologist Norman Davies.

Only very few tombs are open to the public. This one is rarely visited – entry being highly restricted – and photography is banned to prevent light damage to the wall paintings. Those permitted access must first manoeuvre past the endless rubble that surrounds the entrance before removing a pile of stones that frequently blocks the actual door in a crude but effective form of security. Once opened, the door reveals a long, narrow and bleak passageway extending into the tomb, its roof descending in height and adding to a sense of compression. The passage leads to a dusty square chamber where there's a statue of Senet herself, seated; a reconstruction, the sculpture having been found completely fragmented.

Beyond the chamber is another long passageway, but this one is bright with paintings, in colours of ochre, yellow, red and blue. The eye is drawn first to an image of Antefoqer hunting, posing majestically in a simple loincloth, his bow fully extended. Around his neck is an elaborate necklace of blue, green and white, while his wrists are adorned with matching bracelets.

There are images of greyhounds, hippos and beautifully drawn birds: geese, ducks and flamingoes in a bright, sky-blue background. Gazelles and hares are chased by dogs. Birds are netted and fish – so detailed you can tell their variety – are hauled in from a pond. And then halfway down the 20-metre passage, on the right, are scenes of cooking.

There is meat preparation, for instance. Under the cooling protection of an awning, men butcher an ox. They hang pieces of meat on ropes, while others out in the sun tenderise it, tapping it with stones. To their right a man adds a bone to a cauldron of soup with one hand while stirring it with a stick in the other. Another roasts poultry on a skewer over a raised grill, while encouraging the embers with a mezzaluna-shaped fan. It is a hive of activity.

As is a precisely drawn recipe for bread-making, summarised at the top of this chapter. The images were not of course intended to instruct the household cook, but to help the departed soul have some decent, freshly baked bread baked in the afterlife. Yet it is a foundation that has informed bread-making for thousands of years.

The images not only show how flour is prepared from grain, it also records some chatting (deciphered from hieroglyphs) between the characters, painted near some of their heads like speech bubbles. First, two men crush the grain in a wooden container. 'Down!' one orders as another replies, 'I do as you wish.' Next a woman passes the grain through a sieve to remove the husks, while her female companion grinds the grain even finer using a grindstone. In another image a girl kneads small rolls of dough in her hands, while another adds thin lines of it to some tall conical moulds. Behind the girl a man can be seen placing the conical containers into an oven. He pokes the embers with one hand while protecting his face from the heat with another. But he's not happy with the state of the logs. 'This firewood is green,' he moans.

Meanwhile, another woman can be seen kneading a much larger piece of dough. She leans over a table, pressing and stretching it out. The finished dough is presum-

Egyptian bread-making depicted in a painting on the wall of Senet's tomb in Luxor.

ably destined for the bakery in an adjacent picture. Here a foreman stands holding a threateningly pointy-ended staff while he encourages his workers. Below him a man on his knees kneads dough and meekly says: 'I do as you wish, I am hard at work.' His co-worker carries some dough in a reddish-brown mould towards a hearth where another pokes at the flames. While others are kneading dough by both treading or mixing it by hand, a final character can be seen turning a partially cooked piece of bread, which has turned brown in the hot ashes.

Bread made in this way was a staple food of ancient Egypt. The world's earliest loaves show how people had progressed in agriculture and in the techniques of milling, leavening and baking, although we can't be sure when they learnt to use yeast to help the dough rise and produce a lighter loaf.

It's likely that the products of this early baking were a little like modern-day pitta bread. A set of beer-making scenes that exist in the same passageway suggests ancient Egyptians were using yeast. It's needed to turn the sugar to alcohol and even if it was incorporated in its natural state, from yeast spores in the air, it was used at some point in ancient Egypt. Other hieroglyphs in tombs near Luxor show bread being left to rise near ovens, although the detailed scenes of grain being turned to dough in Senet's tomb do not include this part of the process. Perhaps some dough that had been left for a day rose a little due to the presence of air-borne yeast and the baker enjoyed the resulting, fluffier loaf. (Although it is safe to assume that at that time he would not have understood the science behind the process – fermentation expanding the gluten proteins in the flour and causing the dough to expand.)

As bread- and beer-making often occurred in tandem, it could be, whether by accident or experiment, that some fermented brewing liquor was added to the dough. However, it did occur and using starter doughs (a soft lump from the previous day added to the next morning's batch) became common practice. The regular use of yeast to make leavened bread is evident, at least, from the Bible – Exodus 12: 34 and 39, to be precise. As the Israelites fled from captivity in Egypt, 'the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders'. The bread they made subsequently, as Exodus goes on to recount, was not a nice, airy country-style loaf: 'And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not tarry, neither had they prepared for themselves any victual.'

Records show that in addition to bread, the ancient Egyptians enjoyed a diet rich in fruit, vegetables and poultry. They used herbs, from cumin to fenugreek, and that scenes of domestic cooking were considered important for the afterlife confirms that it was as vital a part of everyday life then as it is now.