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Reading the senses: writing about food and wine

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Reading the Senses: Writing about Food and Wine

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"verbiage very thinly sliced and plated up real nice" (Barrett 1)

Introduction

Many of us share in an obsessive collecting of cookbooks and recipes. Torn or cut from newspapers and magazines, recipes sit swelling scrapbooks with bloated, unfilled desire. They're non-hybrid seeds, peas under the mattress, an endless cycle of reproduction. Desire and narrative are folded into each other in our drive, as humans, to create meaning. But what holds us to narrative is good writing. And what can also drive desire is image—literal as well as metaphorical—the visceral pleasure of the gaze, or looking and viewing the sensually aesthetic and the work of the imagination.

Creative Writing

Cooking, winemaking, and food and wine writing can all be considered art. For example, James Halliday (31), the eminent Australian wine critic, posed the question "Is winemaking an art?," answering: "Most would say so" (31). Cookbooks are stories within stories, narratives that are both factual and imagined, everyday and fantastic—created by both writer and reader from where, along with its historical, cultural and publishing context, a text gets its meaning.

Creative writing, in broad terms of genre, is either fiction (imagined, made-up) or creative nonfiction (true, factual). Genre comes from the human taxonomic impulse to create order from chaos through cataloguing and classification. In what might seem overwhelming infinite variety, we establish categories and within them formulas and conventions. But genres are not necessarily stable or clear-cut, and variation in a genre can contribute to its de/trans/formation (Curti 33).

Creative nonfiction includes life writing (auto/biography) and food writing among other subgenres (although these subgenres can also be part of fiction). Cookbooks sit within the creative nonfiction genre. More clearly, dietary or nutrition manuals are nonfiction, technical rather than creative. Recipe writing specifically is perhaps less an art and more a technical exercise; generally it's nonfiction, or between that and creative nonfiction. (One guide to writing recipes is Ostmann and Baker.)

Creative writing is built upon approximately five, more or less, fundamentals of practice: point of view or focalisation or who narrates, structure (plot or story, and theme), characterisation, heightened or descriptive language, setting, and dialogue (not in any order of importance). (There are many handbooks on creative writing, that will take a writer through these fundamentals.) Style or voice derives from what a writer writes about (their recurring themes), and how they write about it (their vocabulary choice, particular use of imagery, rhythm, syntax etc.). Traditionally, as a reader, and writer, you are either a plot person or character person, but you can also be interested primarily in ideas or language, and in the popular or literary.

Cookbooks as Creative Nonfiction

Cookbooks often have a sense of their author's persona or subjectivity as a character—that is, their proclivities, lives and thus ideology, and historical, social and cultural place and time. Memoir, a slice of the author–chef/cook's autobiography, is often explicitly part of the cookbook, or implicit in the nature of the recipes, and the para-textual material which includes the book's presentation and publishing context, and the writer's biographical note and acknowledgements. And in relation to the latter, here's Australian wine educator Colin Corney telling us, in his biographical note, about his nascent passion for wine: "I returned home [...] stony broke. So the next day I took a job as a bottleshop assistant at Moore Park Cellars [...] to tide me over—I stayed three years!" (xi). In this context, character and place, in the broadest sense, are inevitably evoked.

So in conjunction with this para-textual material, recipe ingredients and instructions, visual images and the book's production values combine to become the components for authoring a fictive narrative of self, space and time—fictive, because writing inevitably, in a broad or conceptual sense, fictionalises everything, since it can only represent through language and only from a particular point of view.

The Cookbooks

To talk about the *art* of cookbooks, I make a judgmental (from a creative-writer's point of view) case study of four cookbooks: Lyndey Milan and Colin Corney's *Balance: Matching Food and Wine*, Sean Moran's *Let It Simmer* (this is the first edition; the second is titled *Let It Simmer: From Bush to Beach and Onto Your Plate*), Kate Lamont's *Wine and Food*, and Greg Duncan Powell's *Rump and a Rough Red* (this is the second edition; the first was *The Pig, the Olive & the Squid: Food & Wine from Humble Beginnings*) I discuss reading, writing, imaging, and designing, which, together, form the nexus for interpreting these cookbooks in particular. The choice of these books was only relatively random, influenced by my desire to see how Australia, a major wine-producing country, was faring with discussion of wine and food choices; by the presence of discursive text beyond technical presentation of recipes, and of photographs and purposefully artful design; and by familiarity with names, restaurants and/or publishers.

Reading

Moran's cookbook is a model of good writing in its use of selective and specific detail directed towards a particular theme. The theme is further created or reinforced in the mix of narrative, language use, images and design. His writing has authenticity: a sense of an original, distinct voice.

Moran's aphoristic title could imply many things, but, in reading the cookbook, you realise it resonates with a mindfulness that ripples throughout his writing. The aphorism, with its laidback casualness (legendary Australian), is affectively in sync with the chef's approach. Jacques Derrida said of the aphorism that it produces "an echo of really curious, indelible power" (67).

Moran's aim for his recipes is that they be about "honest, home-style cooking" and bringing "out a little bit of the professional chef in the home cook", and they are "guidelines" available for "sparkle" and seduction from interpretation (4). The book lives out this persona and personal proclivities.

Moran's storytellings are specifically and solely highlighted in the Contents section which structures the book via broad categories (for example, "Grains" featuring "The dance of the paella" and "Heaven" featuring "A trifle coming on" for example). In comparison, Powell uses "The Lemon", for example, as well as "The Sheep". The first level of Contents in Lamont's book is done by broad wine styles: sparkling, light white,

robust white and so on, and the second level is the recipe list in each of these sections.

Lamont's "For me, matching food and wine comes down to flavour" (xiii) is not as dramatic or expressive as Powell's "Wine: the forgotten condiment." Although food is first in Milan and Corney's book's subtitle, their first content is wine, then matching food with colour and specific grape, from Sauvignon Blanc to Barbera and more.

Powell claims that the third of his rules (the idea of rules is playful but not comedic) for choosing the best wine *per se* is to combine region with grape variety. He covers a more detailed and diversified range of grape varieties than Lamont, systematically discussing them first-up. Where Lamont names wine styles, Powell points out where wine styles are best represented in Australian states and regions in a longish list (titled "13 of the best Australian grape and region combos"). Lamont only occasionally does this. Powell discusses the minor alternative white, Arneis, and major alternative reds such as Barbera and Nebbiolo (Allen 81, 85). This engaging detail engenders a committed reader. Pinot Gris, Viognier, Sangiovese, and Tempranillo are as alternative as Lamont gets.

In contrast to Moran's laidbackness, Lamont emphasises professionalism: "My greatest pleasure as a chef is knowing that guests have enjoyed the entire food and wine experience [...] That means I have done my job" (xiii). Her reminders of the obvious are, nevertheless, noteworthy: "Thankfully we have moved on from white wine/white meat and red wine/red meat" (xiv). She then addresses the alterations in flavour caused by "method of cooking" and "combination of ingredients", with examples. One such is poached chicken and mango crying "out for a vibrant, zesty Riesling" (xiii): but where from, I ask? Roast chicken with herbs and garlic would favour "red wine with silky tannin" and "chocolatey flavours" (xiii): again, I ask, where from?

Powell claims "a different evolution" for his book "to the average cookbook" (7). In recipes that have "a wine focus", there are no "pretty [...] little salads, or lavish [...] cakes" but "brown" albeit tasty food that will not require ingredients from "poncy inner-city providores", be easy to cook, and go with a cheap, budget-based wine (7). While this identity-setting is empathetic for a Powell clone, and I am envious of his skill with verbiage, he doesn't deliver dreaming or desire.

Milan and Corney do their best job in an eye-catching, informative exemplar list of food and wine matches: "Red duck curry and Barossa Valley Shiraz" for example (7), and in wine "At-a-glance" tables, telling us, for example, that the best Australian regions for Chardonnay are Margaret River and the Adelaide Hills (53).

Writing

The "Introduction" to Moran's cookbook is a slice of memoir, a portrait of a chef as a young man: the coming into being of passion, skill, and professionalism. And the introduction to the introduction is most memorable, being a loving description of his frugal Australian childhood dinners: creations of his mother's use of manufactured, canned, and bottled substitutes-for-the-real, including Gravox and Dessert Whip (1). From his travel-based international culinary education in handmade, agrarian food, he describes "a head of buffalo mozzarella stuffed with ricotta and studded with white truffles" as "sheer beauty", "ambrosial flavour" and "edible white 'terrazzo'." The consonants b, s, t, d, and r are picked up and repeated, as are the vowels e, a, and o. Notice, too, the comparison of classic Italian food to an equally classic Italian artefact. Later, in an interactive text, questions are posed: "Who could now imagine life without this peppery salad green?" (23). Moran uses the expected action verbs of peel, mince, toss, etc.: "A bucket of tiny clams needs a good tumble under the running tap" (92).

But he also uses the unexpected hug, nab, snuggle, waltz, "wave of garlic" and "raining rice." Milan and Corney display a metaphoric-language play too: the bubbles of a sparkling wine matching red meat become "the little red broom [...] sweep[ing] away the [...] cloying richness" (114). In contrast, Lamont's cookbook can seem flat, lacking distinctiveness. But with a title like *Wine and Food*, perhaps you are not expecting much more than information, plain directness.

Moran delivers recipes as reproducible with ease and care. An image of a restaurant blackboard menu with the word "chook" forestalls intimidation. Good quality, basic ingredients and knowledge of their source and season carry weight. The message is that food and drink are due respect, and that cooking is neither a stressful, grandiose nor competitive activity.

While both Moran and Lamont have recipes for Duck Liver Pâté—with the exception that Lamont's is (disturbingly, for this cook) "Parfait", Moran also has Lentil Patties, a granola, and a number of breads. Lamont has Brioche (but, granted, without the yeast, seeming much easier to make). Powell's Plateless Pork is "mud pies for grown-ups", and you are asked to cook a "vat" of sauce. This communal meal is "a great way to spread communicable diseases", but "fun." But his passionately delivered historical information mixed with the laconic attitude of a larrikin (legendary Australian again) transform him into a sage, a step up from the monastery (Powell is photographed in dress-up friar's habit).

Again, the obvious is noteworthy in Milan and Corney's statement that Rosé "possesses qualities of both red and white wines" (116). "On a hot summery afternoon, sitting in the sun overlooking the view ... what could be better?" (116). The interactive questioning also feeds in useful information: "there is a huge range of styles" for Rosé so "[g]rape variety is usually a good guide", and "increasingly we are seeing [...] even [...] Chambourcin" (116). Rosé is set next to a Bouillabaisse recipe, and, empathetically, Milan and Corney acknowledge that the traditional fish soup "can be intimidating" (116). Succinctly incorporated into the recipes are simple greyscale graphs of grape "Flavour Profiles" delineating the strength on the front and back palate and tongue (103).

Imaging and Designing

The cover of Moran's cookbook in its first edition reproduces the colours of 1930–1940's beach towels, umbrellas or sunshades in matt stripes of blue, yellow, red, and green (Australian beaches traditionally have a grass verge; and, I am told (Costello), these were the colours of his restaurant Panorama's original upholstery). A second edition has the same back cover but a generic front cover shifting from the location of his restaurant to the food in a new subtitle: "From Bush to Beach and onto Your Plate". The front endpapers are Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach where Panorama restaurant is embedded on the lower wall of an old building of flats, ubiquitous in Bondi, like a halved avocado, or a small shallow elliptic cave in one of the sandstone cliff-faces. The cookbook's back endpapers are his bush-shack country. Surfaces, cooking equipment, table linen, crockery, cutlery and glassware are not ostentatious, but simple and subdued, in the colours and textures of nature/culture: ivory, bone, ecru, and cream; and linen, wire, wood, and cardboard. The mundane, such as a colander, is highlighted: humbleness elevated, hands at work, cooking as an embodied activity. Moran is photographed throughout engaged in cooking, quietly fetching in his slim, clean-cut, short-haired, altar-boyish good-looks, dressed casually in plain bone apron, t-shirt (most often plain white), and jeans. While some recipes are traditionally constructed, with the headnote, the list of ingredients and the discursive instructions for cooking, on occasion this is done by a double-page spread of continuous prose, inviting you into the story-telling.

The typeface of *Simmer* varies to include a hand-written lookalike. The book also has a varied layout. Notes and small images sit on selected pages, as often as not at an asymmetric angle, with faux tape, as if stuck there as an afterthought—but an excited and enthusiastic afterthought—and to signal that what is informally known is as valuable as professional knowledge/skill and the tried, tested, and formally presented.

Lamont's publishers have laid out recipe instructions on the right-hand side (traditional English-language Western reading is top down, left to right). But when the recipe requires more than one item to be cooked, there is no repeated title; the spacing and line-up are not necessarily clear; and some immediate, albeit temporary, confusion occurs. Her recipes, alongside images of classic fine dining, carry the implication of cheffing rather than cooking. She is photographed as a professional, with a chef's familiar striped apron, and if she is not wearing a chef's jacket, tunic or shirt, her staff are. The food is beautiful to look at and imagine, but tackling it in the home kitchen becomes a secondary thought. The left-hand section divider pages are meant to signal the wines, with the appropriate colour, and repetitive pattern of circles; but I understood this belatedly, mistaking them for retro wallpaper bemusedly. On the other hand, Powell's bog-in-don't-wait everyday heartiness of a communal stewed dinner at a medieval inn (Peasy Lamb looks exactly like this) may be overcooked, and, without sensuousness, uninviting.

Images in Lamont's book tend toward the predictable and anonymous (broad sweep of grape-vined landscape; large groups of people with eating and drinking utensils). The Lamont family run a vineyard, and up-market restaurants, one photographed on Perth's river dockside. But Sean's Panorama has a specificity about it; it hasn't lost its local flavour in the mix with the global. (Admittedly, Moran's bush "shack", the origin of much Panorama produce and the destination of Panorama compost, looks architect-designed.) Powell's book, given "rump" and "rough" in the title, stridently plays down glitz (large type size, minimum spacing, rustic surface imagery, full-page portraits of a chicken, rump, and cabbage etc). While not over-glam, the photography in Balance may at first appear unsubtle. Images fill whole pages. But their beautifully coloured and intriguing shapes—the yellow lime of a white-wine bottle base or a sparkling wine cork beneath its cage—shift them into hyperreality. White wine in a glass becomes the edge of a desert lake; an open fig, the jaws of an alien; the flesh of a lemon after squeezing, a sea anemone. The minimal number of images is a judicious choice.

Conclusion

Reading can be immersive, but it can also hover critically at a meta level, especially if the writer foregrounds process. A conversation starts in this exchange, the reader imagining for themselves the worlds written about. Writers read as writers, to acquire a sense of what good writing is, who writing colleagues are, where writing is being published, and, comparably, to learn to judge their own writing. Writing is produced from a combination of passion and the discipline of everyday work. To be a writer in the world is to observe and remember/record, to be conscious of aiming to see the narrative potential in an array of experiences, events, and images, or, to put it another way, "to develop the habit of art" (Jolley 20). Photography makes significant whatever is photographed. The image is immobile in a literal sense but, because of its referential nature, evocative. Design, too, is about communication through aesthetics as a sensuous visual code for ideas or concepts. (There is a large amount of scholarship on the workings of image combined with text. Roland Barthes is a place to begin, particularly about photography. There are also textbooks dealing with visual literacy or culture, only one example being Shirato and Webb.)

It is reasonable to think about why there is so much interest in food in this moment. Food has become folded into celebrity culture, but, naturally, obviously, food is about our security and survival, physically and emotionally. Given that our planet is under threat from global warming which is also driving climate change, and we are facing peak oil, and alternative forms of energy are still not taken seriously in a widespread manner, then food production is under threat. Food supply and production are also linked to the growing gap between poverty and wealth, and the movement of whole populations: food is about being at home.

Creativity is associated with mastery of a discipline, openness to new experiences, and persistence and courage, among other things. We read, write, photograph, and design to argue and critique, to use the imagination, to shape and transform, to transmit ideas, to celebrate living and to live more fully.

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