

Food writing and food cultures: the case of Elizabeth David and Jane Grigson

Introduction

In the 1949 Ealing film *Passport to Pimlico*, a discovery is made that the borough of Pimlico belongs to Burgundy. The Pimlicans claim independence from the rest of the United Kingdom, and, under the auspices of the Duke of Burgundy, gradually take on the trappings of the French way of life. Food is served in pavement cafés, where, as newsreel footage proclaims, 'It is a great success. Continental cooking has so much more flavour', a claim comically undermined by a shot of two characters clearly nauseated by the effects of such flavours. An additional problem for the Pimlicans is that they face food shortages, and the film satirically explores the manner in which Britons were currently coming to terms with the ravages of food rationing.

The nauseous flavours of continental food and the privations of food rationing: this moment serves as a useful introduction to the starting point for this article, the publication in 1950 of Elizabeth David's *A Book of Mediterranean Food* (David, 1991). Having spent the years of the Second World War in Egypt, David returned to England in 1946. Rationing was still very much in place, and in the case of certain foodstuffs, most infamously bread, it wasn't actually brought in until after the end of the war. Such restrictions didn't finally disappear until 1954, and food was scarce. During the cold, damp winter of 1947, David began to write down recipes she remembered from time spent in the Mediterranean, 'a lost Paradise of plenty and glamour' (1991: 5). The book celebrates the food of the Mediterranean as a

delicious antidote to rationing. It was very well received, and eventually appeared as a Penguin paperback in 1955. The Preface to this edition identifies Mediterranean food as an antidote to English food itself:

the ingredients which make this cookery so essentially different from our own are available to all; they are the olive oil, wine, lemons, garlic, onions, tomatoes, and the aromatic herbs and spices which go to make up what is so often lacking in English cooking: variety of flavour and colour, and the warm, rich, stimulating smells of genuine food. (1991: 3)

By this time, Elizabeth David had already established herself as one of the foremost food writers in Britain, publishing *French Country Cooking* in 1951, *Italian Food* in 1954 and *Summer Cooking* in 1955, to be followed by *French Provincial Cooking* in 1960. She also wrote regularly for *Vogue*, *House and Garden* and the *Sunday Times* in the late 1950s, before working for the *Spectator* in the early sixties. Invited to write for the *Observer* in 1968, she declined, but recommended instead Jane Grigson, having been impressed by the latter's *Charcuterie and French Pork Cookery* which had appeared the previous year. Over the course of the 1970s, Jane Grigson published a series of critically acclaimed titles, among them *Good Things* (1971), *Fish Cookery* (1973), *The Mushroom Feast* (1975), the *Vegetable Book* (1978) and *English Food* (1974). As the last title suggests, these texts focused less exclusively on the food of France and the Mediterranean, and directed their attention increasingly towards English food traditions. Similarly, Elizabeth David's own publications in the 1970s (*Spices, Salt and Aromatics in the English Kitchen* in 1970, and *English*

Bread and Yeast Cookery in 1977) share with Jane Grigson's a renewed curiosity in English food. This historical trajectory, from a fascination with Mediterranean food in the 1950s, to a revived interest in English food by the 1970s, will be one of the principal concerns of this article, and we will explore it in relation to three interrelated issues: firstly, the style of writing adopted by David and Grigson; secondly, their position as female food writers; and thirdly, the impact of modernity upon food production and consumption.

Writing food

While there has been a growth in literature attempting a sociological and cultural analysis of food practices in recent years, very little detailed attention has been paid to food writing and cookery books. Alan Warde, for example, provides a discussion of cookery columns in women's magazines, but his analysis tends towards the quantitative rather than the qualitative (Warde, 1997). David Bell and Gill Valentine include wide-ranging references to the role played by food media in a number of processes involved in the consumption of food (e.g. conceptions of body image; formations of taste), but apart from a brief discussion of Arjun Appadurai's exploration of Indian cookbooks, their book lacks a sustained analysis of food writing (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Appadurai, 1989). Meanwhile, Counihan and van Esterik's reader on *Food and Culture* maintains an anthropological bent towards the customs and traditions surrounding food, rather than looking at the way in which those conventions are mediated, reproduced or redirected by written texts (Counihan and van Esterik, 1997). Allison James has offered some interesting thoughts on the

relationship between cookbooks, food and identity in British culture (James, 1996; 1997), but it is probably Stephen Mennell who has provided the most detailed discussion of food writing in his book *All Manners of Food: eating and taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the present* (Mennell, 1985). Given the historical scope of his study, there is insufficient space for him to provide a sustained analysis of writers such as David and Grigson. However, what is instructive for our purposes is his discussion of gastronomic literature. He conceives the latter as a primarily French tradition, citing the work of Grimod, Brillat-Savarin, de Pomiane, Carême, and others, and distinguishes it from the cookery book proper, which simply seeks to provide a range of recipes. In contrast, the gastronomic literary text can be identified in terms of its preoccupation with at least one of four concerns: firstly, to set out certain rules of etiquette or 'correct' practice (1985: 270); secondly, to provide a dietetic perspective; thirdly, to provide 'a brew of history, myth, and history serving as myth' (1985: 270); and fourthly, to nostalgically evoke 'memorable meals' (1985: 271). Having outlined this terrain, however, Mennell notes a certain problem with the scope of his criteria:

there is an ill-defined margin at which the gastronomic essay gradually shades into the cookery book. The more learned sort of cookery book, such as those of Dumas and Ali-Bab, or more recently of Elizabeth David or Jane Grigson might be considered gastronomic literature as much as cookery books. In either case, they seem to be intended to be read as literature.

(Mennell, 1985: 271)

It is worth pausing to consider Mennell's observation at some length. Firstly, while David and Grigson's writings have been marketed in the form of the cookery book, there is doubtless a considerable erudition to them: many of their books can indeed be read not simply as cookery manuals, but as a form of culinary, historical literature. Such texts seem to fulfil at least two of Mennell's criteria, those of providing a brew of history and myth, and of evoking memorable meals. The chapter on pasta in Elizabeth David's *Italian Food*, for example, not only includes an account of the origins of pasta, but also a lengthy discussion of Marinetti's discourse on futurist cooking, and particularly his aversion to pasta on the grounds that 'it is heavy, brutalizing, and gross; its nutritive qualities are deceptive; it induces scepticism, sloth, and pessimism' (David, 1989: 65). David goes on to identify the complicity between futurism and fascism. Meanwhile, in *French Provincial Cooking*, the account of the flavours of each region is heavily indebted to David's personal reminiscences about meals taken and markets visited. Similarly, when in *Good Things* Grigson wrote on strawberries, the subject of her first *Observer* column, her discussion of the origin of the modern strawberry leads into an irreverent reading of Jane Austen's *Emma* ('How modern pickers would have laughed'), and then to a reflection on Hieronymous Bosch's 'Garden of Earthly Delights' (Grigson, 1991: 303). Like David too, her work is suffused with memories of culinary habits in Northumbria, Wiltshire and Touraine, of apple tart with Wensleydale and hunting for snails (Grigson, 1992: 26; 1991: 87). Their books tend to contain not only extensive annotated bibliographies about their respective subjects, but are also peppered with a diverse range of literary and historical references. As we shall argue, this attempt to inscribe food practices within a literary, historical and cultural

framework connotes a powerful sense of tradition, which plays a part in their response to modernity.

What should be made of this erudite written style? The first point to make concerns the social background of David and Grigson, which in both cases provided them with a high degree of cultural capital, and access to a diverse range of culinary traditions. Born in 1913, David was the daughter of a Conservative MP, who at sixteen went to live with a middle-class family in France for several months. In the late 1930s she lived in Greece, before moving to Egypt, and then very briefly India, with her civil servant husband, who she soon divorced. She was a very close friend of the writer Norman Douglas, who lived in France and Italy (where he died in 1952), and who shared her love of food. Jane Grigson was born in 1928, brought up in Northumberland, and graduated from Cambridge with a degree in English in 1949. Working as an Italian translator, she published a translation of Beccaria's *Of Crime and Punishment* in 1966. She was married to the poet and critic Geoffrey Grigson, with whom she shared houses in Wiltshire and in France. Both David and Grigson, then, enjoyed frequent access to continental cuisine, and inhabited a social milieu where literary pursuits were of central importance.

Women writing food

Perhaps of greater importance than their respective class positions in the formation of their written style, however, was their position as women writers. Mennell's analysis of gastronomic literature is particularly striking insofar as all of his examples of its exponents are

men. When he cites David and Grigson in his discussion, he locates them in that ‘ill-defined margin at which the gastronomic essay gradually shades into the cookery book’ (Mennell, 1985: 271). The reasons why they might inhabit this ill-defined, marginal position are perhaps explained elsewhere in Mennell’s study. By the start of the eighteenth century, he argues, professional cookery was essentially a male domain¹, while domestic cookery was considered to be women’s work. The authorship of gastronomic literature on the one hand, and of domestic cookery books on the other, reflected this gendered division of labour. Those who pronounced on the finer points of *haute cuisine* were, as we have seen, men, while those who wrote cookery manuals for other domestic cooks - Eliza Acton and Isabella Beeton, for example, - were women. Further, Mennell concludes, ‘it does not seem unfair to describe the food of the nineteenth-century English domestic cookery as rather monotonous, and above all lacking in any sense of the *enjoyment* of food’ (Mennell, 1985: 214). Culinary *joie de vivre*, in other words, was articulated only in the writing of the male professional cook or gastronome. Indeed, Grigson is at times critical of this male tradition. Quoting a piece by Alexis de Soyer in which he invokes Lucullus, Vitellius and Apicius, Grigson wonders what ‘the People’ made of such flights of culinary fantasy (1991: 59).

While both David and Grigson were able, in the course of their work, to challenge this state of affairs, and to combine, in Mennell’s terms, cookery writing with gastronomic literature, it was not a transition that was straightforwardly accomplished, as a glance at David’s reflections on her own food journalism bears out. From 1955 until 1961, David wrote regular articles for the *Sunday Times*, *Vogue* and *House and Garden*. While these articles frequently revolved around

her chief preoccupations in the period - French and Italian food, for example, - she nevertheless felt constrained by the format which was expected of her. Having contributed her introductory piece about her chosen subject, she complained, 'you filled the rest of your space with appropriate recipes and that was that' (David, 1986: 9). There was an expectation, in other words, to provide recipes for the domestic cook. Grigson similarly complained that 'the English, like the Americans, are always demanding "recipes"' (Grigson, 1992: xiv). That the ideal recipient of these recipes was a woman was evidenced by their publishing location. *Vogue* and *House and Garden* were specifically aimed at a female readership. Meanwhile, in the *Sunday Times*, David's fortnightly column initially appeared on a page typically surrounded by adverts for women's fashions, a gendering device which became more explicit after the magazine section was launched in 1958, from which point on her columns appeared in the subsection headed 'Mainly for Women'. Grigson also published in the colour supplement section of the *Observer*, distanced from the news section.

It was not until David went to work for the *Spectator* in 1961, that she was able to indulge her interests fully, writing pieces on food issues and food histories where the provision of recipes was not necessarily a requirement. It is noticeable, then, that it is a publication with a primarily male readership which allowed her to be 'liberated... from the straitjacket of the conventional cookery article as decreed by custom' (David, 1986: 9). What this demonstrates is that, even by the early 1960s, the gender divide between cookery writing and gastronomic literature remained institutionalized.

If there was still a certain rigidity to the way in which newspapers and magazines understood female domesticity in the 1950s, elsewhere, as Alison Light has argued, the relationship between femininity and middle-class domesticity was in a state of transition (Light, 1991). Between the two world wars, Light contends, we can identify certain ambiguities in the way in which female domesticity is represented. Women's fiction of the period generated a creeping anxiety about the stultifying effects of the domestic sphere, accompanied by a rejection of traditional, 'feminine', romanticized forms of discourse in favour of more reticent, 'masculine' discourses of self-control. Nevertheless the 1920s and 1930s were decades in which a high premium was placed upon the values and pleasures of the home (Light 1991: 209-18) .

Light continues:

It is interesting, if somewhat disquieting, that it is not until the 1950s, when the servant class is finally a disappearing species, that the next generation of women begin to write of privacy itself as a form of oppression. Brought up to expect help in the home, these daughters of educated men are actually the first generation of the reasonably well-off actually faced with the prospect of doing all the housework themselves... (1991: 219)

David and Grigson would themselves have faced this prospect. Indeed, some of Grigson's obituarists made rather too much of her domestic devotion to her ailing husband. For those writing about food, however, to have represented the domestic sphere as entirely oppressive was not an option: this was, after all, the space within which culinary interests could be fully realized. Instead, alternative forms of female domesticity had to be sought. One strategy for

achieving this was to dissociate culinary from other kinds of domesticity. In the Introduction to *Good Things*, Grigson noted that 'intelligent housewives feel they've a duty to be bored by domesticity. A fair reaction to dusting and bedmaking perhaps, but not, I think, to cooking' (Grigson, 1991: 11).

Of interest here is David's article marking the centenary of the publication of Mrs Beeton's *Household Management*, first published in *Wine and Food* in 1961 (David, 1986: 303-09). Charting the history of the book from edition to edition, David provides the following analysis of the 1888 version:

Gentility and suburban refinement had crept in; they were the keynotes of the colour plates of truly astonishing late Victorian china and glass, table decorations and furniture. An illuminating piece of English domestic taste, this 1888 edition. It was the period of Japonaiserie run to raging chaos, of tiered bamboo tables and *jardinières*, of octagonal teapots and porcelain sardine boxes encrusted with plum blossom, lovebirds and chrysanthemums. (1986: 306)

Of the 1906 edition, she has the following to say:

On crisp white hemstitched cloths we see the plated toast racks and crystal butter dishes, the starched napkins and tall *cloisonné* vases - two to a tray - filled with swaying roses and carnations, the engraved-glass tumblers, the befrilled cutlets, the whirls of cream potato, the neatly rolled little omelettes and the individual creams and jellies which have become almost

symbolic of a dream world of lovely willowy women, wax pale in lilac silk tea gowns, far too frail to descend to the dining room for dinner. (1986: 306-7)

The problem with such images for David, then, is precisely the manner in which female domesticity is evoked: it is too genteel, too frail and too suburban, and this is reflected in the prissiness of the food and the fussiness of the table decorations. Indeed, Mrs Beeton is a key point of departure for both writers; for alongside the fussiness of the table in *Household Management*, there is also, Grigson argues, a parsimony in regard to ingredients. In a recipe for 'white soup', an ancient concoction of fresh veal stock and almonds, Grigson notes Mrs Beeton's suggestion for a 'more economical version... using common veal stock, and thickening with rice, flour and milk'. As Grigson complains, '[t]he decline in English food through meanness is summed up in that remark' (Grigson, 1979; quoted in Castell and Griffin, 1993: 71). This overturning of the doyenne of domestic English cuisine necessitated a rediscovery of earlier cookery writers, such as Eliza Acton, Hannah Glass and Elizabeth Raffald.

It is worth contrasting Mrs Beeton's assumptions about domesticity with the way in which David and Grigson represent female domesticity. In *French Country Cooking* (published in 1951), for example, David defines '[g]ood cooking' as 'honest, sincere and simple' (David, 1966: 8). For her part, Grigson claims that 'simplicity and high quality [are] the standards of a good dinner' (Grigson, 1992: 3). Furthermore, she represents the kitchen as a 'secret retreat', a space both public and private:

kitchens should be thought of as the centre of the house. They need above all space for talking, playing, bringing up children, sewing, having a meal, reading, sitting and thinking. One may have to walk about a bit, but where's the harm in that?

Everything will not be ship-shape, galley-fashion, but it's in this kind of place that good food has flourished. (Grigson, 1991: 13)

For David, the kitchen should be filled with implements and utensils which are functional and of simple design: it 'will be, as it should be, the most comforting and comfortable room in the house' (1966: 23), an aesthetic which David sought to propagate when she set up her own kitchen shop in 1965. Within such an environment, cooking could be transformed into a source of pleasure:

Good food is always a trouble and its preparation should be regarded as a labour of love, and this book is intended for those who actually and positively enjoy the labour involved in entertaining friends and providing their families with first-class food. (1966: 9)

Cookery, then, is salvaged not only from the fussy frills of nineteenth century taste, but also from the dull compulsion of domestic labour. Furthermore, as David notes, '[r]ationing, the disappearance of servants, and the bad expensive meals served in restaurants, have led Englishwomen to take a far greater interest in food than was formerly considered polite' (1966: 8). For her, in other words, there was an emergent desire amongst post-war middle-class women to take food seriously. Similarly, as Hazel Castell and Kathleen Griffin have argued, Jane Grigson's

contribution was to put food in a wider cultural context, showing that food was at the very heart of life, so it was natural that literature, history and poetry should be included alongside recipes. Jane wanted to get our intellectual tastebuds going again. (Castell and Griffin, 1993: 57)

It is this desire to take food seriously, we would argue, an appetite to explore the culture of food beyond the confines of domesticity, which enabled David and Grigson so successfully to occupy the 'ill-defined margin' between gastronomic literature and the cookery book, and to gesture towards the myths, histories and memorable meals which lay beyond the home.

Food and modernity

Alison Light situates her account of femininity within an analysis of developing responses to the processes of modernity. We now wish to explore the impact of modernity upon post-war food production and consumption, in order to determine the attitude of David and Grigson to such configurations.

Anthony Giddens has identified one of the principal processes of modernity as the 'development of disembedding mechanisms' (Giddens, 1990: 53), in other words, the mechanisms whereby places are disembedded from their locale, and brought into contact with other distant and disparate places. Clearly, the development of transport systems, and of techniques for processing and preserving

foodstuffs, belongs to this process of disembedding. While pre-modern societies were largely consigned to consuming seasonal foods produced within the immediate locale, modern societies have gradually been able to consume foods from ever more distant places, which have often been preserved over long periods of time (see James, 1996; Lee, 1993).

In the immediate aftermath of food rationing, a consumer boom took place in Britain following the tax-cutting budget of 1953. As Christina Hardyment has argued, '[n]owhere was the boom reflected more quickly than in the kitchen' (Hardyment, 1995: 38), with new processed foods providing a particularly alluring alternative to the austere foods of the war years. Eating out also assumed a new prominence: the *Good Food Guide*, for example, was launched in 1950 in order to campaign for the highest standards of food preparation and service in restaurants. The 1950s not only witnessed the introduction of the American hamburger - the Wimpy was previewed at the 1953 Ideal Home Exhibition (Hardyment, 1995: 77) - but also the emergence, at least in London, of Italian coffee bars and spaghetti houses (Hardyment, 1995: 88-90; David, 1989: viii). By the end of the 1950s, then, modern processes had made their mark by introducing people to processed foods, and to foodstuffs from prescribed alternative cultures².

For Alan Warde, one of the best ways of conceptualizing the impact of modernity upon food is in terms of an antinomy between novelty and tradition. Novelty threatens us with disruption, but promises excitement, while tradition offers authenticity, but threatens us with monotony (Warde, 1997: 57-77). What we will argue here is that,

while the work of David and Grigson embodies both sides of this antinomy, the particular force of their work lies in its appeal to authenticity and tradition. In this respect they should properly be seen not so much as anti-modern, for the way in which female domesticity is recast represents, as we have argued, a certain break with tradition. Rather, they should be seen as assenting to a fairly conservative form of modernity (see *New Formations*, 1996). What is crucial to an understanding of their relationship with modernity, however, is the manner in which first continental food, and then English food, figures in their quest for culinary authenticity. If modern disembedding mechanisms threaten the unique flavours of authentically local or regional foods, then David and Grigson turn first to the traditions of continental cuisine, and then to those of English cuisine, as an antidote to the drive of modernity.

Modernity has its benefits for the gourmet, however. Developments in the transport, storage and retailing of food are able to provide the English cook more readily with produce from the continent, and from further afield. While David's earliest publications are at pains to identify specialist food shops selling specialist produce, for example, subsequent editions acknowledge that such problems are now more easily overcome. What is more, both David and Grigson accept that food traditions are dynamic rather than cast in stone, demonstrating a reflexivity towards tradition which, Giddens has argued, is another key component of modernity. As David asserts,

The reproduction of dishes cooked precisely according to the recipes of a hundred or two hundred years ago is a fairly pointless undertaking, not only because our tastes, our

methods of cookery and our equipment have so totally changed but because even the identical ingredients would no longer taste the same. (David, 1986: 287; see also Grigson, 1991: 11)

The process of change requires that recipes are continually updated, then. Further, when transposing a recipe from one country to another, we have to accept that claims to authenticity will ultimately be undermined:

A country's national food appears completely authentic *only in* that country. It is a curious fact that French dishes cooked by a Pole or a Chinaman in France are liable to seem more genuinely French than the same dishes cooked by a French cook in England, Germany, Italy, Poland or New York. The climate, the soil, the ingredients, the saucepans, the stove, even the way of arranging the food upon the serving dish, of folding the napkins and setting the table, as well as the French attitude of mind towards food, and the very smell of their kitchens while they are cooking, all play their parts. (David, 1970: 15)

The authenticity of place, in other words, is lost as a particular dish is removed, or disembedded, from its indigenous locale and recreated in an alternative location. At times this can be a source of celebration. Grigson records that the winner of a 'Great Yorkshire Pudding Contest' was a Hong Kong chef using a mystery ingredient (Grigson, 1992: 140). Overall, then, David and Grigson's work embraces some of the novel benefits of certain modernized food processes, while at the same time acknowledging the impact of modernity upon the authenticity of food in time and space.

More often than not, however, David and Grigson are critical of the impact of modernity upon food. David, for example, frequently provides derogatory remarks about frozen foods (e.g. 1970: 238; 1966: xv), tinned foods (e.g. 1970: 155), food processors (1970: 14), and even about the declining standards in French restaurant cookery (1986: 66-74). Particularly in her 1979 revision of *English Food*, Grigson maintains a general pessimism about modernity, quoting with approval Weber's dictum that commerce hastens in 'the disenchantment of the world' (Grigson, 1992: xv). In a 1968 booklet on 'English Potted meats and Fish Pastes', David further declares that we are '[h]ungry... for the luxury of authenticity' (David, 1986: 217).

One means by which this hunger could be assuaged was by recourse to seasonal produce, a form of temporal authenticity celebrated not only in David's *Summer Cooking* and in her series of 'Food at its best...' articles for *Vogue* in 1956-57, but also in Grigson's *Mushroom Feast*. But while there was a temporal response to modernity, there was also a spatial one. In the 1950s, David looked predominantly to France and Italy as a source of authenticity. Here, food was authentically fresh, and maintained a sensual connection with its place of origin. In the food market in Rouen, for example, David explains how 'everything from the piles of mussels to the shining white leeks is brilliantly fresh, smelling of the soil and the sea' (David 1955). Furthermore, she looked primarily towards pre-modern food traditions:

French regional and peasant cookery, which, at its best, is the most delicious in the world; cookery which uses raw materials

to the greatest advantage without going to the absurd lengths of the complicated and so-called *Haute Cuisine* (1966: 8)

Here was a tradition which had escaped from the worst excesses of modernity.

While Grigson shared David's enthusiasm for such traditions, by the 1970s both women were involved in projects which sought to rediscover English food traditions. Such projects can undoubtedly be seen in part as a response to the development of mass tourism, which since the 1960s had opened up to new swathes of the British public the delights of Mediterranean food (Hardyment, 1995: 86-7), although even today the consumption patterns of such food by British holidaymakers are complex. Insofar as such forms of tourism threatened to devalue the culinary cultural capital of the middle classes, it could be argued that David and Grigson's excavation of English food traditions marked an attempt by the two authors to position their tastes and attendant capitals within a reformulated terrain of authenticity. Such an explanation would be consonant with our earlier observations about the manner in which David and Grigson's erudition works to secure the cultural capital of their various culinary pronouncements. Nevertheless, to explain this transition in their work simply in relation to the need to maintain boundaries within the field of cultural capital is to overlook the organisation of their responses to modernity. If the English diet had been ravaged by processed foods, then it became imperative to uncover those local, seasonal and sensual forms of food which were so celebrated in French cooking. In Grigson's *English Food*, and in David's *Spices, Salt and Aromatics in the English Kitchen* and *English*

Bread and Yeast Cookery, this task was comprehensively undertaken. If, in *Mediterranean Food*, David contrasts English cuisine with ‘the warm, rich, stimulating smells of genuine food’ (David, 1991: 3; quoted earlier), then by the 1970s, she and Grigson are looking for the warmth, richness, and stimulating smells of authenticity in English food itself. In this way, their more recent response to modernity was to return to English culinary traditions, a move which perhaps prefigures the potent cultural imaginary of ‘heritage’ in the 1980s (Corner and Harvey, 1991; Daniels, 1994; Hewison, 1987; Wright, 1985³).

In *French Provincial Cooking*, David approvingly quotes from Pierre de Pressac’s *Considérations sur la Cuisine* (1931). ‘Which is the best cookery book?’ he asks. ‘For myself’, he continues,

I like those books which are not too complicated and which suggest ideas rather than being minutely detailed handbooks - I also like the kind of cookery book which evokes the good meals of the old inns, for reconstitution of the past is a delicate pleasure of which one should not be deprived. (David, 1970: 460)

If modernity deprives us of these very pleasures, then David and Grigson’s collective endeavours can be read as an attempt to reconstitute the past as a critical response to modernity.

Up to this point, we have tried to provide a map of some of the key concerns and continuities in the work of David and Grigson, and have

explored these concerns in relation to modes of food writing, conceptions of female domesticity, and reactions to modernity. It would be wrong, however, simply to collapse their work together, or to ignore any potential discontinuities. Accordingly, we will now develop the discussion of each writer by means of two case studies.

Elizabeth David and bruscardoli

We want to focus here on a 1979 article David published in *Herbal Review*, which explores a Venetian ingredient she came across called *bruscardoli* (David, 1986: 106-13). As a result of her first and best-known book, David is very often characterized as the doyenne of Mediterranean food, a category which would seem to homogenize the various cuisines which are to be found across that vast region. In fact, David is always keen to identify, and to celebrate, the specificity of local food cultures. In *Mediterranean Food*, she dismisses ‘the sham Grande Cuisine of the International Palace Hotel’ in favour of the honest authenticity of idiosyncratic dishes nourished by their particular point of origin (David, 1991: i). She regularly rejects the international currency of French *haute cuisine* in favour of the localized tastes of regional French food, although she does accept that there is doubtless a certain reciprocity between them over time (David, 1986: 249). It is perhaps ironic, then, that one of her most often-quoted principles is borrowed from the great French chef Escoffier, an exponent of both *haute* and *grande cuisine*. The principle?: ‘*Faites Simple...* the avoidance of all unnecessary complication and elaboration’ (David, 1970: 17). In exploring David’s narrative about

bruscandoli, we want to show how her exhortation to *faites simple* articulates her concerns about modernity.

On a visit to Venice in 1969, David noticed in a restaurant at a table next to her a couple eating a bright green risotto. When she enquired about the vegetable it included, they explained it was *bruscandoli*, a form of wild asparagus. She ordered the risotto herself, and the restaurant manager confirmed that wild asparagus was to be found only during the first ten days of May in the region of Venice. The following evening, she again met the same couple at another restaurant, and again they were eating the *risotto di bruscandoli*. The next day she went in search of the vegetable herself at the Rialto market, where she found an old woman selling the odd bunch. The following day, the old woman had disappeared: the *bruscandoli* season had come to an abrupt end.

David was puzzled by the precise nature of the vegetable, and her research led her to discover that it wasn't asparagus at all, but was in fact wild hop-shoots. Her article proceeds in a scholarly manner, providing a historical account of the introduction of hops into England, and adding suggestions for three wild hop-shoot recipes.

The episode reaffirms many of the features we have already identified. There is a considerable erudition to the article, however brief, and the collection of essays within which it is reprinted even includes a lengthy footnote responding to a French correspondent who queried her identification of the plant as wild hop-shoots. Further, the discussion directs the reader beyond the domestic world: while wild hop-shoots might make a tasty supper if available in the home, what

David also provides us with is an account of a memorable meal, a noteworthy visit to the market, and an archaeological case-study of a particular ingredient. This displays all the characteristics of gastronomic literature.

What is most interesting about the article, however, is its implicit response to the mechanisms of modernity. Here is an ingredient which even the locals cannot properly identify, an ingredient whose life-span is so short that the market-seller is here one day and gone the next:

In our English world of produce imported all the year round from all parts of the globe - strawberries from Mexico, asparagus from California, lichees from Israel, courgettes from Kenya - it is from time to time an intense pleasure to rediscover, as in Venice one does, the delicate climatic line dividing the vegetables and salads and fruit of spring from those of summer. Because of that dividing line, because they were so very much there one day and vanished the next, *bruscandoli* became a particularly sharp and poignant memory. (David, 1986: 113)

Bruscandoli, then, is the most fleeting of vegetables, and as such it inhabits a set of spatio-temporal co-ordinates which have enabled it to resist the disembedding mechanisms of modernity. David's memories of it are poignant precisely insofar as they evoke this sense of resistance.

There is, we would argue, a particular aesthetic at work here, an attempt to discover within Venetian cuisine a pre-modern sensibility.

Of interest here is an article in *Vogue* in 1960, from a series on French markets, where David turns to the work of Proust, recalling his assessment of the painter Chardin. She continues,

Proust says, 'Chardin has taught us that a pear is as living as a woman, a kitchen crock as beautiful as an emerald.' Since Proust wrote these words painters and writers have revealed other beauties to us - they have made us see the poetry of factory canteens and metro stations, the romance of cog-wheels, iron girders, bombed buildings, dustbins and pylons. But in the excitement of discovering these wondrous things we shall be poorer if we don't also give a thought now and again to the pear and the kitchen crock. (David, 1986: 267)

While the products of modernity might have their own beauty, then, let us not forget the simple beauty of pears and kitchen crocks, a beauty revealed to us in the transience of *bruscardoli*. If Elizabeth David's kitchen shop provided utensils as an antidote to the fussiness of nineteenth century domestic design, what the *bruscardoli* story reveals is that this aesthetic is also offered as a response to modernity.

Jane Grigson and curried parsnip soup

Both the *Daily Telegraph* food writer Paul Bailey, introducing the 1990 edition of *Good Things*, and Castell and Griffith, point to the fact that Jane Grigson was the inventor of curried parsnip soup, a recipe that Bailey - and we - assumed to be a 'classic'. In some ways Grigson's

history of parsnips encourages this interpretation since, eager as we have shown not to be denigrated as a mere writer of recipes, she slips this novelty into a description of peasant dishes:

Many of the old, rather humble and homely recipes for parsnips survive in American cookery, such as farmer's pie and parsnip pie. Not, I think, the best of parsnip dishes which are perhaps parsnip and walnut fritters ... and curried parsnip soup.

(Grigson, 1991: 218-9)

Without any admission that it is her own invention, the history of curried parsnip soup therefore remains something of an enigma. The context for the recipe replays some of the tropes we have identified already. An historical contextualization describes the parsnip as one of the few vegetables of British origin. Condescension towards the vegetable, she notes, may be a product of its association with Lenten cod and fasting. The parsnip is inscribed in a literary history through an uncredited quotation that it gave men an 'appetyt for women', and it is given a further spatial dimension through its association with the resonant landscape of 'chalk and limestone country'. But the recipe itself remains tantalizingly undiscussed, particularly the presence of curry powder. Revealingly, Grigson barely mentions the Anglo-Indian food heritage, her recipe for kedgeree (Grigson, 1992: 119) being a rare and partial exception.

Within this act of invention, which has subsequently achieved a commodity life of its own, we therefore detect a more unsure response to modernity than that evidenced by Elizabeth David's quest for, and literary resurrection of, *bruscandoli*. The search for a particular

English authenticity involves both a confused position on the question of class and a problematic orientation towards the past.

To take the issue of class first, Grigson declares in *English Food*, that:

the best cooking has come down from the top. Or if you don't like the word 'top', from the skilled, employed by those who could pay and had the time to appreciate quality. In England on the whole the food descends less from a courtly tradition than from the manor houses and rectories and homes of well-to-do merchants - latterly from a Jane Austen world. It hands down the impression of the social life of families in which the wives and daughters weren't too grand to go into the kitchen and to keep a close eye on the vegetable garden and dairy. (Grigson, 1992: xii)

Here then, we have one of those attempts, so common from the years after World War One, by which a fraction of the English middle class attempted to embed itself historically, a trend in which Geoffrey Grigson's Shell series of guides to Britain was so significant. But in fact, the food about which Grigson writes is often not of this genteel kind - instead it is commonly the peasant cuisine which we have already mentioned - soups such as cawl and oxtail, rarebits, offal and root vegetables like the parsnip. We would suggest that the adoption of the authenticity and integrity of this peasant culture speaks of at least a partial disavowal of authority. As Andrew Ross has argued in his discussion of the inter-war archaeology of American folk cultures, far from expressing the solidity of bourgeois cultures, acts of appropriation generate issues of guilt, masquerade and kitsch (Ross,

1989: 48-9). In Grigson, this guilt is often expressed as a kind of radicalism, a gentle mockery of the church, the monarchy, and of eighteenth century industrialism and a less gentle attack on commerce and government:

‘Let them have trash’ seems a far worse attitude than ‘Let them eat *brioche*.’ The latter came from a complete lack of understanding; the former comes from a conniving complicity in lower standards by people who would not accept them for themselves and their families at home. To provide worthless things ... shows what you think of your fellow human beings. In the past food was often adulterated by unscrupulous purveyors ... but at least this was recognized as a vicious thing to do. Now our food is adulterated and spoilt in ways that are entirely legal, even encouraged. (Grigson 1992, xiv)

Equally, the orientation towards the past is not always a confident or coherent one. As the example of curried parsnip soup suggests, the recovery of a tradition often involves its invention (see Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1993). This invention is clearly an attempt to revivify the present through a reading of history as in some ways continuous. But at other times the past is closed off from the present, a refuge from it, and that is suggestive of Grigson’s Cambridge literary education in the 1940s. Like other writers within the Arnoldian tradition, Grigson envisages culture belonging to a few ‘pockets of good food’, residual spaces that might escape what, in a particularly apocalyptic moment, she describes as the ‘almost biblical judgement’ (1992, xiv) imposed upon massified society.

Conclusion

In the course of this article, our central argument has been that the work of David and Grigson needs to be understood in relation to the forms within which food is written about, the gendering of that writing, and its imbrication within the processes of modernity. We have argued firstly that the erudition of their writing developed out of the particularities of their class positions, in turn conveying a sense of their culinary and literary capital. Secondly, we have argued that the often ill-defined nature of their writing allowed them to reevaluate their relationship to female domesticity and, indeed, to explore the coordinates of food beyond the domestic sphere. Finally, we have contended that David and Grigson's responses to the processes of modernity are ambivalent. On the one hand, their reevaluation of domesticity marks a certain departure from tradition while, on the other, they are to be found in a quest for the authenticity of food customs. We have developed this argument through an exploration of specific moments in their respective works. While the *bruscandoli* episode reveals David's efforts to re-enchant the present through contact with the local and the transient, Grigson's curried parsnip soup recipe suggests some of the insecurities necessarily involved in such an enterprise.

It is clear that within affluent societies, food today is an object of considerable fascination, evidenced by the plethora of food programmes, cookery books and the high profile marketing of certain foodstuffs within the retail sector. Indeed, in a similar vein, we might note the resurgent interest in the work of cookery writers (Castell and

Griffin, 1993), including two recent biographies of Elizabeth David (Chaney, 1998; Cooper, 1999). At the same time, food is also an object of widespread anxiety (see Griffiths and Wallace, 1998): recent instances include outbreaks of salmonella, concerns about livestock and BSE, and debates around GM food. One of the tasks of contemporary cultural studies is to undertake an analysis of these various fascinations and anxieties. In examining the work of David and Grigson, we have tried to demonstrate something of the prehistory of today's food cultures. In their reverence for certain food practices, and in their apprehension about the modern erosion of such cuisines, we would conclude that this prehistory is every bit as marked by a sense of culinary fascination and anxiety as the present.

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¹ This gender divide was further complicated by nationality. In England there was no tradition of male cookery writing (although there was an extensive literature on agriculture and husbandry, referred to by, for example, Grigson), this function being fulfilled by expatriate French chefs such as de Soyer and Carême (see also Mennell, 1985).

² Dick Hebdige identifies the 'spectre of Americanisation' (Hebdige, 1988: 52) as one of the key points of reference in organising both the anxieties and the

fascinations of the English cultural terrain within the period. He also notes towards the end of the 1950s an looming fascination with things continental. The emergence of the hamburger and Italian food can be located within this trajectory.

- ³ We might also see in this turn a powerful investment in organicism, for which Grigson showed considerable enthusiasm (Grigson, 1992: 132).