

HISTORY IN THE BAKING

MODERN CHEFS ARE FINDING INSPIRATION IN THE UK'S LOST CULINARY PAST, SAYS RICHARD BENSON

A few years ago Heston Blumenthal, Chef and owner of triple Michelin-starred restaurant The Fat Duck at Bray, came across a recipe book written in medieval France by a chef at the Palais Royale. Blumenthal found himself rather taken with a recipe for roast chicken, which involved taking a live chicken and plucking it, dyeing it yellow, sedating it and then placing it on the table alongside other cooked (and dead) ones. The idea – a sort of medieval culinary joke – was that when a guest tried to cut the live chicken, it would wake up and run for its life. It didn't make it onto The Fat Duck menu, but it did make this modern-day chef think; if there was that sort of creativity abroad back then, what other ideas, closer to home, might be lying forgotten?

A chance meeting and subsequent collaboration with two historians who worked in the kitchens at Hampton Court Palace introduced Blumenthal to a wealth of lost British dishes. When he acquired Bray's 15th-century village pub The Hinds Head Hotel, he decided to use its menu to re-introduce some of the food he had discovered. Working with The Hinds Head Chef Dominic Chapman, he began reinventing once-popular dishes for contemporary tastes. The quaking pudding – a delicious wobbling dessert – has been a big hit, and this autumn will see the introduction of several more, including chocolate wine, lamb cooked in hay and Eccles cakes served with potted Wensleydale.

It is an idea that chimes with other similar developments around the country. At Isinglass in Manchester, for example, customers can eat Chat Moss salad, which in itself provides a little history lesson concerning Manchester and its food. At Ditty's Home Bakery in County Derry, shoppers can buy wonderfully-made versions of old Northern Irish breads and cakes. The pioneering work of writers such as Jane Grigson has been built upon by others like William Black,

whose 2005 book *The Land That Thyme Forgot* is ostensibly a search for a lost culinary heritage, but also an idiosyncratic view of modern British history.

"It wasn't just a question of novelty", says Blumenthal. "It also has to do with new thinking about nationality and eating. In my case, I am proud to be British, and so it is good to explore your heritage and realise that our food goes further than steak and kidney pudding. It's great to think you are part of something, of that history. I think it also has to do with an increasing awareness of food. People are becoming more open minded, more aware of produce, more concerned with where their food comes from. These recipes link that to a sense of heritage."

This new historical cooking also belongs to a desire to connect contemporary British cooking to its traditions – traditions which William Black argues are as interesting as any others, but which were lost in the 19th and 20th centuries. Blumenthal agrees: "I think we have history and traditions that allow us to stand shoulder to shoulder with the French and the Italians. The problem is that our native food culture was killed off for a variety of reasons, and when modern French cuisine came to dominate European cooking in the 20th-century, we embraced it because we didn't have a living legacy of our own cooking. The same thing happened in lots of countries – Italy was one of the few to resist because it had such a strong base. Our cookery schools tend to teach very little in terms of British traditions, but to be fair the information tends to be hard to find, and the recipes vague. You have Mrs Beeton and a few like that, but otherwise the question is, where do you find it?"

At least the interest is there and growing, among food producers, chefs and diners alike. Of course individual people will have individual motivations for rediscovering historical dishes and techniques. The new interest in smokehouses like



Richardson's and Pinney's in Orford or L. Robson & Sons in Craster seems largely driven by the desire to avoid preservative chemicals. The reconstruction of Tudor kitchens at the Weald and Downland Museum near Chichester, on the other hand, is driven by the need to understand a period of history.

"There is so much more to find out about how they ate," says Blumenthal. "What would the smells have been in the room where the food was being eaten? What wood would have been burning on the fire? If they roasted a pig would there have been the smell of pigskin? And then there are the manners. For example, the order in which they ate food was different – in Tudor times they would begin with the darker food and work their way around to the light. And you know the thing where you crook your little finger? That comes from the same period. You would eat with a little tea towel on your left shoulder and use the little finger of your right hand to pick up pastes and purees. That finger didn't go in your mouth, for hygiene reasons. It's not just about the food, it's about understanding history and culture as well."

Indeed, and one imagines that if this sort of lesson had been on offer, many of us might have found school history classes more interesting than we did. Learning about heritage and culture never tasted so good – live chickens excluded, of course. **GFR**