

Celebrity Chefs be Damned

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Habemus papam! We have a new pope - a man of mature values ministering to a large flock who is joyfully feeding the faithful. Having served loyally for a decade behind the scenes to bring order out of mediocrity he is now stiffening the sinews of doubters and dissenters with his special mix of timeless excellence. He is certain of his recipe for the good life. There is a self-deprecating pledge to the world that his philosophy will never be diluted by the rewards of supreme office. So step forward Heston Blumenthal, head chef of the Fat Duck at Bray, now the world's Number One Cook and leader of 1.086 billion foodies, at least in his PR dreams.

How on earth did our attitudes to food and feeding get into such a pickle of Super Chef-aggrandisement? Why have we chosen to appoint Mr Blumenthal as replacement Pontiff with Saints Gary, Gordon and Rick as the Trinity of sidekicks clutching his cloak? On what basis does the former Glasgow Rangers goalkeeper, Gordon Ramsey, get an indulgence to swear at us for apostasy, or for pouring too much oil on the Focaccia? Does it really matter whether camembert is fried, grilled, flambéed, served naked on a bed of organic dove's hearts or even chomped straight from the box? Who cares about the doctrine of the loaves and fishes –sweet rosemary bread under wind-dried herring? What genius does it actually take to boil spinach for two minutes and drizzle saffron condiment from a pipette?

When I was a boy, my mother loved me by producing three hot meals a day with fresh organic ingredients from scratch. My father cooked the roast on Sundays with never less than four vegetables from the garden. I learned to make scrambled eggs to die for by the age of nine because I wanted to make an early start for my paper round. I have always cooked 50 per cent of the food in my own house.

But as a nation we have lost our faith in family and home-prepared meals. There are many of my friends and colleagues in London and New York who never cook anything – and wouldn't know how to if they tried. Theirs is a total ignorance of the physics and time-management skills involved. A moment's reflection suggests that one of the definitions of adulthood is that you can feed yourself. By this criterion it is small wonder that we feel infantile in the presence of a Heston Blumenthal and project our worship and vast rewards onto the small group of professional cooks who so easily command the skillet and soufflé dish.

The consequence is the increasing 'privatisation' of food. We spend £30,000 on a Poggenpohl kitchen that we never use. We need to eat in order to live but instead increase our dependency on the Cardinals of knowledge, the 'Beetonocracy', by only ordering in or eating out. Since nutrition comes after nurture in the psychical lexicon it is inevitable that we literally worship these folk in the hope and hype that they will love us back. The more we actively elevate them, to keep ourselves alive, the more in fact we feel diminished and actively encourage them to bully us: "I'm sorry, Madam, I couldn't possibly let you eat in this restaurant until you feel sufficiently inferior". We pay a high tithe for our laziness.

The natural order of things is that we are breast-fed until we can self-feed. The unnatural order of modern gastronomy is that we are ending up bottle-fed for life by an increasingly arrogant clergy of cooks. We need to reclaim our culinary freedom before they take it away forever.

