

Repulsive Dinners: A Memoir

From *Home Cooking: A Writer in the Kitchen*

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There is something triumphant about a really disgusting meal. It lingers in the memory with a lurid glow just as something exalted is remembered with a kind of mellow brilliance. I am not thinking of kitchen disasters—chewy pasta, burnt brownies, curdled sauces: these can happen to anyone. I am thinking about meals that are positively loathsome from soup to nuts, although one is not usually fortunate enough to get either soup or nuts.

Bad food abounds in restaurants, but somehow a bad meal in a restaurant and a bad home-cooked meal are not the same: after all, the restaurant did not invite you to dinner.

My mother believes that people who can't cook should rely on filet mignon and boiled potatoes with parsley, and that they should be on excellent terms with an expensive bakery. But if everyone did that, there would be fewer horrible meals and the rich, complicated tapestry that is the human experience would be the poorer for it.

My life has been much enriched by ghastly meals, two of the awfulest of which took place in London. I am a great champion of English food, but what I was given at these dinners was neither English nor food so far as I could tell.

Once upon a time my old friend Richard Davies took me to a dinner party in Shepherd's Bush, a seedy part of town, at the flat of one of his oldest friends.

"What is he like?" I asked.

"He's a genius," Richard said. "He has vast powers of abstract thought." I did not think this was a good sign.

“How nice,” I said. “Can he cook?”

“I don’t know,” Richard said. “In all these years, I’ve never had a meal at his house. He’s a Scot, and they’re very mean.”

When the English say “mean,” they mean “cheap.”

Our host met us at the door. He was a glum, geniusy-looking person, and he led us into a large, bare room with a table set for six. There were no smells or sounds of anything being cooked. Two other guests sat in chairs, looking as if they wished there were an hors d’oeuvre. There was none.

“I don’t think there will be enough to go around,” our host said, as if we were responsible for being so many. Usually, this is not the sort of thing a guest likes to hear, but in the end we were grateful that it turned out to be true.

We drank some fairly crummy wine, and then when we were practically gnawing on each other’s arms, we were led to the table. The host placed a rather small casserole in the center. We peered at it hopefully. The host lifted the lid. “No peeking,” he said.

Usually when you lift the lid of a casserole that has come straight from the oven, some fragrant steam escapes. This did not happen, although it did not immediately occur to me that this casserole had not come straight from the oven, but had been sitting around outside the oven getting lukewarm and possibly breeding salmonella.

Here is what we had: the casserole contained a layer of partially cooked rice, a layer of pineapple rings and a layer of breakfast sausages, all of which was cooked in a liquid of some sort or other. Each person received one pineapple ring, one sausage and a large heap of crunchy rice. We ate in perfect silence, first in shock, then in amazement, and then in gratitude that not only was there not enough to go around, but that nothing else was forthcoming. That was the entire meal.

Later as Richard and I sat in the Pizza Express finishing off a second pie, I said: “Is that some sort of Scottish dish we had tonight?”

“No,” said Richard. “It is a genius dish.”



Several years later on another trip to London, Richard and I were invited to a dinner party in Hampstead. Our host and hostess lived in a beautiful old house, but they had taken out all the old fittings and the place had been redesigned in postindustrial futuristic.

At the door, our hostess spoke these dread words: "I'm trying this recipe out on you. I've never made it before. It's a medieval recipe. It looked very interesting."

Somehow I have never felt that "interesting" is an encouraging word when applied to food.

In the kitchen were two enormous and slightly crooked pies.

"How pretty," I said. "What kind are they?"

"They're medieval fish pies," she said. "A variation on starry gazey pie." Starry gazey pie is one in which the crust is slit so that the whole baked eels within can poke their nasty little heads out and look at the pie crust stars with which the top is supposed to be festooned.

"Oh," I said, swallowing hard. "In what way do they vary?"

"Well, I couldn't get eel," said my hostess. "So I got squid. It has squid, flounder, apples, onions, lots of cinnamon and something called gallingale. It's kind of like frankincense."

"I see," I said.

"It's from the twelfth or thirteenth century," she continued. "The crust is made of flour, water, salt and honey."

I do not like to think very often about that particular meal, but the third was worse.

It took place in suburban Connecticut on a beautiful summer evening. The season had been hot and lush, and the local markets were full of beautiful produce of all kinds. Some friends and I had been invited out to dinner.

"What will we have, do you think?" I asked.

"Our hostess said we weren't having anything special," my friends said. "She said something about an 'old-fashioned fish bake.'"

It is hard to imagine why those four innocent words sounded so ominous in combination.

For hors d'oeuvres we had something which I believe is called cheese food. It is not so much a food as a product. A few tired crackers were lying around with it. Then it was time for dinner.

The old-fashioned fish bake was a terrifying production. Someone in the family had gone fishing and had pulled up a number of smallish fish—no one was sure what kind. These were partially cleaned and not thoroughly scaled and then flung into a roasting pan. Perhaps to

muffle their last screams, they were smothered in a thick blanket of sour cream and then pelted with raw chopped onion. As the coup de grâce, they were stuck in a hot oven for a brief period of time until their few juices ran out and the sour cream had a chance to become grainy. With this we were served boiled frozen peas and a salad with iceberg lettuce.

Iceberg lettuce is the cause of much controversy. Many people feel it is an abomination. Others have less intense feelings, but it did seem an odd thing to have when the market five minutes away contained at least five kinds of lettuce, including Oakleaf, Bibb and limestone.

For dessert we had a packaged cheesecake with iridescent cherries embedded in a topping of cerise gum and light tan coffee.

As appears to be traditional with me, a large pizza was the real end of this grisly experience.

But every once in a while, an execrable meal drags on way past the closing times of most pizzerias. You straggle home starving, exhausted, abused in body and spirit. You wonder why you have been given such a miserable dinner, a meal you would not serve to your worst enemy or a junkyard dog. You deserve something delicious to eat, but there is nothing much in the fridge.

You might have egg and toast, or a glass of hot milk, or toasted cheese, but you feel your spirit crying out for something more.

Here is the answer: rösti. Rösti is a Swiss grated potato dish. In reality it is an excuse for eating a quarter of a pound of butter. While your loved one is taking a hot shower or mixing a drink, you can get to work.

Take off your coat and plunge one large Idaho potato into boiling water. By the time you have gotten into your pajamas and hung up your clothes, it is time to take it out—seven minutes, tops. This seems to stabilize the starch.

Gently heat a large quantity (half a stick) of unsalted butter in a skillet. It should foam but not turn brown. Grate the potato on the shredder side of the grater, press into a cake and slip into the butter. Fry till golden brown on both sides.

The result is somewhat indigestible, but after all, you have already been subjected to the truly indigestible. You will feel better for it. You and your companion—or you yourself (this recipe makes two big cakes: if you are

alone, you can have both all to yourself)—will begin to see the evening's desecrations as an amusement.

Because you *are* the better for your horrible meal: fortified, uplifted and ready to face the myriad surprises and challenges in this most interesting and amazing of all possible worlds.