

Poetry on a Plate

This collection was edited and designed by a panel of Poetry Society staff, including: Jules Mann, Director (who worked in the wine business in California for 15 years); Janet Phillips, Book Designer; Angel Dahouk, who researched and categorised the poems; Andrew Bailey, who assisted in the research and virtual component of this project; and Jessica York and Valeria Melchiorretto who compiled the Poetry Café menu and blackboard.

Poetry on a plate

A feast of poems and recipes

Second Edition

Edited by the Poetry Society



CAMBRIDGE

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INTRODUCTION

It has been a delight to produce this book, and I'd like to introduce *Poetry on a Plate* with a glimpse of what went on behind the scenes. It was, at times, as chaotic as the best moments when everything happens all at once in a kitchen; it also allowed those long reflective spaces of imagining particular combinations of flavour, savouring a recipe or poem (even if it wasn't eventually included), and generally immersing ourselves in the sensory realms of poetry and food.

Poetry on a Plate came about because of National Poetry Day, an annual celebration (since 1994) of the art form of poetry. Each year the Poetry Society and our partners work with a particular theme. The theme of 'food' allowed us to explore the creative impulse for both poets and chefs. It enabled us to form some new and, I hope, enduring alliances – it certainly sparked some wonderful responses from those chefs and food writers we approached about the relationship between food and poetry.

It also involved corresponding with poets and writers around the country, fishing for their favourite food poems, either their own or a recommendation of other poets' work. Wendy Cope responded quickly by saying she didn't tend to like food poetry but made an unqualified exception for "Extra Helpings" by Douglas Dunn and "Greedyguts" by Kit Wright, with its refrain line, "The bigger the breakfast, the larger the lunch". Paul Farley admitted, "I wouldn't wear a chef's hat or suffer a bollocking from Gordon Ramsay, but ideas of cuisine, high and low, interest me". John Mole mulled, "Where to begin? Food as necessity, indulgence, largesse, eroticism, nostalgia, political analogy, character definition . . . ? And that would probably be a mere aperitif". Philip Gross proposed that "whether or not one goes along with the Christian metaphors, that way of linking the most good and basic things (bread) with the highest/deepest

(spirituality, poetry) seems right to me”. Deryn Rees-Jones pointed out the fact that Grevel Lindop’s poem ‘Summer Pudding’ does actually work as a recipe, and noted the tradition of great cooks who were also poets—Elizabeth Bishop among them. On the other end of the spectrum, ‘Mushrooms’ by Sylvia Plath was recommended by Professor Ann Oakley, who says the poem “doesn't make you want to eat them, but on the other hand some food is really quite creepy!”.

William Sieghart, founder of National Poetry Day, read me some wonderful examples of his favourite (“intriguing”) food poems, some of which are included here; of those that are not, it’s worth hunting down John Burnside’s ‘The Asylum Dance’ and Gillian Clarke’s ‘Anorexic’. In fact, if you’d like to view an entire bookshelf of food poems, have a browse on the Poetry Society’s website (www.poetrysociety.org.uk/food).

I would like to thank the chefs, poets, and their publishers who, by contributing their recipes and poems, will help sustain future National Poetry Days. Thanks also to our partners in poetry who contributed to the National Poetry Day menu in the last section. The first edition of this book was made possible by the generous support of Salt Publishing and funding from Arts Council England. The Second Edition incorporates some wonderful recipes and poems that arrived too late for the first printing, but were so good we decided to publish an updated edition. A typical example is the Joachim Ringelnatz poem ‘Ich habe Dich so lieb’ that Antonio Carluccio sent us, which reminded him of living in Germany between 1962 and 1975; all he could remember was the first part, ‘Ich habe Dich so lieb / Ich würde Dir ohne Bedenken / Eine Kachel aus meinem Ofen / schenken’ which is translated by Ernest A. Seemann as ‘I love you so! / I would, without any regret / Give you a mattress spring / Of my bed.’ which rather puzzled us until we tracked down the rest of the poem which ends: ‘Ich lache. / Die Löcher sind die Hauptsache / An einem Sieb. / Ich habe Dich so lieb.’ In translation: ‘I laugh. / Caviar is an epitaph / On sturgeon’s roe. / I love you so.’

Finally, this book owes everything to the enthusiasm of my colleagues at the Poetry Society, in particular Janet Phillips for keep-

ing us on course, Andrew Bailey and Ripa Haque for eagle-eyed editing, and Angel Dahouk who is now a walking encyclopaedia of food poems.

Enjoy your poetry on a plate.

JULES MANN

A Visit to the Poetry Café

JESSICA YORK

Poetry Café Manager and Cook

WELCOME TO THE POETRY CAFÉ, LONDON

Food and poetry come together quite simply at the Poetry Café.

From behind the counter we can watch customers running through the blackboard with this week's poem on it before realising that they meant to read the menu in the second blackboard above the bar. Hard to tell sometimes which tempts them the most . . .

The *TLS* (*Times Literary Supplement*) used to needle us for having no poetry in sight—"call yourself a poetry café?"—but now there is a board with all the recent press clippings about poetry, other boards advertising our own and everyone else's events, as well as a rotating selection of young artists' work on the walls and a clientele prone to think deep thoughts over blank sheets of paper.

We have been permutating poetry and food for the last six years, without making too exaggerated a claim for the lyricism of our own cooking. One of the most memorable ways of putting the two together has been to ask poets who love cooking (and lots of them do), to cook a great meal for a long table full of customers and to host the evening.

Many great poets/cooks have now done so. I have to say, some well-known poets have also declined the invitation for the greater good of our customers. So cookery doesn't always go hand-in-hand with writing, though I suspect good eating often does.

MATTHEW SWEENEY

“Dinner with . . .” Poet in the Café

SALATĂ DE VINETE, OR AUBERGINE SALAD

A delicious but simple summer starter in Romania – summer because vegetables are still seasonal there, and all the better for that. The best I had was in a good restaurant on the Black Sea, where one could taste that the aubergines had been roasted on the grill.

Ingredients:

3 – 4 large aubergines

1 medium sized onion

Sunflower oil

Salt

SERVES 2 OR MORE

Cook the aubergines on the hot grill, turning all the time. (If you do not have a grill you can bake them in the oven, or on a hot plate put directly onto the stove or gas flame, but the result will not be as good.) When they are blackened all over and beginning to go soft, peel and drain them. Then chop them on a wooden board, using a wooden or plastic cleaver if possible, and put into a bowl. Peel and chop the onion very finely, and add to the bowl, along with salt to taste. Mix thoroughly. Add oil, a little bit at a time, until the mixture attains the consistency of mayonnaise.

Some people actually add mayonnaise, but this is not traditional, and the dish doesn't need it. The customary way to serve it is with sliced tomatoes, or an attractive variant is to slice large tomatoes in half horizontally, squeeze the juice and seeds out, and stuff the halves with the aubergine mixture.

MATTHEW SWEENEY

EGG

Ask in a beach café for a boiled egg
and it comes raw – well, it's hot
but when your hands grow oven gloves
to prise the shell off in shards
a fissure forms and liquid white
drops out, leaving a clear glimpse
of raw yolk. You call the waiter,
tell him it's *not boiled* – you can't
eat this with a knife & fork! He agrees,
instigates a replacement. It comes,
eventually, and is even hotter,
a real test of the asbestos fingers,
but the shell comes off, with the egg
intact, until the knife attacks it,
meeting – you can't believe it – *soft yolk*
which floods out onto your plate,
with not an egg-spoon in sight.
You do your best to eat it, but run –
a safe hour later – into the sea
and swallow as much of the salty water
as you can – the extra salty water,
one should say, this being the Black Sea.
Egg-taste recurs all day. That evening
you order, in a restaurant, pork stew
with polenta – a safe choice, you think,
till it arrives with a local variant
your lack of the language blocks you from:
a soft fried egg sitting there on top!

SARAH MAGUIRE

“Dinner with . . .” Poet in the Café

THYME SALAD

Salatet al-zaatar al-akhdar

Thyme grows in abundance all over the Levant, and it is the plant most powerfully associated with Palestine. It’s commonly eaten for breakfast: warm flat bread is dipped into olive oil and then into a bowl of *zaatar*—a rough, pungent mixture of crushed, dried thyme leaves combined with sumac (the dried berry of the *sumac* tree, ground into a dark red powder with a sour, lemony flavour), toasted sesame seeds and salt. Packets of *zaatar* can be found in Middle Eastern grocery stores; I rather like it on toast.

This salad, however, is made with fresh thyme leaves. These little woody bundles again can be found in Middle Eastern stores, and in Greek and West Indian grocers too; the new season begins in late April but you can usually buy fresh thyme throughout the year. I made Thyme Salad as one of the *mezze* for my dinner at the Poetry Café; everyone was intrigued by its sharp, pungent flavour. It’s too powerful to be eaten alone, and is best served with a number of other *mezze*, good bread, and some sharp green olives.

SERVES 4 AS APPETISER

IN A BOWL, crush 1 clove of garlic with salt into a puree; stir in the juice of 1 lemon and 2–3 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil; whisk these together vigorously. Then add the leaves stripped from 1 bunch of fresh thyme and 1 medium onion, finely chopped. Simple and wonderful.

SARAH MAGUIRE

Zaatar

for Zakaria Mohammed

Astringent, aromatic, antiseptic –
the souls of the dead
come to rest in the blooms
of this bitter herb

to haunt the bleached landscape
of limestone
of broken stones
of olive trees stricken and wasted

Incendiary – a volatile oil
can be crushed from its leaves
small pockets of scent
toughened, hirsute

Uprooted, exploded
ground under foot
its pungency rises
staining the air –

pollen like gunpowder
dust in the hand
cast over Palestine
from the mouths of stones

MIMI KHALVATI

“Dinner with . . .” Poet in the Café

KORESHT BADEMJAN

Ingredients:

1 free range chicken

1 large onion

3 cloves garlic

1 teaspoon turmeric

2 teaspoon cinnamon

1 lb dried walnuts

1 large cup of pomegranate purée (available from Iranian groceries)

Cooking oil

SERVES 2

BOIL THE CHICKEN with a little salt to make stock. Cut and bone the cooled chicken if you like. Chop the onions and garlic. Fry slowly in oil (in a saucepan or casserole dish, not a frying pan) so as to caramelize the onion, then add turmeric. Add the chicken portions and pour in chicken stock. Put on low heat to simmer. Grind the walnuts finely and add them, little by little, to the pot. Keep stirring. When all the walnuts are well mixed in, put the lid on and simmer for half an hour. Add the cinnamon and pomegranate purée, stir and simmer for another 10 minutes. Serve with steamed Basmati rice. This dish can also be made with pheasant or duck.

Mimi Khalvati was one of the Poetry Café’s first poets to be asked to cook in the “Dinner with . . .” series; she brought her secret ingredient, which was her mother, to cook up a Persian feast. This is her mother’s recipe.

MIMI KHALVATI

HAIKU

On the verandah
the wet-nurse thinks of her own
pomegranate tree.

JOHN HEGLEY

“Dinner with . . .” Poet in the Café

THE CUSTOMER’S COMPLAINT

In the caff
swapping some of her spaghetti
for a bit of his moussaka
she considered what a benefit it was having a
 partner
when you both wanted the same two
separate meals on the menu.
Unfortunately she considered it
to be the only benefit.

NII AYIKWEI PARKES

“Dinner with . . .” Poet in the Café

DEEP FRIED YAM WITH AVOCADO KPAKPO SHITO

This is a recipe I developed as a modification to a popular Ghanaian snack of fried yam and kpakpo shito (crushed pepper dip). The avocado cuts the spiciness of the pepper and gives the dip a cool twist.

Ingredients:

- 1 tuber of sweet yam (ask for ‘Puna’ yam at an African market)
- 4 medium-sized fresh tomatoes
- ½ teaspoon of salt (maximum – should ideally be done to taste)
- 1 small soft avocado
- ½ a lime
- 1 large onion
- 3–7 kpakpo shito (Small Scotch Bonnet peppers – you may use the bigger ones but adjust the amount of pepper according to taste)
- Oil for frying

SERVES 2–3

PEEL THE YAM and slice it into bite-sized chips (thick cut). Sprinkle the yam with a little bit of salt and deep fry until tender in the middle. Ideally, wait until the oil is hot (about 180°C) before putting the yam in to fry otherwise you will get soggy chips.

While the yam chips are frying, peel and cut the onion into four quarters and place the tomatoes, kpakpo shito, ½ of the onion and some salt into a blender and liquidise. When the mix is smooth, peel and add the avocado and squeeze in the lime (this is to prevent the avocado oxidising, but it plays a dual role and adds a zing to the dip). Finally, chop the remaining quarter of the onion finely to garnish the dip.

Serve the dip in a small bowl placed in centre of a plate of chips. Serves 2–3 Ghanaians.

Note from the poet: the only food poems I have published are ‘The Bite’ in my first collection *Eyes of a Boy, Lips of a Man*, and ‘Orange Flesh’ in *Wasafiri*.