

profile

a bone to pick



Photography by Melbourne Wine and Food Festival

He brought nose-to-tail eating
to the attention of the food world,
and counts Anthony Bourdain and
AA Gill amongst his biggest fans –
but Victoria Wells finds Fergus Henderson
is quite bewildered by
all the fuss...

“I didn’t realise nose-to-tail would catch on in quite the way it did. The idea wasn’t to start something; a thought or school of thought. It’s gone that way a bit.”

British chef Fergus Henderson muses on this during our interview in a hotel room overlooking Melbourne’s Yarra River. He has just presented his class as part of the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival and it’s a good bet that those who were there are now regaling others with descriptions of the crispy pigs’ tails and pot roast half pig’s head placed before us during the demonstration.

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For Fergus Henderson is the man who believes it is important to be “courteous” to ingredients, and this includes using as much of the animal as possible. His nose-to-tail concept of eating also encompasses seasons and local ingredients and he has written two books on the subject: *Nose To Tail Eating* and *Beyond Nose to Tail: A Kind of British Cooking Part II*.

It was still confrontational cuisine for some – the pig’s head was barely touched on several tables – but Fergus believes that using the whole beast when cooking is common sense.

“If you look beyond the fillet there’s so much gastronomic possibility. It’s a joy unfolding, and the fillet becomes rather dull in the end.”

The menu at his London restaurant St John is therefore far from dull: roast bone marrow and parsley salad is a firm favourite with diners, while trotters, pig’s heads and all manner of offal parade proudly across the tables of his quintessentially British eatery, which he describes as “beautiful in its dourness”.

Guests at the Melbourne class got a glimpse of the St John style as Fergus and wife Margot prepared crispy pigs’ tails as a starter. The long, straight tails were poached in light stock then crumbed and fried. “Kids love them for tea,” Fergus told the class. “It’s like sweetcorn with a bone in the middle and lots of fatty flesh around it.”

To hear Fergus Henderson tell it, in answers laced with his bone dry humour, there was no grand plan for taking the restaurant world by storm when the former architect-turned-chef opened St John in 1994. He says that like any chef running a restaurant, he simply cooks the food he enjoys eating. It’s a mix of modern technique with an appreciation of the way earlier and more culinarily frugal generations would have used animals.

“I’m not a fan of fashion or fads in food. I think food is a perfect thing. Our food is British. It’s appropriate today, but it also recognises that things that were good are still good.”

Anthony Bourdain regards Fergus as a “hero” while food writer and critic AA Gill admitted he regretted his first review of St John, later

saying the food: “always looks you straight in the eye, and it does it in an observantly British way. Nothing to do with funny hats or Morris men or Beefeaters. It is properly who we are.”

Fellow chef, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, describes St John as having “one of the bravest agendas of any restaurant.”

Fergus looks genuinely surprised when I mention this.

“I think the dishes are quite straightforward. Brave? Some perverse confidence perhaps. It was just the menu I wanted to write and it seemed appropriate.”

So if this was how people used to cook, what happened to make today’s consumer head unswervingly for the fillet or chop and shudder at the thought of using the head or feet? When, to put it simply, did we stop wanting to recognise that what was on our plates had come from an animal?

“People say it was the war – or frozen chicken kiev – who knows what it may have been. It happened when people began moving into cities. We’re talking about rare breeds and good meat, but supermarket shelves are still full of pink meat in plastic which everyone loves. I think centralisation was part of regional food and cooking disappearing, and the strange obsession with fillets and things, rather than enjoying a bone. Offal can be quite flavoursome – it’s certainly incredibly gentle and soothing. It’s a mystery to me what went on there. I feel people keep trying to work out what happened...actually chicken kiev may have more to do with it than we think.”

His love affair with food came at an early age – he was exposed to different ingredients thanks to a Lancashire mother (tripe was a regular on the menu at home) and a father who travelled extensively through Europe and took his young son along with him.

But it is the food of his homeland to which he turns for inspiration.

“I can’t understand how British food got such a bad name for itself. There’s fantastic meat: beef and lamb, and if you follow the fantastic rigour of seasons there are oysters, asparagus, wild mushrooms, strawberries, raspberries, game – it’s full of it. Game is the best thing in the world. Things fall out of the sky: grouse, pheasant, partridge, woodcock – cook it and nature’s writing your menu for you.”

Given that the pig is the star of St John’s menu, it follows that Fergus has a strong relationship with his suppliers. The pig he uses most is the Middle White, a breed established in 1852 in Yorkshire. Fergus says visiting the breeder’s farm is a joy: “You go and there’s Mum pig under the tree...how they’re looked after is just as important as what they are.” The pigs are fed on whey, which he says gives them far better flavour.

But this is as involved as he gets, until the pigs arrive in his kitchen ready for the oven. Other chefs have garnered a fair amount of media coverage thanks to their desire to get involved at the “business end” of where their ingredients come from. In 2005 Jamie Oliver provoked an outcry in Britain after he slit a lamb’s throat on his television series *Jamie’s Great Escape*. Although visibly uncomfortable with the experience he was later quoted as saying: “A chef who has cooked 2,000 sheep should kill at least one, otherwise you’re a fake.” Anthony Bourdain also cited similar reasoning for participating in a traditional pig slaughter in Portugal for his book *A Cook’s Tour*.



Margot Henderson with the pot roast half pig’s head

Fergus, however, doesn’t share their feelings.

“Some people are really good at killing pigs. Jamie wasn’t good at that killing thing and the animal sort of picked that up. It’s like going to a tailor – you want a good tailor so you’re in capable hands. The pig’s thinking ‘Who’s this chap who’s going all twitchy and nervous?’ It’s not going to help the pig in any way. I don’t wish to knock Jamie or Tony (Anthony Bourdain) at all, but I don’t think I’d get myself into that position. No, I’d rather it was done in calmer hands than mine.”

When talking to a man who is so passionate about meat, it’s inevitable the subject of butchers rears its head. He laments the decline of local butchers in England and the price of meat at some of the specialist food stores.

“It gives good food a bad name when it becomes so boutiquey and expensive. They’re few and far between now, butchers and wet fish shops in London. They’re disappearing along with greengrocers, and people should be careful, because they’ll suddenly say ‘Where’s a butcher?’ They should be supporting them. Hug your butcher, buy your meat there. You feel it might get to the point where kids look at a (raw) chicken and ask ‘What went in there?’ There’s no notion of giblets or anything. It’s weird.”

As well as championing use of the whole animal, Fergus Henderson also dedicates time to helping to raise money for the Parkinson’s Appeal. He was diagnosed with the disease around ten years ago. In 2005 he underwent Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS), a pioneering implant operation that alleviates the symptoms of Parkinson’s.

“It was quite full on but good. Before it happened I was really ‘windmill’ (he demonstrates how his arms moved around) which was

“Offal can be quite flavoursome – it’s certainly incredibly gentle and soothing.”



very good for burning off the tummy. I still don’t feel totally happy with hot pans and knives.

“The strange thing is that I really stepped back when my Parkinson’s was bad, and as soon as you do that ‘stuff’ appears in your life. Emails and the like. I’ve got tons of that now, so that’s a bit distracting. But I’m there (at St John) every day – talking the menu through and things.”

His latest project is called Trotter Gear, a stock made with trotters. “You pull off the flesh from the trotters and set it in jelly. So if you’re braising or stewing or making a pie, or pot roasting it sort of soothes meat. ‘Unctuous Potential’ we call it.”

Trotter Gear is currently sold at Selfridges and selected gourmet food stores, and Fergus has his sights set on global domination to bring the pig to more people.

“I want it worldwide...I see great Trotter Towers overseeing the Trotter Gear path. It’s a brilliant thing, I thought it would be interesting to try getting people eating more trotter.” ●

For more visit stjohnrestaurant.co.uk

Dish travelled to Melbourne courtesy of Tourism Victoria and Qantas. For further information please visit www.visitvictoria.com/nz Qantas offers twice daily services to Melbourne from Auckland and daily services from Wellington. For the latest airfares visit www.qantas.co.nz or call Qantas on 0800 767 400. With thanks also to the Melbourne Wine and Food Festival. The 2009 Festival will be held from March 13-23. Visit melbournefoodandwine.com.au for details.