

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Full English

Tom Parker Bowles

Contents

Cover

List of Recipes

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Tom Parker Bowles

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

Introduction

1. The West

Pigeons in Cider with Apples

Brawn

Cheese Toast or English Rabbit

Apple and Rhubarb Crumble

2. The North

Lancashire Hotpot

Potted Shrimps

Battered Tripe

Winnie's Eccles Cakes

3. The Midlands

Charles Champion's Chilli-Pickled Onions

Cyrus Todiwala's 'Country Captain Pie' with Mutton and Spinach

Real Pork Scratchings
Balti Chicken and Mushroom

4. The East

Stephen Harris's Angels on Horseback
Lincoln's Inn Cherries
Dressed Crab
Kentish Huffkins

5. London

Roast Bone Marrow and Parsley Salad
Devilleed Bones
Deep-Fried Whitebait
Steak, Kidney and Oyster Pudding
Eel Pie

6. Full English

Devilleed Kidneys
Kedgereed
Fried Plaice with Shrimp Butter
Snipe on Toast

Bibliography

Acknowledgements

Copyright

List of Recipes

THE WEST

[Pigeons in Cider with Apples](#)

[Brawn](#)

[Cheese Toast or English Rabbit](#)

[Apple and Rhubarb Crumble](#)

THE NORTH

[Lancashire Hotpot](#)

[Potted Shrimps](#)

[Battered Tripe](#)

[Winnie's Eccles Cakes](#)

THE MIDLANDS

[Charles Campion's Chilli-Pickled Onions](#)

[Cyrus Todiwala's 'Country Captain Pie' with Mutton and](#)

[Spinach](#)

[Real Pork Scratchings](#)

[Balti Chicken and Mushroom](#)

THE EAST

[Stephen Harris's Angels on Horseback](#)

[Lincoln's Inn Cherries](#)

[Dressed Crab](#)

[Kentish Huffkins](#)

LONDON

Roast Bone Marrow and Parsley Salad
Devilled Bones
Deep-Fried Whitebait
Steak, Kidney and Oyster Pudding
Eel Pie

FULL ENGLISH

Devilled Kidneys
Kedgeree
Fried Plaice with Shrimp Butter
Snipe on Toast

About the Book

Tom Parker Bowles takes a picaresque journey across the country to learn about the English through our love-affair with food

From the West Country cider brewers to Yorkshire tripe dressers, Tom meets the punters and producers at the heart of our food traditions and samples the very best of real English food: Bury black pudding, home-cured Wiltshire Bacon and the planet's finest cheddar.

But *Full English* is no paean to an imagined land where yokels sip ale together while chomping on pork pies. Tom's quest delves beneath the surface to unearth the real story behind our eating habits, and what the food of today says about us: organic heaven or mass-produced hell?

Peppered with mouth-watering recipes and recommendations, Tom's pilgrimage maps out England's defining dishes: fish & chips in the north, balti in the midlands, snail porridge at the Fat Duck. But it is the colourful characters we meet along the way who truly bring *Full English* to life.

About the Author

Tom Parker Bowles is a food writer with a weekly column in the *Mail on Sunday's Live* magazine. He is also a contributing editor to *GQ*. He co-hosts *The Market Kitchen* on UK TV and is a regular contributor on Gordon Ramsay's *The F Word*. He is the author of *E is for Eating: An Alphabet of Greed* and *The Year of Eating Dangerously*.

Also by Tom Parker Bowles

E is for Eating
The Year of Eating Dangerously

TOM PARKER BOWLES

Full English

**A JOURNEY THROUGH
THE BRITISH AND THEIR FOOD**



To Lola

Prologue

The French, they say, live to eat. The English, on the other hand, eat to die.

Martin Amis, *Money* (1984)

In the eighteenth century English inns were so renowned for their good cheer as to have caused contemporary French travellers to lament that in no French province could their equals be found.

P. Morton Shand, *A Book of Food* (1927)

AS PIES GO, this one sat somewhere between glum and downright suicidal. The crust was mean and purse lipped, and despite a good half-hour spent sweating in the oven it stubbornly refused to brown. Little wonder, being constructed from a dreary mélange of potatoes, margarine and baking powder. The filling, though, was more depressing still – a pound each of diced potatoes, carrots, swedes and cauliflower, boiled mercilessly until each soggy lump had oozed into one homogenous mess. Then baked, just to ensure that any last traces of texture were utterly obliterated. A few pinches of salt fought valiantly for life but stood little chance against this relentless vegetative assault. As for the spring onions, they disappeared into the sludge, never to be heard from again.

The name of this wretched concoction was Lord Woolton pie, named after the eponymous Minister of Food when it

was introduced in May 1941. Two years into the Second World War, Woolton was a largely popular figure, cajoling the public into munching on meatless rissoles, mock hare soup and all manner of ersatz creations. The pie, although cheap and easy on the ration book, was hardly a high point of British cooking. And it trudged across the palate, watery and morose, little more than a primeval soup of root vegetables. The pastry added nothing, save a coating of cheap fat, slathered across the roof of one's mouth - joyless fodder for difficult times. My friend Bill, with whom I was cooking the damned thing, agreed. He took a bite, wrinkled his nose and set down his fork. 'I'm starting to feel the wartime drudgery already.'

The mock goose was marginally better, but only in the way that death by lethal injection is preferable to the electric chair. A few ounces of split red lentils are cooked to a mush, then seasoned with a touch of lemon juice (a modern embellishment), salt and pepper. A large onion is then 'sautéed' in water (those wartime recipe books were certainly inventive with their euphemisms), mixed with sage and breadcrumbs, stuffed between two cake-shaped portions of the lentils, and baked until dry and turgid. What it has to do with goose, I don't know, although it's certainly a fascinating study in different shades of beige. I suppose that the sage, onion and breadcrumbs are meant to ape a traditional stuffing, but without the pork (which was fiercely rationed), it sort of loses the will to live.

We had meant to move on to 'donkey' (or mealie) pudding, where all sorts of indecent things are done to leeks and oatmeal, and mock fish cakes, where bloater paste took the place of fresh fish. Or even mock clotted cream, a sorry coming together of margarine, sugar, dried milk powder and vanilla essence. Instead we had given up, sunk into an all-too-real gloom cast by these ersatz recipes. The experiment over, we binned the wretched results and

wandered off down to the pub, for sausages, beer and salt-beef sandwiches.

The afternoon of cooking had started as a very loose sort of experiment. I was researching an article about rationing in Britain. I could just about remember those posters from school, 'Dig for Victory' and 'Food is a Munition of War', but they were little more than colourful splashes on the classroom wall, something to gaze at while some poor teacher grappled with the intricacies of the Schleswig Holstein Question. My favourite of all was 'Better Pot-Luck with Churchill today than humble pie under Hitler tomorrow. Don't waste food.' Leaving aside the Hun bashing, the advice now seems as pertinent as ever. In these financially challenged times, the papers are filled with eulogies to the cheaper cuts of meat, and parsimony, they say, is back in vogue. We do tend to assume, though, that in the past, every woman up and down the land was blessed with exquisite cooking skills, and a culinary knowledge to match.

It is obvious, even before the Second World War, that this was a little wide of the mark. 'A butcher with a sense of humour, whose shop was in a wealthy district, once said to me,' wrote Florence White in 1923, "'They all want cutlets or chops; an animal ain't made up only of chops, but they can't cook anything else. I wish they'd learn to cook the cheaper cuts.'" A woman greengrocer in a poor district said to me: "It's pitiful to think young married women - mere girls! - can't cook. They come to me and ask me to tell them. They don't even know how to cook a potato, and we can't sell them some vegetables because they don't know how to cook them.'" This was like the scent of truffle to a snuffling pig, spurring me deeper still. Everything I had previously believed of English food, of its pre-war glories and pies for all, was suddenly challenged. My assumptions were shallow, my understanding strictly limited.

We emerged from those bleak war years with an understandable acceptance of the bland and uninspiring, and a reliance on foods of convenience, tinned, frozen or freeze dried. Good food was seen as a luxury and to abandon oneself to the pursuit of gastronomic pleasure was 'not the done thing'. 'Rationing lasted for approximately fifteen years,' writes Philippa Pullar in *Consuming Passions*. 'It had the effect of changing the British diet in a major way. It reduced the overall standard to a uniform level. Everyone, whether rich or poor, whether in town or country, was eating the same food.'

Many Victorians saw a love of food as synonymous with weak morals, natural indolence and suspect, continental ways. Victorian children were 'steeped in original sin', according to Pullar, and were therefore never indulged or allowed to show pleasure in eating, in case it led to improper passion. Tablecloths, it's said, were there to cover exposed table legs, lest those wooden protuberances excite an ungodly stirring of the loins. Sensual enjoyment was seen as shameful in public (while in private, pornography reached a quivering crescendo of lascivious popularity). The Puritans, in the mid-seventeenth century, were worse still, even going as far as to ban the Christmas feast. There was no such thing as pure gustatory pleasure. To feast meant gluttony and gluttony, dear child, was a deadly sin.

Even my long-held view of English food as good, honest fare, of beautiful ingredients treated with care, was quickly shattered. 'English domestic cooking has never stood in high repute,' write J.C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, gloomily, in 1939, 'except perhaps in so far as roast meats are concerned. Its reputation appears to have declined during the nineteenth century, probably because we acquired from the Continent the knowledge how to grow garden vegetables [but] we did not trouble to learn how to cook them properly. It is one of the tragedies of English domestic life.'

All this sprang from just a mouthful of the wretched Woolton pie. Our attitudes to rationing provided an accurate snapshot of our attitude to food, which saw pragmatism mixed with creativity, the noble stirred in with the wretched, the good folded into the bad. The more I read, however, in recipe books and diaries, scrawled letters and formal orders, in the peace of the Imperial War Museum archive, the more I saw rationing as emblematic of the English attitude to food in general.

‘Both materially and spiritually the future looks bleak,’ huffed Dr J.P. McHutchinson, a staunchly Tory Scottish bachelor, in his diary of November 1945. ‘VE day is now six months old, and yet ordinary conditions of living, food, clothing, etc, have improved not one whit ... as a nation we have lost our soul ... rations are even slightly tighter and every whit as lacking in variety. We are expected to celebrate the first post war Xmas with an extra $\frac{1}{4}$ pound of sweets!’ James Lees-Milne, an assiduous chronicler of all things grand and titled, moaned, in November two years later, that ‘everyone I meet complains of distended stomach and attributes it to the starchy food. The food in England is worse than during the war, dry and tasteless, even at Brook’s.’

Yet amid the gloom there were moments of celebration too. An article in *The Land Worker*, ‘the Journal of the National Union of Agricultural Workers’, in 1945, talks of a particularly merry feast.

The Notton Branch, Yorkshire, celebrated its fourth anniversary and the passing of the 100 membership mark with a rabbit pie supper on October 17th. Men of a lesser breed would not have dared the dangers of the journey, but with vision of rabbit pie haunting his eyes as they strained to pierce the fog, Bert clung grimly to the wheel of his car, and in spite of mounting banks and other hair-raising experiences

finally arrived at Notton with sharpened appetite. Although both he (Bro. Bert Hazell) and Bro. Robinson soon had what Bert described as a feeling of 'almost indecent repletion,' they managed to deliver bright and breezy speeches appropriate to the occasion. The South Milford Branch, Yorkshire, also had a supper when Bro. Hazell was the special speaker. There were none of the synthetic foods we poor Londoners have to put up with but real ham sandwiches, apple pies, gooseberry tarts, and other delicacies. One brother with a passion for pickled onions caused amusement by eating them with everything. He would take a bite of gooseberry tart, then pop an onion into his mouth and so on. In our native county, pork and apple pie was once eaten together, but gooseberry tart and onion seems a queer mixture. But the member ate the combination with evident relish and is even said to have patted the lower part of his anatomy with great approval.

Did these attitudes have any bearing on how we eat now? For any serious insight into this period, there's no better authority than Marguerite Patten, the food writer and historian. Now ninety-three, she speaks with clarity, wit and insight. 'I was still with the Ministry of Food when the war ended in '45. And in our innocence we thought that rationing would be ending within a year or so. Of course it didn't do anything of the kind. They told us we have to go on until '54. And we were rationed more than ever before. In 1947, the Ministry of Food became very, very unpopular,' admits Patten. 'During the war, we were happy to be given advice, we wanted advice. People came from all over to ask how to do it. We were fighting a war, so therefore we accepted that we should be dictated to and we should have to behave in the right and proper way. But after the government changed, the approach changed. I was always

warned, from my very first radio broadcast, “Don’t wag fingers, don’t lecture people” and *they* began to lecture *us*. And I thought, well, maybe the Ministry think they’re going to guide us for forever and a day. And maybe they were right, and we should have taken their advice and we wouldn’t have obesity and the problems of today.’ She laughs. ‘Whilst that might well have happened, equally it might not.’

Would English food have improved if the ministry had stayed in charge? I think not. But rationing was just one part of a series of events that saw English food fall so low. What had started as my small excursion on English rationing had suddenly taken root and grown into a full-scale expedition into English food. A few days spent in the Imperial War Museum, in the air-conditioned somnolence of the British Library and upon the battered leather sofas of the London Library, were no longer sufficient to quell my hunger. I felt more voyeur than participant, as if watching some invisible banquet, unable to join in – Tantalus tempted by ale and steak and kidney pudding. To really find out about the English and their food, I had to gird my belly and sharpen my knife. Most importantly of all, I would have to get out and eat ...

Introduction

ENGLISH FOOD HAS never had it easy. On the one hand, it's the world's culinary whipping boy, the sorry butt of a thousand multilingual gags. 'An international joke,' wrote Philippa Pullar, 'as bad as any music-hall mother-in-law.' It's more comic stereotype than national cuisine, a deep-fried snort or a long-stewed giggle, up there with dodgy teeth, swinging vicars and Norman Wisdom. This hackneyed view is as predictable as it is pervasive.

'Every country possesses, it seems, the sort of cuisine it deserves which is to say the sort of cuisine it is appreciative enough to want,' writes Waverley Root in *The Food of France*. 'I used to think that the notoriously bad cooking of England was an example to the contrary, and that the English cook the way they do because, through sheer technical deficiency, they have not been able to master the art of cooking. I have discovered to my stupefaction that the English cook that way because that is the way they like it.'

Ask any foreigner from Paris to Port-au-Prince as to their views on the matter and they'll agree with Root. The Americans and the French are the worst, earnest and infuriating. British cuisine is a wretched oxymoron, they sneer as one: grey, turgid and lumpen. There's no refinement, passion or beauty, just some barely edible, depression-inducing, overcooked mediocrity in a funereal flour sauce.

As far as the rest of the world is concerned, our contribution to global gastronomy stops at Marmite and the deep-fried Mars Bar. Oh, and jellied eels. Mustn't forget the jellied eels. The situation's so dire that even the lesser culinary nations, the Icelanders or the Dutch, peer down their noses at our food. Now it's one thing taking abuse from the Chinese or French, but quite another from a country best known for a hundred ways with rotted shark. The fact that the vast majority of these naysayers have barely left Omaha or Dieppe means little - the muck has been thrown so long that it not only sticks, but endlessly fertilises the tired old cliché too.

Yet the opposing view is equally galling, a damp-eyed vision of an Albion long gone, where jolly squires clinked flagons of foaming ale with slow-but-honest horny-handed sons of the soil. A grossly romanticised fairy tale where good eating was classless and universal, with hand-raised pork pies for all and as much pickle as you could fit on a shovel. One nation forever united by good beer, beef and bread. The perpetrators of this view argue we've always eaten well and heartily, making solid food for solid people. Certainly, the rich might have feasted on their roasted swan and neat's tongue in pastry, but the average peasant did all right too. Not for him the fripperies and fineries of court, but proper John Bull grub, a steak and kidney pudding to sustain him while he skipped through the medieval mud. With a pig in the back yard and a vegetable patch for all those turnips, nothing could dampen the British spirit.

This is the view of those who see food as a nationalistic battering ram, the mighty rib of beef ready to smite down any lily-livered French fancies. The fact they bake their nationalism into a Victoria sponge makes it no less distasteful. Show them the most greasy and wretched of roadside breakfasts and they'd claim it preferable by far to the damned foreign muck of Johnny Frog.

In the past twenty years, though, a new attitude has crept in, the furrowed, angry brow replaced by a beaming, all-encompassing smile. These people joyously proclaim that we're living in the midst of a food revolution and that English food is undoubtedly the best in the world, now that we've rediscovered Bath chaps, Essex dunkles, rumbledethumps and flummeries, and that everyone, from the dwellers in sink estates to the lords of stately piles, is sharing in the pleasures of the new English food.

Both arguments are extreme and each is as misguided as the other. There's absolutely no doubt that English food – that is, the national food of the country rather than the food eaten every day – has improved beyond belief in the past two decades. A whole new generation of 'New English' restaurants pepper the land, from pubs using the best of local produce to Michelin-starred icons doing magical things with every part of the swine. Chefs study Eliza Acton and Hannah Glasse and Robert May, searching for information and inspiration in the way we once ate. The critics rave, the pundits applaud and we're proud of our food once more.

Yet this is hardly reflected on the international restaurant scene. How many English restaurants are there in Beijing? Or Paris and Hong Kong? Aside from a few, crumbling, old-colonial clubs, relics of a past long gone, our international standing is still pitifully low. When foreign publications crown London 'Restaurant Capital of the World', only a precious few natives make the grade. The rest are the usual trans-global m el e of French, Italian, Chinese and Indian. And although Gordon Ramsay has restaurants across the world, it is mainly the haute cuisine of France from which he draws his experience and techniques. While our drinking culture has spawned pubs across the world, our culinary exports are markedly less successful.

The irony lies in the fact that the best English food is easily appreciated by decent palates the world over. We're a country blessed with sumptuous produce. All food is a product of history, geography and climate, and a temperate, oft-invaded island filled with lakes and marshes, moor and pasture, is always going to be better supplied than the arid depths of the Gobi Desert. No other country has such a highly evolved pudding culture as we do. Roast meats too - we're masters of the art. In terms of raw material, we're every bit the equal of any other country. Thanks to a job that takes me around the world on the whim of my belly, I've eaten with the most exacting of Chinese, French, Italians and Americans, all of whom eulogised on the joys of roast bone marrow at St John Restaurant in Smithfield or the very sweetest native oysters at Green's in St James's. They've taken as much joy from a fresh crab sandwich or home-cooked Sunday lunch as they would from the most delicate of dim sum or most robust of bollito misto.

Good English food is undoubtedly criminally underrated, not least because so few visitors have actually eaten it. Imagine yourself a European tourist, first emerging from the tube stairs into Piccadilly Circus. You spot the welcoming banquettes of an Aberdeen Steak House and wander in, expecting the finest Scottish beef. An hour later, you stagger out, your sorry view of British food only reinforced. It's a similar story in all those pubs that promise 'Genuine English Fayre', but fail to point out that the shepherd's pie was made a month earlier in a Croydon processing plant, using New Zealand lamb and Spanish potatoes, fast frozen then blasted in a microwave for a few minutes. The unlucky eaters return home to the outskirts of Milan, or Rheims, or Nanjing, shaking their heads and sullyng the reputation of English food further still. And can you really blame them?

The state of our national health is also worrying – morbid obesity is on the rise, along with Type A diabetes, both intrinsically linked to poor diet. The multinational, processed-food pushers get richer by the day and sales of ready meals are soaring. For all the Jamie and Nigella books we buy, for all the Gordon and Hugh we watch on television, the national waistline continues to expand. Because we're a nation of culinary voyeurs – we watch but don't do. Our appetite for ever growing portions of processed food is so voracious that experts believe the National Health system will soon buckle under the extra weight. And our pockets will be hard hit too, as taxes soar to pay for more beds. In fact, we haven't eaten so badly since before the Second World War.

To be sure, universally affordable food means that everyone can afford to eat, but the long-term costs could be catastrophic. Sometimes, I wonder whether all those books bought, and programmes watched so slavishly, are little more than culinary titillation. While I don't believe we're a nation uninterested in quality, the fact that so few of us now do cook means we're prepared to put up with mediocrity. What use are heritage tomatoes and organic goat's cheeses to people who cannot boil an egg? And can a cash-strapped mother of four, scraping by on dead-end jobs at all hours of the day and night, really justify buying an organic chicken at double the price of a standard one? There is no black and white with English food, just endless shades of grey.

'The trouble has been that having the finest materials in the world,' writes Rupert Croft-Cooke in *English Cooking* (1960), 'we take them too much for granted.' He was speaking to a nation still reeling from the deprivations of rationing, and in an era where anything foreign seemed impossibly exotic, borne in on a thyme-scented, Mediterranean breeze rather than smothered in a cloud of London smog. Who wanted dull old shepherd's pie when

there was bouillabaisse and pommes dauphinoise? As an ardent devotee of good English food, I'd be a liar to deny some flutter of culinary patriotism. 'The cookery of a nation is just as much a part of its customs and traditions as are its laws and languages,' wrote my great-grandfather P. Morton Shand in *A Book of Food*. 'There is much to be said for preserving the purity of all four, and also a good deal that can be argued in favour of a properly controlled assimilation from appropriate foreign sources to replace incongruities and repair deficiencies.'

This sensible, pragmatic approach, written over eighty years ago by a man not noted for his delicacy of opinion, is all the more relevant now. A cuisine that stands still and stagnates, that refuses to adapt with the ever-changing times, is no longer a national food, but a relic of the past. There's absolutely no question that English food has evolved, like any other, from the fruits of the primitive hunter-gatherers to the cosmopolitan harvest of the global pick 'n' mix. So why is our national food still so mocked?

The food of centuries ago would certainly have lacked the pesticides, hormones and fertilisers so crucial to today's industrialised farming. England, some claim, existed in a permanent golden age of gastronomic bliss, before the juggernaut of industry came along and ripped us away from our pretty cottages and well-tended plots. Everything was organic and 'natural', God's own food. However, a few days spent in Victorian London would soon put paid to this myth. Sweets were made with clay and coloured with toxic copper, red lead lurked in cheese and sloe leaves were sold as tea. And that's just for starters. With no regulations, food adulteration reached epidemic proportions.

As for the lot of the poor, for most of the last millennium it was wretched: pottage, a dull, stodgy, soup-like stew was the staple, a far cry from the happy, feasting peasants of popular imagination. It's tempting to see the decline of

English food as the end result of a long historical chain of events. The Enclosure Acts ripped the peasants from their common land, then industrialisation changed the country from mainly agricultural to primarily urban. If you add wartime rationing, the flight of women from the domestic kitchen, the rise of processed foods and the power of the supermarkets, you can chart what has happened to English food. This, though, is too scientific a method. It offers markers but no real truth.

It's too easy to lay all the blame on the supermarkets, although the case for the prosecution is strong. They suck the life out of small, local shops like vampires with an unquenchable thirst, draining the high street of life in their eternal quest for ever-increasing profits. They favour the cosmetic appearance and transportability of their produce over flavour, as anyone who has suffered the bland iniquity of a Dutch tomato will attest. They seduce us with their homogenised ready meals, those insults to the palate that are loved for their 'convenience' rather than their flavour. And they reduce the world of butchery into sirloin steak and chicken breasts, neatly cut and ready packaged. This is not a dead beast, they purr, this is a shiny product, wiped clean of blood and viscera, so you can sleep easy at night. My mother's blind Jack Russell knows more about the various cuts of beef and lamb than the average man on the meat counter, while my two-year-old daughter is positively well informed on the subject of British piscine life in comparison to the hapless fish-counter assistant.

But there is also the case for the defence. Bulk buying means cheaper food, so everyone can afford to eat fresh fish, meat, fruit and vegetables. It's all very well my deploring the quality of the meat but compared to a hundred years ago, at least everyone today can afford to buy and eat it.

Despite the average trip around the supermarket having all the excitement of a Mormon rave, they are not all bad.

Cheap food may not be the long-term answer, but it's democratic. Everyone now has access to good food, and it's more important that a child learns to cook from scratch rather than fussing about seasonality or local ingredients. Those concerns come later. By studying the past, though, would it be possible to find a clear path to the present? I want to find out the truth about English food, how it evolved and what went wrong.

Full English is as much about enjoyment as it is about disgust, about the past and the future, celebration and despair. Whatever your view on the subject, we're in a better place now than we were forty years ago. But is this really the dawn of a renaissance in English food? Or have we, a country eternally uninterested in the food we eat and produce, left it too late?

1

The West

ON FIRST SIGHT, there's little to differentiate Manor Farm from any other dairy operation. The yard is muddy and expansive, the air thick with milk and manure. The farmhouse itself is rambling and lived-in, comfortably scruffy and sitting a few metres back from the main road running through the Somerset village of North Cadbury. In fact, this could have been any old working farm, the sort of well-oiled, faceless and resolutely unglamorous business that goes about its work with the minimum of fuss. Cows are milked, milk is sold and the seasons ebb and flow.

This place, though, is different, and I'd be a liar if I didn't admit a jolt of disappointment, a hint of the anticlimax, at its apparent normality. I'd grown up around farms like this, made camps among hay-bales, chased the chickens and fired catapults, impotently, at scurrying rats. So how could this everyday, unassuming sprawl produce the finest cheese in the world?

Others may argue the strengths of an oozing Brie de Meaux, aged manchego, Colston Bassett Stilton or Mrs Kirkham's Lancashire. All are great cheeses but none, for me, reaches the blissful heights of Jamie Montgomery's unpasteurised Cheddar. While George Keen's Cheddar comes close, made just a few miles down the road, Montgomery's is the king of them all.

It is a light, elegant yellow in colour; the unpasteurised milk comes from Montgomery's own Friesian cows. The eighteen-month aged cheese starts off in the mouth tasting buttery, sweet and nutty. A few seconds later, these qualities are tempered by a fine lactic bite – forceful at first, then measured – adding balance and acidity. The flavour rolls across the tongue in stately waves, building to a perfectly pitched crescendo before fading into warm, creamy delight. It lingers, blissfully, for minutes, coating the taste buds with the quintessence of good milk. Even the French, not known for their gushing admiration of English cheese, have been known to pause thoughtfully upon tasting, and proclaim, 'pas mal'. If it were a person, Montgomery's Cheddar would be awarded a knighthood for services to the palate, and become a national living treasure, opening supermarkets and pontificating on Radio 4.

So where were the huge brown signposts to this Cheddar Mecca, proclaiming 'Big Cheese Bliss, just five miles away?' In America, even cheese in a can gets a gift shop flogging cuddly cows plus an overstocked concession stand pushing sugary drinks and ditchwater coffee. Yet in England, the opposite is true. In many cases, one has to seek out the best. There's no bloated marketing budget, no smooth-talking specialist drafted in to build the brand, just an inherent quality of product matched only by the passion of the producer.

I grew up in the West Country, near the once-typical market town of Chippenham. Now, its straightforward, Bath-stoned Wiltshire charm has been blighted by idiotic planning and corporate myopia, its bramble bushes and scattered copses buried under faceless business parks and graceless housing. In a few years' time, the town will be little more than a gloomy suburb of Swindon, its character ripped out along with the fish shops and butchers that once dotted its streets.

Despite a resolutely urban adulthood, I adore the West Country. The village names call out like old friends: Lacock and Berry Hill, Kington St Michael and Box. This is the land of the *Gazette and Herald*, with its tales of school fêtes and stolen chainsaws, harvest festivals and neighbourhood watch. The traditional food of the West found its way deep into my consciousness before I ever knew it. School trips were taken to cider farms and Cheddar dairies, and every time I went to play at my best friend's house we'd drive past Harris's sausage and bacon factory in Calne. Our daily, Mac, had come to us after it closed down and would regale me with stories of searing the bristles off hogs, or the constant, cloying smell of pig, which even the deepest and hottest of baths was unable to remove. So that Western holy trinity of apple, milk and pig was ingrained in my earliest years, long before food became my job. Start with what you know, they say, so it made perfect sense for me to set off for Somerset.

Back at the farm, I push open a small, creaky iron gate and wander up the short path to the door. I knock, softly at first, before hammering again. There's no reply. I look up and notice a pane of glass is missing from a window on the top floor. The whole farm is eerily silent, save for the odd, distant moo. For a moment I panic, thinking I'm in the wrong place. I decide to wander around the back, immediately regretting wearing trainers. Rice-paper slippers would have provided as much protection from the rural muck. Despite my having had an agricultural upbringing, where wellies were almost fused to my feet, the lure of the pavement had long since swamped any lingering inclinations in that direction. Now I tend to panic when too far removed from an easy source of shrimp paste, imported DVD stores and all-night garages.

'Up in London again, are we?' my parents still ask every Friday, incredulous that anyone would want to spend a weekend in the capital.