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THE £31 CHICKEN

It would suit the narrative if I could claim that, from the moment I laid eyes upon the chicken, I knew I had to have it; that I was overcome by a greed and hunger verging on the carnal. Granted it was one damn beautiful chicken: good sturdy legs for the brown meat fetishists, a robust skin with the ivory promise of plentiful fat deposits underneath; breasts big enough to make Pamela Anderson wince with jealousy. But the truth is it wasn't the chicken I saw first, but the entire meat carnival of the butcher's shop. I had heard tell of Lidgate's in Holland Park before, of course. It's one of those high-end butchers that food obsessives dribble into their computer keyboards over, when describing their shopping adventures. It's the kind of place you visit with more money than sense.

Lidgate's has been trading for 150 years, has remained in the same family throughout that time and has won countless awards for what, in cheaper parts of town, would be called their ready meals but here are called 'baked goods'. The window is full of their ready-to-cook shepherd's pies, the surface of the mash as carefully raked as the gravel outside a

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stately home. There are boeuf bourguignon pies and pesto-smearing saddles of lamb, and their own enormous sausage rolls, wrapped in the flakiest of butter-rich pastry. The shop is tiled inside and out in Edwardian shades of jade green. The butchers wear straw boaters as if it's an entirely reasonable thing to do. (It isn't.)

I stepped inside and waited in the narrow space in front of the counters with the Holland Park yummy mummies, smelling of Jo Malone products – jasmine and mint, wild fig – while others were served. I was not entirely sure what I was going to do. I like butcher's shops, worked in one of them at weekends as a kid. I like the promise of all that meat; like to think about what it could become. I like to think about what pleasure it could give me. I particularly like high-end butcher's shops, as if the pleasure I can achieve can in some way be correlated on a graph against the cost of the produce on offer. I like all this, while also knowing it is wrong and deluded, that the quality of the meal will actually depend on my ability to cook those ingredients sympathetically. I listened to a butcher weigh off a piece of beef and quote the price. My eyes widened. I have spent big money on my dinner before, paid unconscionable sums for bits of dead animal, but this was in a new category.

Then my gaze fell upon a small chicken, slapped with the label 'organic free range', from Otter Farm. Yours for £12 a kilo. Later I would check the going rate for whole fresh chicken in the supermarkets that week – from £2.04 a kilo to as much as £6 a kilo for a free-range organic bird – but even without checking I knew that this wasn't just expensive; that this chicken laughed in the face of expensive. It had migrated to a new and unique category located somewhere between nose-bleeding and paralysing.

In its favour these were small birds of little more than a kilo, and so, individually, a whole chicken was likely to come in at less than £20. I had paid £18 for a bird once before, a free-range organic number from Borough Market in south London, a place so expensive I never went there carrying plastic, only cash so as to put a limit on what I could spend. This would, in turn, enable me to carry on buying shoes for my children. Buying the £18 chicken had made me feel dirty and wrong, albeit in a good way; but the point is that these Lidgate's birds were within my tolerances for excess.

That's when I saw it, on a glass shelf, creamy-coloured arse to the shop, as though its skin tones had been picked out of a Farrow & Ball catalogue. This free-range, non-organic chicken was big. Very big. I asked the butcher to put it on the scales. It weighed just over 3.2kg. At £9.90 a kilo. 'That will be £31.78,' he said, his straw boater rested at a jaunty angle. I let out a hiss of breath, like the air leaking from a punctured bicycle tyre. Did I want it? the nice chap asked me.

Did I want it? Yes. Yes, I did want it. Who wouldn't? A chicken costing more than £31? What would that be like? Surely it had to be the ultimate chicken, the king (or, more precisely, the queen) of birds? Surely if I paid – I did the sums quickly – over 75 per cent more for a chicken than I had ever paid before I would accrue an equivalent amount more pleasure from the experience than I ever had before? At the very least wasn't it my responsibility to find out? Wasn't that what I did these days? As I left the shop, I noticed a sign in the window signed by David Lidgate, the current family member to be custodian of the business, to the effect that all their chickens were bred and supplied by small farms. 'We pay our farmers a fair price.' It felt like he was getting his apology in first.

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Before leaving I asked the butcher where this particular chicken had come from. 'It's an Elmwood chicken, I think,' he said. Back home I Googled the words 'Elmwood' and 'chicken'. It turned out to be an odd thing to have said. Elmwood isn't really a place, or at least it isn't a place any more. It's an idea. While there is an Elmwood Farm somewhere in East Anglia, today the word is a registered marketing label, used by the Co-op – and only the Co-op – to describe a higher-quality, more expensive bird than the bog-standard, fast-grown cheap chickens they sell. The higher welfare standards started at the original Elmwood Farm have now been pressed into service at farms across Britain. The label is now applied to all birds grown under those standards.

This is a familiar ploy by the big food retailers. Marks & Spencer has its Oakham chicken, which some might assume comes from the environs of the town in Rutland of the same name. It doesn't. It's just a brand name for chickens grown at farms all over the country, none of which is called Oakham. Tesco has a range of chickens called Willow Farm, which are reared on a few dozen farms across the south-west of England and Northern Ireland, none of which is called Willow Farm. The labels may portray bucolic scenes of olde farming life. They may be sold with images of carefully drawn ears of corn, but they are still birds raised on an industrial scale.

Whatever my £31 chicken was, it had nothing to do with Elmwood. I phoned Lidgate's and asked again if they could say where it was from. 'It's from Willow Field in Norfolk,' I was told by another butcher. Right. That's more like it. Willow Field actually sounds like a real place. It had the word 'field' in the name. That made it sound just like a farm. Back I went to Google, but found nothing online about a chicken farm in

Norfolk called Willow Field, save for a planning application to the local council for the placement of a mobile home. Conceivably the mobile home was for luxury chickens to live in, but I thought it unlikely.

I was becoming obsessed with this chicken. I had begun to fantasize about its life. Maybe its coop was completely pimped: ermine trim, leather seats, a sound system with serious bass, and a drinks cabinet heavy with vintage Crystal. At this price surely it had to be the most pampered chicken ever? Maybe they fed it on the ground-up bones of delicate songbirds? Perhaps it was watered with Evian? How else could the price be justified?

To bring things back into focus I called Lidgate's yet again. This time I spoke to David Lidgate's son, Danny. He could not explain the misinformation I had been given but he could categorically confirm that it had come from a farm in Suffolk which didn't want any publicity because they couldn't produce any more birds and didn't want any more trade. But he could tell me that they were slow-grown, hand-plucked, and hung for seven days before being dispatched. I wanted to ask him about the ermine-trimmed coop, but couldn't quite summon the will.

One afternoon I went onto Twitter and asked people there to tell me the most they'd ever spent on a whole chicken. There were a few who had never gone beyond a tenner. Quite a number of people had spent sums in the mid-teens. A small number had gone over the £20 mark. Curiously, people had very specific memories. 'Eighteen pounds for a rooster in Montpellier. Nineteen ninety-one. It was worth every penny,' said one person. 'On one memorable occasion enough to feel obliged to give it a name,' said another, without revealing what the sum might be. 'Eighteen pounds,' said a third. 'Big

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bugger. Think they might have killed it for scaring the cows.’ One tweeter talked proudly of the two chickens they had picked up for a fiver in a supermarket deal; another said they had never spent more than £8 and wouldn’t dream of doing so. As these things do, the singular question about the price of a chicken had quickly become a debate about welfare standards, food poverty, excess and the morality thereof. And every now and then someone chipped in with a tweet announcing the enormous sum they had once spent on a chicken as if it were a mark of commitment.

I nodded sagely. As I had suspected, this was a game I was going to win. I gave them the big reveal, told them about Lidgate’s and the £31 chicken. There was an electronic gasp of horror. Thirty-one pounds? Too much. Absurd. Ludicrous. Bizarre.

Just wrong.

‘I once saw a woman run out of Lidgate’s in tears over the price of a chicken,’ one person said. I answered that I could well imagine such a thing.

My warped, obsessive, competitive streak now took me on a tour of London’s classiest butchers, desperate to prove that I had spent the most it was possible to spend on a chicken. For some reason it mattered that the bird which now sat in my freezer awaiting its moment, the bird which had become such a talking point on Twitter, should be able to hold onto its title. I saw birds that were local and free-range and hand-reared and hand-plucked and hung with their guts in. I went to Harrods, where the food hall throngs with tourists who have no intention of buying anything other than tins of branded tea, and looked at shrink-wrapped birds from unpronounceable places in France. I did kilo-to-pound-weight calculations in my head, asked bored butchers to weigh chickens for me

and pronounce on the price, and moved on, each time satisfied I was still ahead.

And then I went to the meat counter at Selfridges' food hall, which is run by a highly respected butcher called Jack O'Shea. There I met the £51 chicken. It was a Poulet de Bresse, a particular breed which was granted *Appellation d'origine contrôlée*, or AOC, status in 1957, protecting it as a name for a particular type of bird, prized for its gamey flavour and rich fat. A nice chap behind the counter called Les, who wasn't wearing a straw boater, told me they were special 'because of their diet. They're treated like royalty, they are.' The bird I was looking at, with its head, neck, and feet on, and guts in – when you bought a bird from Bresse you got to pay for a lot of things you might not actually want – cost over £22 a kilo, and it was well in excess of two kilos.

Damn.

Damn, damn, damn.

There was I thinking I had bought the Bentley of chickens, with metallic paint and sports settings on the gearbox, when it was nothing of the sort. It was just a mid-range BMW. It was an Audi with under-seat heating, the kind of thing a desperate sanitary-ware salesman trying to prove his worth might buy as a way of declaring he had arrived, when in truth all it did was signal loud and clear to anybody who could bother to be interested that he had barely got started.

I wondered, even then, whether I had finally reached the zenith of the luxury chicken business and quickly discovered I had not. One evening, in the kitchens of London's Savoy Hotel, I came across Heston Blumenthal, the chef of the famed Fat Duck in Bray, which has three Michelin stars. He was there overseeing the preparation of the starter for a big charity dinner I was attending. I had snuck away from the velvet plush and

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precious gilding of the ballroom to the bright lights and hard surfaces of the kitchen, where I always felt more comfortable, and stood there in my dinner jacket, picking his brains about chickens. A few years before he had made a TV series called *In Search of Perfection* which involved finding and then roasting the perfect chicken. I wondered how much he had spent on the birds. He thought about £45 each. He talked about the quality of Label Anglais chickens, a British-reared bird which was supposed to challenge the big names of the chicken world.

‘But there are even more expensive ones.’ Like what? He mentioned the birds from Bresse. Well yes, I knew all about those. ‘It’s the cockerels, though. They only sell them for about two weeks of the year around Christmas,’ he said, hand-sown into muslin bags. ‘They have this fabulous skin. ‘It’s like silk.’

And how much would one of these Bresse cockerels set me back?

‘About £120.’

There was, it seems, always a more expensive chicken out there somewhere.

I went to university in the eighties with a bloke called Eugene, who was thinner than me, smarter than me, and got much more sex than me. His name isn’t really Eugene; it is, naturally enough, something far cooler than that, but it pleases me to take my revenge by giving him a really crass pseudonym, because he was horribly annoying. Though obviously not to the parade of pretty girls who were willing to go to bed with him.

Eugene had read an awful lot of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes and, *pace* the kings of postmodern philosophy, liked to refer to things as ‘signifiers’ and ‘symbols’. Nothing was

merely itself. In his universe everything was representative of its place within a long-drawn-out discourse; the physical world in which we lived was merely a set of these signifiers and symbols that had to be reconfigured and understood through their conversion to language. Or something. A pint of beer was never just a pint of beer. It was a signifier for the pursuit of a certain type of human experience, a way of managing communication, usually with one of the women who, a few drinks to the bad, had failed to recognize Eugene as the sociopath he was. (I'm really not bitter.) A bike was actually a signifier for modes of property ownership and an understanding of forward motion. A five-pound note was ... something he cadged off you just before last orders in the back end of term when his money was running out, so he could buy this girl he'd just met another drink. Can you see just how bloody irritating Eugene was?

Which was why it was all the more infuriating that thinking about the £31 chicken had in turn made me think about Eugene and his tiresome language of symbols and signifiers. For it was clear to me that this ridiculously expensive bird was so much more than just three kilos of prime protein, delicious fat and potentially luscious crisp skin. It could stand – Lord help me – as a symbol for so many of the arguments and battles that we are, and need to be, fighting over food in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Certainly it couldn't be dismissed as an object that was merely about wealth. I have long said that there is nothing wrong with paying large amounts of money for food experiences. Some people like to shell out for opera tickets or seats at cup finals to watch their team compete. They are buying memories, and an expensive restaurant experience is no different.

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But an expensive restaurant experience is only that. You can't go to, say, the Fat Duck for something as banal as chicken nuggets. You can't even go there for deconstructed, ironic chicken nuggets (yet). You can only go there for a luxury experience. And sure, my £31 chicken could be given the full de luxe treatment: it could be pelted with truffles, stuffed with lobes of foie gras and basted with the richest of butters. (I can recommend a great place for something like that if you fancy it.) On the other hand it really could just be turned into chicken nuggets. However expensive the raw ingredient, it can still be converted into something very ordinary, which is precisely why the debate on Twitter had kicked off. Hell, it's just a bloody chicken, and you make broth out of those for loved ones when they're snotty and feverish. You barbecue their wings and drumsticks for kids' parties, and put the breasts into pies with leeks and the kind of mustard-heavy cheese sauce that completely obscures the nature of the bird that provided the meat in the first place.

It was clear to me that wrapped up in this single bird were arguments over how we rear our livestock and the amount we are willing to pay for it: about provenance, sophisticated food marketing, the supply chain, and the value of small, local shops over large supermarkets; about the imperative to eat meat and the competing imperative to cut down on it; about the roles of money, status and class in what we eat; and the difference between what we want and what we need. In short, this one big-titted hen had become what Eugene would have called a huge signifier for the warped morality of our food chain.

That's the point. I am in no doubt that the way we in the developed world think and talk about food has become warped; that most of the time we are completely missing the

point. On television, online and in the glossy press we are bombarded with pornified images of food which attempt to cast the most expensive of ingredients as less a luxury than an ideal to which we should all aspire. In this world view any form of mass production or mass retailing is an evil; any attempt to engage with issues around food which doesn't fetishize the words 'local', 'seasonal' and 'organic' is plain wrong. In short, too many of us have mistaken a whole bunch of lifestyle choices for the affluent with a wider debate on how we feed ourselves, when they are nothing of the sort.

We need to get real. The term 'food security' is occasionally bandied around, but it has failed to take its place right at the heart of our conversation about what and how we eat, even though it has to be there. Because, be in no doubt: a combination of world population growth – expected to hit nine billion by 2050 – climate change, appallingly misguided policies on biofuels and an ingrained Luddite response in parts of the West to biotechnology risks coming together into a perfect storm; one which will make the sight of young chefs on the telly talking about their passion for cooking and their commitment to local and seasonal ingredients sound like the screeching of fiddles while Rome burns. According to the United Nations, by 2030 we will need to be producing 50 per cent more food, and a system built around that holy trinity of local, seasonal and organic simply won't cut it.

Indeed, while self-appointed food campaigners are banging on about that, an entirely different conversation has been going on elsewhere, within university faculties and government departments as well as at an inter-governmental level. In that world they use not three words, but two: sustainable intensification. It is about the need to produce more food, in as sustainable a manner as possible, which means thinking

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about far more than just how close to you your food was produced. It's about carbon inputs all the way down the production system. It's about water usage, land maintenance and the careful application of science. According to Oxfam, between 1970 and 1990 global agricultural yield grew 2 per cent a year. Between 1990 and 2007 the yield growth dropped to 1 per cent. We are close to a standstill on producing more food, and that is not a good place to be. In January 2011 the British government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir John Beddington, published a major report entitled 'The Future of Food and Farming'. It drew on the work of dozens of experts; over 100 peer-reviewed papers were commissioned in its writing. In that report there were 39 references to 'sustainable intensification', and the single word 'sustainability' cropped up 242 times. Where food is concerned there is a new lexicon, and it has nothing to do with farmers' markets or growing your own vegetables or fruit.

I hate polarized arguments. They serve no one, because nothing is ever black and white. Even while I pick fights with the diehard foodinistas, and I do on a regular basis, it's obvious to me that there is a lot of good stuff in what they are saying. When they describe the modern food chain and the way we eat its product as being deformed they are absolutely right. A lot is wrong. The problem lies in the solution they propose, which is too often based on a fantasy, mythologized version of agriculture, one that isn't much different from those lovingly drawn ears of corn slapped on the packaging for Oakham or Willow Farm chickens to suggest their bucolic origins when in fact they've been reared in gigantic industrial sheds.

As a newspaper and television journalist I spend an awful lot of my time travelling around Britain (and abroad) finding

out how our food is produced. It's fascinating. I have watched tons of carrots being lifted in the darkest, small hours of the night because, if harvested during the day, they would start to decay under the sunlight. I have dodged fountains of stuff from the wrong end of a cow to help milk the herd on a traditional dairy farm and visited a cow shed that can house up to 1,000 milkers at a time. I have fished for langoustine off the very northernmost tip of Scotland, helped make bespoke salt from the waters off the Kent coast, chosen beef animals for slaughter and followed them to the abattoir so I could witness them take the final bolt. I have driven a £360,000 harvester that vines peas, tried to keep my balance on the slopes of the island of Jersey that give us their sweet, nutty Royal potatoes, and stood in the rafters of an ex-Cold War aircraft hangar atop fifty foot of drying onions. I have even visited a pork scratchings factory and discovered that there is a limit to the amount of pork scratchings an eager man can eat in a day (six packs, as you ask).

From these experiences, and many others like them, I have become convinced that we are disconnected from what real food production means, and therefore afraid of it. We need to understand how it works, be unembarrassed about it, because only then can we genuinely push for the kind of sustainable supply chain which both guarantees quality and that our food will be affordable, though not necessarily dirt cheap. We need to find a way to mate the delicious promise of gastronomic culture with the rather less delicious but equally important demands of hardcore economics. For want of a better word – and there may well be one – we need a New Gastronomics.

So come with me as I show you why the committed locavore, who thinks that buying food produced as close by as possible is always the most sustainable option, has been sold

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a big fat lie. If what really concerns you is the carbon footprint of your food, then it turns out the stuff shipped halfway round the world may not be the great evil you've always been told it is. And because local does not necessarily mean sustainable, it transpires that seasonality is generally about nothing more than taste. Being concerned about how things taste is lovely. Worrying about that stuff is lovely. I do it all the time. But it's not the same as being good to the planet. I'll explain why 'farmers' markets' can never solve our food supply problems – indeed are a part of the problem – how little the organic movement has to offer a world looking to produce more food in as sustainable a manner as possible, and why growing your own will never be more than a lovely hobby. I'll explain why small is not beautiful and why big is not necessarily bad.

You know all those great sacred cows of ethical foodie-ism? Well, I think the moment has come for you to say your good-byes. Give the old dears a hug. Celebrate how much you've shared together. Then wave them off for ever. Because I'm about to lead most of those sacred cows out into the market square and shoot them dead. I'm so sorry, but it has to be done.

People are occasionally surprised that I give a toss about all this. After all, I earn part of my living as a restaurant critic. I swan around on somebody else's dime, licking the plate clean, trying not to order pork belly too often and writing smartarse things about it all. I have run up three-figure bills for dinner that almost ran to four figures. I have taken plane trips simply to buy a specific brand of vinegar. When my kids want to mock me they recite a tweet – 'The dish had a hint of rosemary' – that I swear I never sent, but which very efficiently

marks me out as some ludicrous, gourmand fop who obsesses over tiny gustatory details. And all of this is, I suppose, true. I do, after all, earn enough money to be able to pay £31.78 for a chicken just for the hell of it.

But none of that precludes an interest in our food chain in general, and the ability of everybody in our society to eat as well as they need to. Indeed, I would argue that to be in such a privileged position and not to have an interest in these things would be not just obscene but contrary. Challenged once on this point by a journalist who was interviewing me, I compared it to issues of reading and writing. There was, I said, nothing contradictory about having a love for, say, the rich, expansive language of William Shakespeare, and having a keen interest in basic literacy standards in our schools. Indeed, without one you couldn't really have the other. I think the same applies to food.

So we need to get real about our food. If we really are to shape a New Gastronomics, we need to be honest and brave. And being those things means saying stuff that some people might find unpalatable. Which is exactly what I'm about to do.