

Sébastien Demorand invite us all, in the kitchen, at table, seated at the computer.

—Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Columbia University

Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper:

A Sweet-Sour Memoir of Eating in China

Fuschia Dunlop

New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008

320 pp. Illustrations. \$24.95 (cloth)

My love of Sichuan cuisine dates to the 1980s, when I spent a year in the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu. Thus I picked up Fuschia Dunlop's memoir eager for a trip down memory lane. She does not disappoint, describing the same sweetly sleepy city I remember and falling hard, as I did, for its timber-house-lined back lanes, warm and easy-going residents, and prickly ash and dried chili-spiked food. Soon after arriving at Sichuan University, Dunlop sets aside the studies that brought her there to devote her time to mining the offerings of hole-in-the-wall noodle huts, ramshackle open-air cafes, and roving vendors.

After attending the prestigious Sichuan Institute of Higher Cuisine, Dunlop returned to England and wrote *Land of Plenty: A Treasury of Authentic Sichuan Cooking*. Since its publication she has returned to China often, to research a second cookbook (*Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook: Recipes From Hunan Province*); on assignment for various publications; and as part of a personal quest to know more of its regional cuisines—journeys related chronologically in *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper*.

Richly detailed descriptions of gluttonous repasts aside, this book is about much more than satiating the appetite. "...I have discovered more about China in general through my food explorations than I ever did when I was interested in explicitly social or political issues" (p.154) Dunlop writes, and her story advocates for food as an entrée to culture. From her earliest days in China Dunlop's immersion in its cuisine parallels a growing engagement with its culture, even to the point that she questions her Britishness, a self-transformation undertaken by design: "If you want a real encounter with another culture, you have to abandon your cocoon" (p.152).

Before arriving in Chengdu Dunlop determined to transcend her Western-rooted culinary comfort zone to eat whatever the Chinese put in front of her. In a chapter entitled "The Rubber Factor" she introduces the Chinese gastronomic dimension of *kou gan*, or "mouth feel," and

asserts that to eat Chinese one must learn an appreciation for "...the textures most adored by Chinese gourmets: gristly, slithery, slimy, squelchy, crunchy, gloopy" (p.135). She also chronicles her growing "omnivorousness"—a Chinese-like willingness to eat almost anything including, on a trip to the southeastern province of Fujian, wild and possibly endangered species (not without remorse).

Cultural immersion, Dunlop finds, has its cons: "Sometimes these days, when I'm in a totally English environment...I feel like a foreigner, with my altered perspectives and traveler's tales" (p.187). Then there's the possibility that behavior cued to an adopted set of cultural parameters will be seen negatively when viewed through the prism of one's native culture. Such was the case when several critics blasted Dunlop for her *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook's* exploration of *Mao jia cai* (Mao family cuisine) and Little Red Book motif (here I confess empathy with the author; after all, a statue of a waving Mao sits on my desk). *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook's* theme is a product of Dunlop's altered cultural and historical landscape: "His [Mao's] image swings from the windscreen mirrors of buses and taxis in which I ride; it hangs on the sitting room walls of many of my friends. I'm used to him now, desensitized" (p.183).

As in tune as Dunlop is with Chinese mores, at times she seems shockingly blind to its social, political, and economic realities. Returning to Sichuan in 2004, she travels to a remote corner of the province with a Chinese friend in search of Sichuan peppercorns. The secretary of a local branch of the Chinese Communist Party helps her procure bags of high-grade specimens and invites her to a lavish banquet, an invitation she gladly accepts. Her friend is appalled: "What are you doing, accepting the hospitality of these local officials?...everything they give you, all that meat, all that wine, all that precious pepper, is paid for with money that they have screwed out of the peasants" (p.231). Dunlop is surprised, but why? Rural protests against corruption and excessive taxation had been well publicized by that point; in her extensive, low-to-the-ground travels around the country surely she had noticed the ostentatiously showy Party offices that sit in the middle of many an impoverished township. Then again, perhaps Dunlop suffered from the sort of myopia that can at times afflict food writers. She herself admits, "...corruption and poverty had been the last things on my mind as I sipped my soup and let the steamed pork belly melt in my mouth" (p.232).

Compared to the emotional heft of chapters set in Sichuan and Hunan, most others, in which Dunlop touches down briefly in unfamiliar territory, feel frothy. In Xinjiang she seeks out grilled camel meat and sees Han

Chinese in an unflattering light; in Beijing she reflects on the life of the last Chinese emperor and observes, like too many before her, that “Food has always been of exceptional importance in Chinese culture” (p.206). Having exhibited admirable chowhoundiness in Sichuan and Hunan—“I just go somewhere with interesting food and find out *everything* I can about it” (p.154)—she arrives in Hong Kong and goes positively limp, mustering little more than a soulless litany of scrumptious meals shared with hooked-in foodies and clichéd observations about the coexistence of traditional and modern, East and West.

Happily, there’s more than enough meat, as it were, to balance shortcomings. If Dunlop occasionally seems unnecessarily keen to prove her traveling and eating chops (journeys are “grueling, innard dishes “revolting”), she nonetheless recompenses with a generally absorbing read rich with astute observations and informative expositions on everything from Chinese knife techniques and the master-chef tradition of *liu yi shou* (“holding back a trick or two”) to the mark of a high-grade Sichuan peppercorn. She is a passionate, intelligent, curious, and extremely likeable gourmand. If the epilogue, in which she flies the Chinese omnivore flag into her mother’s Oxford kitchen, left me thinking non sequitur, neither did it deter me from hoping that Dunlop continues her culinary travels—in China or elsewhere—and tells all in a second memoir somewhere down the line.

—Robyn Eckhardt, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Spicing Up Britain: The Multicultural History of British Food
Panikos Panayi

London: Reaktion Books, 2008

283 pp. Illustrations. \$40.00 (boards)

Panikos Panayi, a professor of European history at De Montfort University, Leicester, has written extensively on immigration into Britain. Until now his primary concern has been with the ethnicity of the various groups involved, with racism, and, more generally, with the reactions of the then resident population. In this book Panayi examines the effect that migrants have had on the eating habits of the latter, taking the end of World War II as a pivotal point. He begins with an attempt to define British food, which proves to be surprisingly difficult. In the period before World War II cookery books often included dishes of foreign origin, without particular comment. Books specifically on foreign food were uncommon, although some (notably on Indian

food albeit adapted for preparation in England) were written to satisfy the nostalgia of returned colonial officials.

The major distinct migrant groups entering Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth century were the Irish, Jews (mainly East European), Germans, Italians, and Chinese. Panayi asserts that Irish immigrants exerted little effect on food culture because of the general similarity of their cuisine, but as English speakers their more general dispersal is surely of relevance. The other groups tended to occupy restricted areas and opened shops where they could buy the ingredients required for their particular cuisines and, in the case of the Jewish immigrants, that conformed to dietary laws. They also established places where they could eat out. By the end of the nineteenth century restaurants selling overtly foreign food to British customers were also to be found, especially in central London. Many of these were French or Italian; others were from farther afield, although there was an increasing tendency to westernize the menus.

A paradoxical effect of the rationing that was introduced in Britain during World War II and that continued until the mid-1950s was the general improvement in diet that ensued. The standard British diet was, nonetheless, dull and unvaried. The more diverse postwar immigration provided a potential wealth of new food experiences. Regarding the two most conspicuous groups Panayi has little explanation why West Indian immigrants exerted little influence, while the foods of those labeled “Indian” became widespread. Most so-called Indian restaurants were, in fact, run by Bangladeshis, who presented menus very definitely adapted to their perception of Western taste. Western clientele became sufficiently interested in this food to try to prepare it at home: it is an irony that many books written to satisfy this interest reproduce corrupted recipes. Only relatively recently has it been possible to sample the wonderful variety of regional cuisines in restaurants and find cookery books that accurately record them. That said, the fare provided in restaurants tends not to represent what is eaten at home; once concentrated communities of immigrants dispersed, the survival of their restaurants often depended on attracting new customers, and menus were accordingly adapted.

Eating out was and is affected by class and income rather than by ethnicity, but the establishment of restaurants and takeaways providing fast food at relatively low prices has done much to extend the exposure of the less well off to foreign food. The most numerous of these outlets are Chinese, Indian, and Italian, which mainly sell pizzas. Another, perhaps more commonplace takeaway establishment sells what has been taken to be the quintessentially British fish and chips. Panayi asserts, however, that this