

Chicago Sun-Times May 26, 2004

The Whole food experience // London chef shows how to enjoy every last bit of; --Fergus Henderson

BYLINE: Mike Thomas

SECTION: FOOD; NEWS; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 2438 words

Across the pond, in an old bacon smokehouse with five large chimneys, London's St. John restaurant is changing the course of gastronomy.

Co-founded and helmed by British chef Fergus Henderson, the vaunted decade-old establishment has become a must-stop for adventurous diners and world-renowned cooks who come to savor a vast array of eminently earthy delights: roast bone marrow and parsley salad, crispy pig's tails, warm pig's head, duck hearts on toast, deep-fried lamb's brains, jugged hare in rich blood sauce.

Over the years, Henderson has increasingly emerged as St. John's public face, garnering plaudits aplenty for bravely going where few, if any, of his culinary contemporaries have gone before — at least not with his degree of purism and commitment. "If you get nervous or frightened of your ingredients, they'll misbehave," he has said. "The ingredients know what you're thinking."

Thanks to the recent American publication of his cookbook *The Whole Beast: Nose to Tail Eating* (Ecco, \$19.95), whose 1999 overseas release as *Nose to Tail Eating: A Kind of British Cooking* sparked a cultish following among foodies and fellow chefs, his mainstream profile is higher than ever.

"I think he's starting a revolution of sorts," said ChicaGourmets! founder Don Newcomb, who with Chicago chef Paul Kahan hosted a mid-April event for Henderson at Avec restaurant. "I think

Americans are going to become much less squeamish about certain things."

"A really cool thing about [Fergus] is he's all about simplicity," Kahan said. "It's not froufrou food at St. John. It's all family-style, and it's all simply presented--mainly the product itself--not all this manipulation and stuff."

An elegant and strenuously understated chap with spherical specs and a ruddy complexion, Henderson is quietly pleased and somewhat unhinged by the sudden onslaught of attention. The most dazzling praise in this country comes from toque-clad peers who happily prostrate themselves before his altar.

"It's slightly bamboozling, yes. I feel it's very hard to live up to the things they've said about me. It's almost impossible," he said while in Chicago on a promotional tour. Still, he offered, the resultant pressure was "not unpleasant."

Dressed plainly in rumpled black pants and a semi-tucked white button-down shirt, Henderson sat behind a corner table in an empty downstairs dining room at North Side haute cuisine palace Charlie Trotter's, where he would soon be the guest of honor at a luncheon featuring several of his best-loved creations. It wasn't the first highbrow eat-a-thon of his tour, nor would it be the last. "Tautness around the midriff," he noted, was growing more pronounced.

"The book's about food I enjoy and take pleasure in," he explained, sipping from flute number two of late-morning bubbly and mopping brow moisture with a red hanky. "The idea is it's permanent food. It's not telling you how to re-create a dish done in a restaurant or something. I think...there's a sense of permanence to eating, and so food should express that kind of permanence. And hopefully this food does."

Aside from Trotter, Henderson's notable food-world fans include Anthony Bourdain, a Food Network favorite and the best-selling

author of *Kitchen Confidential* and *A Cook's Tour: Global Adventures in Extreme Cuisines*. In an adoring introduction to *The Whole Beast*, Bourdain declares Henderson's roast bone marrow and parsley salad to be his "always and forever choice for my 'Death Row Meal,' the last meal I'd choose to put in my mouth before they turned up the juice." (Henderson's response: "It's a very steadying dish, but I don't know if it'll quite cheer you up that much at the last moment.")

Throughout his extensive travels, Bourdain has savored/choked down such "Fear Factor"-ish fare as live cobra heart, porcupine, bear bile and bat. By comparison, he said, Henderson's concoctions are tame.

"He's a soulful cook, he's unpretentious," Bourdain said. "I've said elsewhere that he runs the restaurant that just about all the chefs I know in their heart of hearts would like to run. Meaning, he gets right to the center of what chefs feel makes a real good cook. ... The kind of care, attention and respect for what the British call the 'nasty bits,' the tough bits."

Knee-jerk revulsion to ingesting these so-called "nasty bits," Bourdain offered, is "largely an American problem."

"We used to eat like champions. If you look at menus at the turn of the century, we ate fearlessly. There were brains and kidneys and ox hearts on almost every menu. Almost all fancy restaurants and even middling restaurants had terrapin and turtle and raw shellfish. We ate like heroes. The postwar prosperity and highways really kind of ruined everything for us. Generations grew up not knowing that chicken had legs...So here is a guy with a real respect for ingredients, for humble ingredients. That guy handles tails and ears with real affection and real respect, and I think that automatically makes him a hero to anyone who loves cooking."

Superstar New York Chef Mario Batali is a Henderson groupie as

well. In fact, he has joked (presumably) of torching his wildly popular New York eatery Babbo "for pretending to be a restaurant" and moving London-ward "to heed the master's call."

"I have tasted Fergus' cooking and it is the future of rock 'n roll," said Batali, who some weeks ago feted Henderson with a gourmet bash that featured fried lamb's brains in salsa verde, testa with mustard, smoked mackerel pate, bone marrow salad, and, of course, pig's tails. On a personal front, Batali added, "I find his modesty and obvious intelligence most striking, but he's a funny f--- too."

A funny f----- indeed.

Back at Trotter's granite counter-topped television kitchen, where the chef/owner tapes PBS cooking shows every so often, a small invite-only group assembled to nibble assorted canapés — duck hearts on toast, jellied tripe, cured venison and celeriac — and to meet the conjurer of these curious treats. Recounting a lunch trip to St. John, Trotter called the outing "a stunning, stunning experience."

"I was blown away," he went on. "And I said, 'This guy gets it.' It's exciting food, and it's food that's very near and dear to my heart because, as you know...we often incorporate elements of the pig into our preparations. Pigs' feet here, pigs' tails there, a snout, an ear. Different things. But Fergus takes it to a high art."

He then introduced Henderson, who himself seemed a bit blown away. Here was yet another celebrated colleague publicly genuflecting before him, and as usual he was helpless to stop it. Not that he would if he could, mind you. Still, it's heady stuff for one who began cooking on a whim while training to be an architect.

"It's quite hard to live up to things like what Charlie said," he softly told the assemblage. Then everyone retired to an upstairs space,

where course after course was presented as edible artwork and prefaced by comments from Trotter and member of his kitchen staff. Following their boss's lead, they too gushed about the man of the hour and his tasty victuals.

Henderson, who earlier had stood in the restaurant's famously well-run kitchen and bemusedly watched as his normally hearty dishes were "Trotterized," sat at a long table up front, chatting with neighbors and absorbing compliments as best he could. At one point, his genial head chef Edwin ("Ed") Lewis, sporting casual garb and multiple piercings (including a double-whammy on one eyebrow), explained how best to prepare warm pig's head, a St. John staple. It went something like this:

"Buy a pig's head. Take the ears off and use those for something else. Stick it in a brine bucket of very salty water for five days or a week. Lift it out, soak it for 24 hours in cold water--changing it a couple of times. Then put it in a very big pot, because pig's heads can be very big. Add some carrots, onions, celery, hard herbs, thyme, rosemary, sage, a bottle of wine, peppercorns. Bring it to a boil, give it a good skim and leave it on the stove for three-and-a-half hours, literally until the flesh is just falling away from the bone. Then ever so gently, lift the head out of the pot, lift the vegetables out of the liquid, pass the liquid, reduce it maybe by about half. Then shred all the meat off the head, chop it up, and set it in a tureen, combining it with the reduced liquor from the pot."

The first Trotter's dining room oratory of its kind, to be sure.

"The notion of the whole beast, as well as using the whole animal, is appreciating the indigenous seasons and ingredients," Henderson said. "It's sort of holistic, not wanting to sound too New Age--I'm far from New Age." His eyes widened, as they often do, at the very thought.

St. John, whose sister restaurant St. John Bread and Wine opened

last spring, deals directly with farms that supply them with only the finest specimens, many of which are given names. "We know what the animal's been eating or where it's from or which way the wind's blowing," Henderson said, explaining that a content creature is a tasty one, too. "The mood kind of transfers itself all the way along. So if the animal's happy, and as long as your chefs are happy, I think ... you're going to imbibe some sort of happiness as the consumer, the eater."

"You don't want it to just be something in a field that has a blue ear tag with a number written on it [that's] visited by a vet once a week," said Lewis. "We don't like that."

Born 40 years ago in London, the self-taught Henderson was raised in a food-centric household. Lancashire-born "Mum" cooked lots. Dad ate lots — tripe and onions and so forth. Inevitably, motherly advice laid the foundation for what would someday become his life's passion.

"She had a very healthy approach to cooking and she taught me a few essential things like, When you boil meat it's vital that it boils very slow--doesn't even boil, it simmers," recalled Henderson, now a husband and a father of three. "We travelled much and ate well, so I learned a lot. It was good. In a way, the white tablecloth kept the family together longer than most families. It still brings us together."

Though lately, he mused, Mum "seems to have gone a bit peculiar" when cooking for her lauded son. "She gets anxious when she cooks for me," Henderson said, "because she taught me. So it's very strange that she should be anxious ... I'm still [the same] Fergus Henderson who I was before. But anyway."

The next afternoon, Henderson and head chef Lewis made an appearance at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago to deliver a brief presentation on crispy pig's tails and bone marrow.

Shortly before it began, the duo stood in a large kitchen looking mildly dismayed. "A few glitches," Henderson revealed. For one, the tails were neither long nor curly, and thus lacked "that strange purgatory between flesh and fat." And the veal bones were all wrong. Unusable, in fact, "I'll have to wing it," he said.

In a nearby classroom, to which implements and pans of prepped pigs' tails had been moved, the visiting dignitaries stood behind a small demo grill and got right to it, dusting the delicacies in flour, rolling them in egg-and-mustard mix, coating them with breadcrumbs, frying them in butter. Henderson, who is afflicted with Parkinson's disease that has rendered his left side "slightly ropey," left Lewis to the hands-on chores while he did wry color commentary for the standing-room-only crowd. Whispered a young lady up front, "This guy rules."

Prefacing his first-ever student lecture with some full disclosure, Henderson told the rapt chefs-in-training that bone marrow is a "pale, milky colored, soothing delight. Unfortunately, that's not what we have this afternoon. But we'll conjure that up." Chortles all around.

As for the tails, "They seem to have [lopped] them here, not taking into account their gastronomic futures. So what we have are pig stumps." That, too, got laughs.

The remainder of his session was consumed with talk of tail shaving and properly ground breadcrumbs (the finer, the better), cooking precautions ("You know how bacon spits? These really spit. So look lively."), middle marrow ("pure, creamy, opaque fat, which we all know is a joy") and parsley chopping ("You're not beating it into submission. You're letting it know you're in charge. It doesn't have the will to struggle as parsley.")

When Henderson wished to communicate the adding of gusto, flavor, oomph, he employed the term "Nyeh!", a more genteel

form of Emeril Lagasse's "Bam!" Toward the end, Lewis doled out tails and marrow-less parsley salad for sampling purposes. Yummy sounds were heard.

"Look for happy meat," Henderson told his pupils in closing. Also, this: "Sometimes, take a breather and have some fresh air and you'll come back feeling better."

It had been a whirlwind couple of days--fancy luncheon, book signing, Art Institute event, cooking class--and the master himself required just such a breather--minus, as it were, the fresh air. Tomorrow, another lecture, another luncheon.

At present, he craved smokes and booze and R&R, so it was off to Garrett Ripley's on North Clark for puffing and quaffing and kicking back. After much nicotine absorption, a few Tanqueray-tonics, and some wide-ranging conversation, he and Lewis left to gorge on goat-cheese stuffed squash blossom and parchment-steamed Alaskan halibut and rack of Australian baby lamb at Salpicon Mexican restaurant on Wells. Presumably, midriff tautness increased.

Less than 24 hours later they flew to New York, where over the next few days, disciples Bourdain and Batali presided over gluttonous tributes. More supplication. More adulation. More gorging. As ever, our reluctant hero was humbled and flustered by their joyous fussing.

After all, the beast is a far bigger star.

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