

Food & Drink

Book plots, film plots, political plots and lost plots: See Declan Lynch, page 23

BRENDAN BITES

The advice this week (after a life-changing risotto experience) is: always buy good ingredients



JUST allow me another word about Italy and I promise that'll be the end of it for a while.

Fergus MacCabe, the red-haired olive farmer of Tuscany, brought me to the supermarket one day. The shop was owned, perhaps not surprisingly, by Silvio Berlusconi and, as regards decor, it seemed a pretty standard shop, the equivalent of our Dunnes or Tesco, except for the food.

The produce was superb in this bog-standard shop and the bog-standard people were cruising around like connoisseurs, picking the best of everything and crankily going through cheeses and meats and whatnot to pick the finest.

Nothing surprising there you think, except that go to your bog-standard Irish shop and you simply won't find the ordinary people buying such good, fresh, healthy produce.

Fergus was explaining to me that he thinks the difference is that there is no class system in Italy regarding food. From the poorest right up, people all buy the best possible food they can for their families, spending as much money as they can on grub and using anything that's left over for everything else.

In Ireland, you suspect, booze or other issues might

take precedence over food. You'll see people economising to save a euro on meat and then going out that night and drinking 10 pints.

Of course, the whole thing is made easier for the Italians by the omnipresent nature of good food and the relatively knockdown prices of the good stuff in Italy compared to here.

Presumably, it makes no sense for many Italians to buy frozen food when they can get the best of fresh produce for the same price.

I mention all this because I had a few life-changing risotto experiences in Italy and I became determined to develop a good risotto recipe of my own, something closer to the creamy but loose Italian version — rather than the stodgy we tend to get here. And I've done it and I realised in doing it that we've got far too fussy about how we cook our food and that the answer to good grub is good ingredients.

A good winter dish, for example, need only include one or two basic ideas as long as the stuff going in is good. And so I've come to the conclusion, hardly unique, that we should all be doing less fussy cooking and more fussy buying.

Throw away the recipe book once you've mastered the basic techniques, go with what you feel and create

food to your own tastes. But just do it with good stuff. If the ingredients speak for themselves you shouldn't need to fanny around with them too much.

Perhaps because I've been using some good stuff smuggled in from Italy I've found that the most basic risotto or omlette or fritata or pasta dish can be simply and beautifully done with the right stuff.

In order for people to start buying the right stuff however, the right stuff needs to be reasonably affordable. At the moment we have a regimented class system when it comes to food.

There are the frozen food classes, the reasonable meat and two veg classes and then the organic, hand-reared, artisan-buying classes (usually people without children).

If the good food revolution is to truly take off and gain momentum it needs to be open to everyone. Because people will respond to quality if they reasonably can.

On a final note I would suggest that part of the reason good produce is so cheap in Italy is because every spare inch of ground appears to be taken up with a market garden or a chicken run or an olive grove or whatever.

Perhaps when you grow more good produce it becomes that bit cheaper and more affordable and the market adjusts to soak it up. And maybe I'm being a bit simplistic but it seems to me that everyone benefits.

Brendan O'Connor

Brendanbites@unison.independent.ie

Where I'd eat my last meal

Lucinda O'Sullivan had a love-in at the new Rasam Indian restaurant where the food . . . and the prices . . . are good

THERE was quite a fuss in the culinary world a couple of years ago when, for the very first time, a Michelin star was awarded to an Indian restaurant — the Tamarind, in London.

The ground-breaking chef was Atul Kochhar who subsequently opened his own restaurant, Benares, in Berkeley Square. This article however is not about Atul Kochhar, but about the new wave of Indian food, and the man who has made such an impact on this country's Indian food scene — Nisheeth Tak.

Since arriving in Ireland, Nisheeth Tak has cut a swathe through the old-style curry house and consigned it to history (for foodies anyway). He was involved in the opening of Poppadom in Rathgar, introducing Irish palates to the regional tastes of India. He was also involved, along with Ash-eesh Dewan, in setting up Jai-pur in Sth Great Georges Street.

Last week they opened Rasam, this time in partnership with Rangan Arulchelvan. It's in the food-friendly village of Glashule, just over the Eagle House Pub.

Once through Rasam's doorway you are transported into a world of gleaming glass, silver elephants and big silver-plated doors — all replicas from an Indian Palace. You follow the ankle-high candles into a smart waiting area complete with bar, brown leather sofas and lovely beaten silver tables. In the 80-seater dining area, the whole effect is subtle and smart. There is a cocoon-like feel of being away from it all — helped by the superbly courteous service.

Executive chef Pankaj Gupta has just arrived to take up position from India, where he was executive chef with the five-star Oberoi Hotel group and more recently at the luxurious Oberoi Rajvilas in Jaipur. Pankaj Gupta trained at the same catering college in Bombay as Atul Kochhar and his menu is interesting and stimulating, exuding exotic local spices brought directly from India.

Starters range from €5/€10



Illustration: Jim Cogan

and we had a selection between us which were absolutely knockout; sarson ka salmon from Goa in south India was freshly-pounded mustard-marinated salmon fillet wrapped in bacon and lightly cooked in the clay oven. This was absolutely moist, pink and luscious. Duck kathi kebab from Pondicherry was wine-marinated breast of duck stirfried with tomatoes, onions and peppers, rolled in orange-flavoured roomali roti — handkerchief bread made from whole wheat flour.

If I had a last meal choice it would definitely include mirchi bada aur khasta kachori — I know, just say "mirchi" and I am sure they will know what you mean. It is a Rajasthani dish of golden fried potato stuffed green chilli involving flaky pastry and spiced lentil filling — crispy, soft, spicy, hot, and yummy in each and every bite.

Celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay is a big fan of Atul

Kochhar's marinated lamb chops, but I bet he hasn't tasted Pankaj Gupta's which have been marinated in sweet and pungent peepla (a root from the peepal tree in Rajasthan) and chini (a clove-like spice). Just divine.

Mainers run from €14.50 to €19 but Rasam are also doing thalis (very traditional to India) which are served on big silver platters and basically offer a selection of various dishes. This is just the sort of thing that appeals to me — a little of lots of things.

The shakahari thali (at €16) is designed for the vegetarian, with lentils, leafy greens and vegetables; whilst the mansahari thali (at €22) is for the carnivores, with a selection of lamb, fish, chicken, lentil and leafy greens. Both come with steamed rice, raita, chutney and Indian bread.

Being a party of four, we decided to try a selection — because we didn't want to miss a single dish. We had a bowl of

coral coloured choosa khaas makhni from old Delhi, which is the authentically rich, creamy and delicious Indian version of the ubiquitous English dish of chicken tikka masala.

From Awadh we had khus ka gosht — tender pieces of lamb infused with poppy seed and betel plant roots and bay-leaf. Mirish malu was India's challenge to Rick Stein — perfect cubes of monkfish cooked in coconut milk, a subtle influence of green chilli, rampe leaves and sweet and sour tamarind.

From Chittor we had teekha gosht — clove-smoked lamb curry cooked in chilli and tomato gravy — earthy and fiery.

Indian menus are great for vegetarians and Rasam has a great selection of side dishes (priced between €4/€6.50), like the khumb palak kofta — dumplings of mushrooms, spinach, cottage cheese and ginger simmered in a fenu-

greek scented tomato gravy; bagare baingan from Hyderabad — baby aubergine cooked in a gravy of peanuts, sesame, poppy and coriander seeds, tamarind and chilli.

We had bhindi bhujia from Lucknow — a bowl of chopped okra tossed with fresh ginger, garlic, cumin, green chilli and fresh coriander finished with lime juice. Then, to make sure we had our greens, we ordered chonka patta gobhi from Jaffna — simply delicious stir-fried cabbage greens flavoured with mustard seeds, curry leaves and lime juice. And on top of all this was a bowl of rice that was lighter than light. Prices are reasonable too when it comes to rice and breads, which can silently run bills up, with €1/€2 being the tops.

For some people puddings are the main attraction and they are catered for at Rasam with lychee kulfi — a frozen reduced-milk ice cream enriched with saffron and lychee, served with falooda, a steamed cornflour vermicelli. Or try the apple jalebi — batter-fried sliced apples dusted with sugar and cinnamon served with rose petal ice-cream — while shahi tukra is an Indian version of bread pudding for the boarding school boy.

Sinful eaters will love the walnut brownie with chocolate fudge sauce and goodie-goodies should go for the lovely selection of cool, sliced fresh fruit — and they are all priced at €5.

Wines are very competitively priced between €16 to €29 for white wines and €16 to €39 for reds, but we indulged ourselves somewhat with Döpf & Irion Gewurztraminer at €24 and a superb Barolo Brunate at €39 — both cheaper at those prices than in many other restaurants. A better taste of India.

Rasam, 18/19 Glashule Road, Glashule, Dun Laoghaire, Co Dublin. Tel: 01-2300600 Contact Lucinda O'Sullivan at lucindaos@eircom.net

VINO VERITAS

To celebrate a centenary

IT IS one of the great evocative names of Burgundy but if you mention to the aficionados of Nuits-Saint-Georges that you have just tasted a white Nuits they might well look doubtful. The production of white wine in this Cote d'Or appellation is so tiny that some reference books don't mention it at all.

Lupe-Cholet, a company that owns wineries in Nuits as well as Chablis and elsewhere in Burgundy, has just celebrated its centenary, and some of us had a rare opportunity to taste Les Terrasses du Chateau 2001, a white Nuits-Saint-Georges, in the always comforting atmosphere of Roly's Bistro in Ballsbridge.

This wine is, naturally, 100

per cent chardonnay and has a deliciously dry style, not unlike a Chablis, but with a round and full feeling that is distinctive and impressive. They only made about 600 bottles of that vintage (the 2002 is bigger) and it retails at €42 or so.

Lupe-Cholet's Chablis, Chateau de Viviers 2002, €15.50, and is not as austere as many wines of that great area, giving instead full, ripe fruit and a flinty mineral quality; a very distinctive Chablis, and drinking well.

With the Puligny-Montrachet 1997 we're up to €40.49, though dedicated lovers of the products of one of the world's great white wine villages will not balk at that. Lovely, deep Burgundy flavours here, perhaps

a bit more elusive and elegantly dry than the other two whites.

Lupe-Cholet Fleurie 2002 is a fruity, easy-going red from one of the most popular Beaujolais crus and retails at around €15. With Chateau Gris 1996, a Premier Cru Nuits-Saint-George, we are into delicate, perfumed pinot noir territory; 1996 was a great year in Burgundy and this wine, though drinking beautifully already, has years of life in it (€35).

Lupe-Cholet wines are imported by Edward Dillon and Co and are available in some Tesco branches (Merrion, Bloomfield, Stillorgan); O'Brien's chain; some Cheers outlets and other good off-licences.

Ronan Farren

Christmas pud: an idiot's guide

Puddings are easy-peasy, according to **Brenda Costigan**. So just read on . . .

THE making of a pudding is simplicity itself — it won't collapse like a cake might.

FRUIT AND NUT PUDDING

This delicious recipe is different from my lovely rich plum pudding (see below); it uses less fruit. Also, in this recipe the butter and sugar are beaten together like a cake mixture, resulting in a lovely texture. As well as the usual collection of dried fruit this mixture includes toasted hazelnuts. Ideally, the fruit should be left steeping in the alcohol and juices for a day or two before assembling and steaming. Makes one 1.75k/3lb pudding.

You will need:

150g (5oz) each raisins and sultanas
110g (4oz) dates, chopped
100g carton glace cherries, halved
110g (4oz) ready-to-eat dried apricots, chopped
4 tablespoons brandy or whiskey
grated rind (zest only — avoid the white pith) and juice of 1 lemon and 1 orange
75g (3oz) skinned hazelnuts, toasted and chopped
110g (4oz) self-raising flour
half teaspoon each ground nutmeg, ginger and cinnamon
1 level teaspoon mixed spice
150g (5oz) butter (at room temperature)
150g (5oz) brown sugar (demerara or muscovado)
3 eggs, lightly beaten
1 eating apple, peeled, cored and grated
75g (3oz) fresh white breadcrumbs

Mix together the raisins, sultanas, dates, cherries and apricots in a bowl. Add the brandy and the grated rind and juices from the lemon and



RICH festive fruits. Photo: Tony Gavin

orange. Stir, cover and leave overnight. Prepare the pudding bowl by greasing thoroughly with butter and line the base with a circle of baking parchment.

Next day mix the chopped hazelnuts through the fruit. Sift together the flour and spices. In a separate bowl beat together the butter and sugar and then beat in the eggs, adding some of the sifted flour and spices. Stir in the remaining flour. Mix the grated apple through the mixture followed by the fruit and nut mixture and finally the breadcrumbs. Mix well and turn into prepared pudding bowl. Cover bowl with its own lid, or with a double layer of buttered baking parchment tied in place with string.

Steam pudding in a steamer over a saucepan of gently boiling water. If preferred the pudding can be cooked in the saucepan of gently boiling water. The water should come two-thirds of the way up the sides of the bowl. (I like to stand the bowl on a metal scone cutter, or something similar, to lift it up from being in direct contact

with the bottom of the saucepan). Constantly check the level of water and keep topping up when necessary with more boiling water. Cook for 3 hours. The pudding can be cooked longer; the longer a pudding is cooked the darker it gets — but do remember this is not a very dark mixture. Recover the cooked pudding with fresh baking parchment and store in a cool, dry place. On the day of serving steam again for about 1 hour.

SUPER PLUM PUDDING

Based on my mother's wonderful recipe, this is a very fruity pudding that can be stored for months. The list of ingredients is long, and so to simplify it, I divide the ingredients into three bowls.

Bowl one: The fruit mixture. You will need:

225g (8oz) raisins
225g (8oz) sultanas, 110g (4oz) ready soaked apricots or prunes, chopped
1 carton (100g) chopped mixed peel
1 carton (100g) glace cherries, chopped
110g (4oz) figs, chopped
110g (4oz) dates, chopped

1 packet (100g) blanched almonds, chopped coarsely (optional)
half a medium cooking apple, peeled and grated
grated rind of half a lemon

Bowl two: Mainly dry ingredients. You will need:

110g (4oz) flour (not self-raising)
110g (4oz) brown sugar (demerara)
110g (4oz) suet (or use 110g (4oz) butter or margarine, see note)
110g (4oz) breadcrumbs
about 1 rounded teaspoon each of cinnamon, nutmeg and ground cloves

Note: If using the butter or margarine, cut it into small lumps and rub it through the flour and sugar until like fine breadcrumbs, then add in the breadcrumbs and spices.

Bowl three: The liquid ingredients. You will need:

3 large eggs
150ml (quarter pt) stout
2-3 tablespoons whiskey
juice half lemon

To assemble: Using a large bowl (or basin), empty in the contents of bowls one and two and mix them together. Then add in the contents of bowl three. Stir thoroughly, let everyone have a turn. Put the mixture into a well-greased pudding bowl (1.75 litre/3pt size). Cover the top of the bowl with a double layer of baking parchment (greased on the side nearest to the pudding), making a fold (pleat) down the centre as this allows for the expansion of steam inside. To cook: steam or boil as directed in the previous recipe, except cook for 5-6 hours.

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