

## SEVENTH SYMPOSIUM OF AUSTRALIAN GASTRONOMY

National Gallery of Australia Canberra, 1993

### FOOD AND ART - CORPOREAL VERSUS SURREAL.

#### Report on the Banquet by Cherry Ripe

"Like being in a Bunuel film," was how food legend Claudia Roden described it, "with people in ball dress, and the entrails of 30 animals spread out all over the table."

You wouldn't have thought people could get so worked up about a dinner, but it was possibly the most controversial meal I have ever been to: people who weren't there were still talking about it weeks later. It inspired passionate argument, and polarised those that attended it: you either loved it or hated it. (I loved it.) Many simply misunderstood it. Some even left - possibly affronted? - before its climax, only to miss the highpoint of the drama (for it was nothing if not dramatic). It forced people to confront the relationship between food and art.

One word - a riddle - was supposed to sum it up.

Held at the National Gallery in Canberra, it was the climax of the recent (seventh) Symposium of Australian Gastronomy. It was staged for an audience of sophisticated palateers who had come together for three days for the sole purpose of discussing food - and eating. There were chefs, restaurateurs, numerous food writers (including colleague Di Holuigue) editors of food books and magazines, as well as the food literati (Roden, Marion Halligan, Stephanie Alexander).

Devised by Sydney restaurateur Gay Bilson and chef Janni Kyritsis, this was no mere 'meal' - it was a banquet, and different criteria apply. A banquet by definition is a **supra-ordinary** event, a "sumptuous entertainment of food and drink" according to the Shorter Oxford.

That it would be dramatic should have come as no surprise: the final banquets at the end of these Gastronomy Symposia are usually memorable, but this one was even more extraordinary than most, even by comparison with Bilson's previous efforts, such as the fund-raising Opera Gastronomica two years ago.

It started ordinarily enough. We'd all been guided in a private viewing around the Surrealist exhibition - subtitled *Revolution by Night* - upstairs, and were finally lead down a steep flight of stairs, to a long narrow room that is usually the Gallery's coffee shop. As we turned the corner at the

bottom of the stairs, we were confronted by a forty metre (40 m) long table literally covered in tripe - a table cloth of animal stomachs.

If the original intention of surrealism was to shock people out of their complacency, the "confrontation" offered by this spectacle was entirely consistent with - and the perfect metaphor for - the initial reaction to the paintings upstairs: it made some feel nauseous.

Bare-torsoed waiters, bandaged diagonally across their hearts, quickly dispatched the offending table cloth - rolled it up and whipped it away - leaving a bare canvas on which the dinner would unfold.

As cutlery and glasses appeared, people began to ponder what word would sum up this obviously thematic and conceptual dinner.

A sparkling red burgundy set the tone: only red wine was served throughout the meal. First, out came a tartare of beef - strips, rather than mince - wound round a pullet's egg yolk, with capers and jugs of olive oil. Then followed a much reduced beef consommé, accompanied by marrow bones served separately in a large oval dish - surmounted by one single gilded marrowbone. (This, according to Bilson, was a reference to John Donne's line, "a bracelet of bright hair about the bone".)

Next appeared a dish of two pieces of crispy fish skin, from two different fish, one freshwater (the spotty brook trout), the other an ocean (King George Whiting) garnished with a cucumber and seaweed salad.

Then came individual black puddings - blood sausages - with apple. Then a rare-roasted pigeon breast, set on a bed of caramelised red cabbage, and garnished with skewered duck and pigeon hearts, resembling nipples.

A theme began to emerge. We'd eaten flesh, bone, skin, heart. Did it relate to the exhibition upstairs? If so was this "corporeal" - rather than Surreal?

Next, perhaps appropriately since Dali's "melting watches" were apparently inspired by ripe cheese (*Torta del Casar* - a delicious, very runny Spanish cheese)- came goats' cheese interleaved in puff pastry. (Milk?)

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These were just the savoury courses: there was more to come.

After a short interval, all eighty diners were blindfolded. The bandaged-torsoed waiters (they were all men) appeared with strips of white sheet, and tied them around everyone's eyes - even Margaret Whitlam's.

A bandaged (mummified?) body was borne to the table, and laid down in the middle. This was Bilson's daughter, the diminutive Sido, who has played a central role in many of Bilson's banquets.

In a flurry of activity, with all the kitchen staff called on to help, her supine body was buried - hidden - under a mound of black grapes, and the table strewn with yet more grapes, figs and fruit breads - a type of foccaccia with sultanas and walnuts - glazed with plum jelly: this was dessert.

Then the blindfolds were removed. At this point Sido rose from under the mound of grapes like a corpse coming to life, to be borne away by the waiters, leaving the laden table to be devoured.

In another break with convention, just as diners were preparing to rise and leave, the menus were presented. Appropriately, they were printed in as close to blood-coloured ink as Bilson could find. They read: "Stomach, Egg, Flesh, Bone, Skin, Blood, Heart, Milk, Fruit, Virgin's Breasts, Dead Men's Bones". (These two last were biscuits served with coffee.) Corporeal indeed.

The rumour that Gay had wanted to use her own blood for the blood sausage only served to heighten the meal's more dramatic and confronting aspects. (Would that have made us cannibals?)

This was a meal that forced one to question the relationship between food and art. Food and art inspire contradictory emotional responses: art can be challenging, while food almost never is. Food by definition is designed to be welcoming, soothing, and comforting, yet this was confrontational food - in which there was an inherent paradox. Thus many present were too challenged by it - misunderstood it, even. They had anticipated food as 'nurture' - warm, succour-giving - not 'food as art' - dramatic, conceptual and challenging.

This dinner assumed not only a level of artistic sensibility in the diner, but a level of gustatory sophistication: it was not for the inexperienced (given that these were Gastronomy Symposiasts, a not unfair assumption) nor the faint of heart, who might blanch at consuming marrow bones, or even blood sausage.

A telling comment from one diner verged on hypocrisy, referring to the exhibition upstairs: 'I can cope with it behind glass but not on the table'.

Objections to it were that it did not work as a menu; that there were too many courses; that it was too rich; that the courses did not go together, one after the other; that you would never have ordered such a succession of dishes - nor so many of them to follow each other - had you been choosing from a menu. But that was hardly the point: it was after all a banquet.

Certainly you couldn't fault any of the individual dishes on their execution, despite the logistical nightmares involved. Turned out of a tiny tent in the gallery's courtyard, by a team of six cooks, and six waiters, each dish was superbly crafted. Perhaps, more interestingly, it was unlike any banquet at the end of a similar event anywhere in the world, not just in its execution, but in its conceptualisation.

Despite the controversy, Bilson claims she did not devise it to be deliberately confrontational. A past master in such conceptualisations, had she anticipated such passionate responses?

"Under the aegis of the Symposium," she avers, "one is allowed to take a meal further than one normally can. One presumes an intelligent and open audience. In an age of cholesterol-consciousness and righteous vegetarianism, it was the last unashamed carnivorous meal."

One thing's for sure: it will be difficult - if not impossible - to top it, in Adelaide next time around.