

NINTH SYMPOSIUM OF AUSTRALIAN GASTRONOMY

SYDNEY, 1996

Report by Barbara Santich

Food, said Alan Saunders in his summing up of the proceedings of the Ninth Symposium of Australian Gastronomy, can be linked with almost anything to yield a stimulating subject for debate and discussion - intimating that the multi-faceted, trans-disciplinary, infinitely complex subject of food has the power to open minds and imaginations to a diversity of interpretations and perspectives.

Initial information about this Ninth Symposium suggested that its theme, Food and Power, could be examined by looking at various sources of power (in the world, the state and the household); at sites of power (the body and the soul); and at the promises of today's powers in the foods of the future. Meal planning for the Symposium also took account of ideas of power: thus the Ascension Day pie, a variation of a traditional Ascension Day dish on the Greek island of Cephalonia, hinting at the power of the Church; a sous-vide Futurist Dinner, featuring breast of artificially inseminated duck and a nutrient composition chart; a powerfully-flavoured Thai lunch, picnic style; and a prison-style menu in an ex-prison, where power was held by those who wielded the ladles (it might have been a prison-style menu - corned hogget, pease pudding, bread and dripping, baked custard - but prisoners would never have had it so good!).

Keynote speaker was Professor Bruce Kraig, whose book *Cuisines of Hidden Mexico* was launched at the symposium. Together with examples of food used as a means of control in ancient societies and in later industrial societies, he discussed the power associated with foods carrying contemporary symbolic meanings and the control of these symbols - the image of American culture, the American dream, associated with fast foods, American style, owned and controlled by multinational corporations.

While probably a majority of papers saw food and power in a context of authority and control (power over - over Nature and the environment, over commodities and their trade, over those in penal institutions, over those adhering to particular religions), several others saw power as an enabling force. Whether or not they exercised it, consumers could be seen as having the power to accept or reject new foods, be it simply a new variety of apple or a genetically-engineered one; and by demonstrating preferences, they had power (or potential) to change food production practices in such a way as to improve the environment. The food industry has the power, through technology, to produce food 'analogues' (such as synthetic cheese) which have almost no relation to the originals. Flavour (of food) has the power to give pleasure, and in the case of fragrance, according to Max Lake, less (fragrance) is more (enjoyment). In Japan, according to Richard Hosking, sugar has the power to please, to placate, and many other foods are

believed to have power to please the gods. And absolute power, in the hands of Louis XIV, enabled many improvements to be made in gardening and horticulture, through the innovations of Jean de la Quintinie. Alicia Rios' multi-sensory 'Mediterranean Symphony of the Senses' demonstrated the power of aromas, more than any other sensory stimuli, to evoke memories and associations.

As is now a tradition, the final banquet allied performance and culinary arts and, with a diversity of references, emphasised the power of the church, of the female sex (and the power of these belly dancers over their bodies) and the male sex, of myth and tradition and of the subverting of all of these in a finale worthy of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.