

Leben



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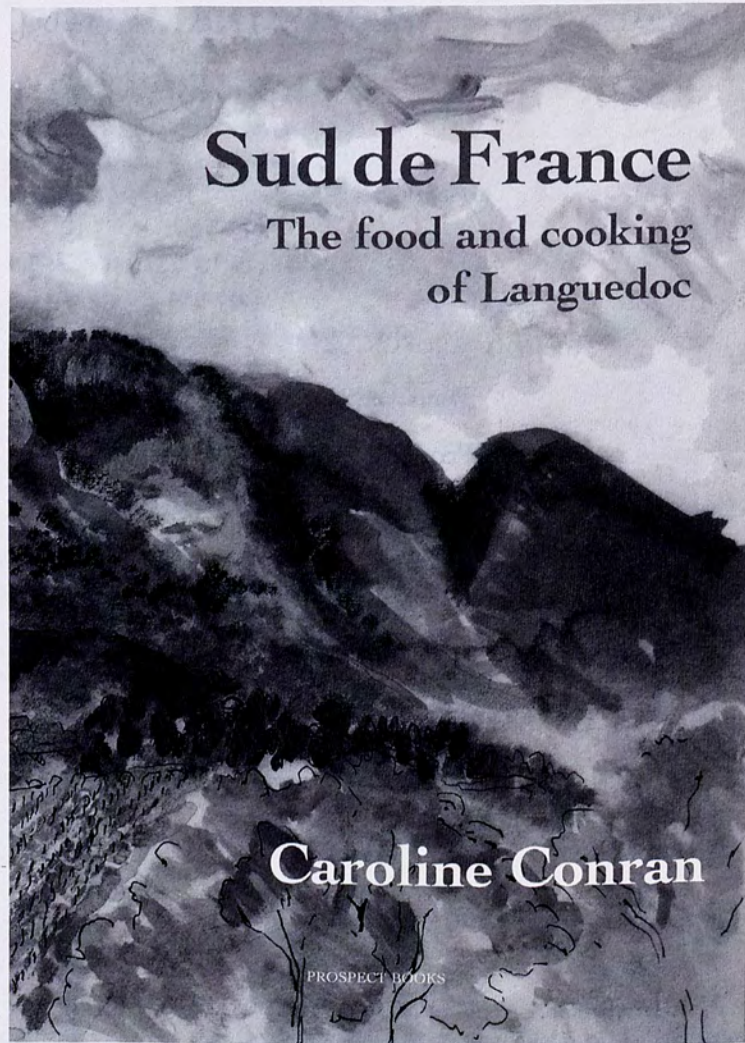
PPC 98

PPC BOOKS

PPC 98

WURST





We are so inexpressably pleased at Caroline Conran's book having been named Food Book of the Year both by the André Simon Trustees and the judges of the new Fortnum and Mason Food and Drink Awards that we had to make it our frontispiece, albeit in black and white. The painting, of course, is by Caroline herself.

Petits Propos Culinaires 98

Essays and notes on food, cookery and cookery books



Prospect Books, July 2013

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

MARY-ANNE BOERMANS was a finalist in the 2011 series of *The Great British Bake Off* and is now a successful food blogger. She has been cooking and baking for more than 40 years. She is passionate about home cooking and has amassed a library of over 900 cookery books, with an emphasis on traditional British recipes. Her book *Great British Bakes: Forgotten Treasures for Modern Bakers* will be published in November by Square Peg. Mary-Anne lives in Worcestershire with her husband and daughter.

IRINA DUMITRESCU teaches medieval literature at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Her essay 'Tasting Texas,' on culinary fusion in the Lone Star State, appeared in the *Southwest Review*.

GERALDENE HOLT is a very senior lady in the *galère* of English cookery writers. Her books on cakes are legendary, as is her garden in southern France, where she lives when she is not in Oxford.

BARAK KUSHNER teaches modern Japanese history in the Faculty of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies (formerly the Faculty of Oriental Studies) at the University of Cambridge and has a PhD in History from Princeton University. He has written lots on Japanese history and of course, *Slurp!*, see below.

STEVEN D.P. RICHARDSON has worked fishing trawlers, tutored medieval history, been employed as a numismatist, and as an Associate Producer in arts and history television. Based in London, he is now a freelance writer and the author of the cookery app, *telchef*.

WILLIAM SAYERS is Adjunct Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at Cornell University. He writes on medieval western European languages and literature and works in collection development in the Cornell University Library system.

MICHAEL POLLAN

In the book reviews you will find Tim Harris's enthusiastic notice of Michael Pollan's new book *Cooked*. We were amused to read in the *Guardian* round-up of media reviews of Giles Coren's slightly heterodox opinion of this year's great guru of food. Michael Pollan is a professor of journalism. His books are part of that great American tradition of non-fiction writing that steers a course between investigation, populism and speculative thought. For many of us, our first encounter with it as teenagers was possibly Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders*. Another example I remember fondly is Tracy Kidder's *House*. What marks most of these books is a certain prolixity, as well as a thoroughness in their wanderings around their chosen subject. When it's well done, it is astonishingly instructive, and I for one take my hat off to Pollan's exposé of corn and corn syrup in American processed foods as a great example of a clear objective masterfully executed. However, although Coren is wrong to imply that Pollan is turgid (although I would agree he's somewhat long-winded), he is absolutely bang on the money that Pollan's conclusions are banal in the extreme and if anyone found them arresting or novel, then they must never ever have thought about food or eating before in their lives. From the day you were born it was self-evident that most processed food was filth, and that most food processors were only in it for the money. It was also pretty obvious to anyone with half a brain that if you wished to eat with sense, you ate in moderation and across the full palette of foods available. It really doesn't need five hundred pages.

TWELFTH-CENTURY RECIPES FROM POITOU

I expect quite a few of you will have read in the press about the discovery by researchers from Durham University of a very early group of manuscript recipes in a document once in the hands of the monks of Durham, but now in the library of Sydney Sussex College Cambridge. I give below the text of the communication from Dr Giles Gasper of Durham which describes the material in question. I hope that Prospect Books may be connected with the next stage of this exciting development.

A sequence of culinary recipes from the late twelfth century has been discovered in a manuscript originally from Durham Cathedral Priory,

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CURRYWURST

Irina Dumitrescu

Picture a sausage, kept warm in a flat pan of water or oil, its uncased surface shriveled, drenched in ketchup and sprinkled with curry powder. A heap of French fries, blanketed with mayonnaise and ketchup, serves as accompaniment, or else a comparatively ascetic five-cent bread roll, generally stale. Any sane non-German, with properly calibrated taste buds and a sense of the limits to which innovation in food should be taken, will recoil. And during my first visit to Berlin, almost a decade ago, this is exactly what I did. But I was also curious. I gingerly ate my first currywurst and found it less foul than I expected. The second was not bad at all and the third really kind of satisfying. Before I knew it the sausage became a sign of Berlin I carried with me when away, a craving for a pieced-together city and its gawky magic.

It's not that the currywurst is delicious despite its maladroit combination of ingredients. With all due respect to the competing claims of the snack kiosks of Germany, I have never had a truly tasty currywurst. Moreover, the feeling I have in my stomach after wolfing one down recalls the early stages of pregnancy. And yet I must eat it at least once during each visit, a ritual eucharist for my unbelieving tongue. The currywurst is a food of desire, both for me and for the culture that created it. Unlike rustic polenta or gooey mac-and-cheese – dishes that evoke home, history, the simple tastes of childhood – the currywurst is not nostalgic. Nor is it aspirational, conveying a promise of class via perfectly-textured proteins and just-so applications of sauce. No, the currywurst embodies a desire as contradictory as its ingredients, a craving for new, exotic experience and fast, resolutely plebeian comfort.

In the years since I first blanched at the sight of a currywurst, I have had time to carry out arduous linguistic, anthropological,

and gastronomic research into this riddle of a nibble. My first conjecture is that wurst is absolutely central to German culture. I had a hint of this during my first visit to Berlin in the summer of 2004, when I came across a gallon-sized jar of sausages that had rolled to a halt between two cars in a Kreuzberg gutter. In some visions, paradise is paved with gold – the streets of Berlin are covered in ground meat. My second postulate: if sausage in its many forms is the meaty key to things *deutsch*, then the immensely popular currywurst is a diminutive, edible symbol of Germany's collective psychology in the present day. Big claims, I know, but the proof is in the sausage.

The etymological origins of *wurst* are unknown, perhaps appropriately for a foodstuff whose charm lies in concealment. The *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen* proposes a source in the Indo-European root **uert-*, 'to turn, spin.' This would make *wurst* distantly related to words like *werden*, 'to become,' and *wirr*, 'tumultuous, befuddled.'¹ *Wurst* is, in other words, a confusion turned food. It is particularly telling that the single food item most readily associated with Germany runs counter to stereotypes about Germans themselves. The verb *wurschteln* means to bumble about, fiddle around, to work slowly or messily, while *wursten* can mean to produce sausage, but also to disarrange, mess up, to do something in a disorderly, utterly non-Teutonic fashion.

Sausage flavours the German language with a chain-link of expressions. *Das ist mir Wurscht*, or 'it's sausage to me,' is a way of expressing disinterest, perhaps because both ends look and taste the same. Counterintuitively, *es geht um die Wurst*, or 'it's about the sausage,' gives a sense of urgency – now it really counts. A woman who *spielt die beleidigte Leberwurst*, or 'plays the insulted liverwurst,' is a prima donna in a huff, while someone who can barely steal sausage from a plate, *die Wurst vom Teller ziehen*, is unimpressive despite his pretensions. A culture of expressed meat also requires its troubadours of *Wurst*. Early in our romance, my now-husband made me a mix CD of cheesy *Schlager* music. He introduced me, of

course, to Herbert Grönemeyer's 'Currywurst,' an ode to the messy snack in the dialect of the industrial Ruhr region. Among the tracks were also Helge Schneider's cheeky 'Bonbon aus Wurst,' which describes the adventures of a man whose 'sausage bonbon' satisfies the cravings of all the women he meets, and Stefan Remmler's song about the end of a love affair, 'Alles hat ein ende nur die wurst hat zwei' (everything has an end – just the *Wurst* has two). Clearly, there were several directions this relationship could go.

As our romance continued and I got to know the wursts of Germany – and, as the granddaughter of a sausage-maker, I am not completely naive to this area of human experience – I was surprised by the semantic capaciousness of the term. While the English *sausage* and the *cârnat* of my native Romanian refer to meat encased in animal intestine, *Wurst* is just chopped meat, no pig gut necessary. When I visited the KaDeWe department store in what used to be West Berlin, that monument to the glorious, overwhelming variety of goods to be had under capitalism, I had a language lesson right in the famous sixth-floor food hall. I gazed at shelf after shelf of neatly arranged jars, each filled with mottled grey matter and labelled *Wurst*, befuddled until I realized that pâté and chopped liver are, it turns out, also *Wurst*. So is *Mett*, a bread spread made of chopped raw pork, sometimes flavoured with cumin or garlic. The clever 1950s German housewife impressed her guests by fancifully shaping *Mett* into a porcupine, with raw onion slivers for spines and beady little olive-eyes and nose.

I would come to make other linguistic discoveries. On my first trip to south-west Germany to meet my boyfriend's family, I was presented with a plate of *Wurstsalat*. To make it, bologna is cut into thin ribbons and tossed with pickle strips and raw onion rings in a light vinaigrette. While the German *Fleischsalat* (literally, 'meat salad') makes a kind of piquant spread out of bologna-bits and mayo, the rather demure dressing used for *Wurstsalat* does nothing to obscure the fact that you are eating luncheon-meat with knife and fork. (It is typical of Baden-Württemberg and Switzerland, though

the Swiss go one better and add ribbons of cheese to the mix, as if to underscore the brazen lack of fresh vegetables.) Taken aback by the dish, I struggled to identify the *Wurst*, and when I finally recognized it, the word came to me in Romanian. I exclaimed with glee that I knew *parizăr* from back home, that we also liked to eat it, and that I had particularly enjoyed it as a child. My future in-laws looked at me with friendly confusion. Romania, I later figured out, must have received its word for bologna from Austria, where it is called *Pariser* and associated with Paris. In Germany, however, the sausage is thought to come from Lyon, and thus called *Lyoner*. A *Pariser* is a condom.

My mistake was not wholly inappropriate. It does not take a particularly sprightly imagination to notice the phallic allusiveness of the *Vaterland's* favourite food. Currywurst is the battleground for a macho duel for culinary glory between two unromantic north German cities. Hamburg and Berlin both claim to have invented it, a fact no German journalist writing about currywurst fails to note. Whether the history books will consider the *Wurst* a lasting testament to the Kingdom of Prussia or to the Hanseatic League, I cannot help but notice that all the myths of origin involve women.

In Berlin's corner stands Herta Heuwer, born 1913. Before opening a snack stand, Herta worked as a saleslady at KaDeWe and served as a *Trümmerfrau*, one of the women who cleared the city of rubble after WWII. She claimed to have invented the dish on 4 September 1949, and she knew how to cement her legacy, most notably by patenting her spicy ketchup recipe as 'Chillup' in 1959. In 2003, Berliners commemorated her *Imbiss* stand in the Charlottenburg district of the city with a plaque describing her invention as 'tradition and eternal enjoyment!'¹² As is often the case with exercises in public memorialization, the plaque points to the truth by stating its exact opposite. For the currywurst, whether Heuwer was the first to make it or not, had little to do with eternity. It was an inventive way of covering the taste of the

substandard sausage available in the postwar period. Far from being the epicurean apogee of tradition, as the plaque suggests, currywurst was a response to the annihilation of tradition. A more accurate representation of its meaning is to be found on a 2011 limited-edition stamp commemorating German inventions, which depicts a thermos, a half-eaten currywurst on a paper plate, and a double-chambered teabag. Currywurst here is a feat of German engineering, resulting in an unremarkable but necessary pleasure.

The widespread, though not universal, practice of using a skinless sausage for currywurst also recalls postbellum necessity. Now, Germany's need for sausage casings is always greater than its supply.³ In the late 1940s, an East German butcher named Max Brückner devised a way of manufacturing sausage without casings by using hot water to form a protein skin around the *Wurst*. Commanded by the Soviets to produce two varieties of sausage, using better quality meat for the occupying force and lesser meat for German customers, Brückner did the exact opposite. He was sentenced to death, but he managed to escape to West Berlin before the judgement and founded his own company. Herta Heuwer was one of his first customers.⁴ The company eventually also covered the city with its own *Imbiss* franchises under the name *Maximilian*, adding '*det orijinal*' in Berliner dialect to the easily-recognized red and yellow sign to emphasize its authenticity.

In his novel *The Invention of Curried Sausage*,⁵ Uwe Timm props up Hamburg's claim to the currywurst with the story of Lena Brückner, an enterprising woman in her forties who begins a love affair with a soldier young enough to be her son and houses him when he defects from the German army. So delighted is she at her erotic reawakening that she conveniently forgets to tell her lover that the war has ended, thus forcing him to continue hiding in her apartment in fear for his life. When the relationship reaches its inevitable end, Lena barbers for food with the English and American occupying forces and opens a snack joint. An accident with spilled ketchup and curry powder reveals a way to make the

cheap meat taste better, and her *Imbiss* becomes a sensation. In a kind of historical wish fulfilment, Timm focuses keenly on the more desirable elements of Germany's past. Everyone in the building hates their spying Nazi neighbour, *beil-ing Hitler* out of fear and not conviction. The feisty heroine abets a soldier's dereliction of duty, undermining the war effort. Finally, through ingenuity and hard work, German commerce, cuisine, and libido rise, Phoenix-like, out of the rubble. Still, the origin of currywurst as Timm portrays it remains uncanny, a love affair of things forced together that do not really fit.

It is in this sense that I read currywurst as a symbol of troubled German national consciousness in the post-war period. As Germany has taken steps – often halting, but also determined – towards establishing a society tolerant of difference, it has embraced a snack-food made by cutting the phallus of the fatherland into pieces, smothering it in American ketchup, and sprinkling it with Asian curry. This could be a sad vision for multiculturalism, suggesting it can only come at the cost of the disintegration of German identity. But perhaps it is better read as a sign for the kind of creative chaos cities like Berlin and Hamburg foster so well, a riff on traditional food that keeps it squarely in the middle, even if unrecognizable. Leave it to Bavaria to stoutly defend its white sausage, which, served in broth with only a pretzel and sweet mustard as accompaniments, renders a plate tellingly pale. Currywurst is inauthentic, impure, spicy and colourful.

My current favourite currywurst is to be found under the S-Bahn station on Friedrichstrasse, right in the center of Berlin and only a few blocks away from the recently-built Currywurst Museum. It is suspended on two axes of deep misery and high culture, Brecht's Berliner Ensemble and Checkpoint Charlie to its north and south, the Pergamon Museum and the Holocaust memorial flanking it east and west. Whether I have just tried to look interested through several hours of eighteenth-century German drama I don't quite understand, or shivered at the recognition of my own first and

last names among the doomed Jews profiled in an underground exhibition, I process it all over a helping of currywurst at Bier's. This particular *Imbiss* has improved on the original concept by adding a thick, homemade hot sauce and a pile of oily fried onions to the chaos of potatoes, *Wurst*, curry, and mayo already outlined by a greasy nimbus on the small paper plate. And, in a shrewd embrace of the contradictions embodied by this improvisational proletarian food, they serve it with champagne.

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NOTES

1. Wolfgang Pfeifer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 'wurst'.
2. Petra Boden, *Die Berliner Currywurst* (Berlin: be.bra verlag, 2010), 37.
3. An example of this is the recent kerfuffle caused by Claus Steiner, a butcher from Nürnberg, who claimed in February of 2012 that tensions with Iran had raised the price of the sheep intestine needed for traditional Nürnberger brats; other butchers countered that China, Australia and New Zealand were more important exporters of the vital sheepgut, and that anyway, the problem was that people were not eating enough mutton. Uwe Ritzer, 'Was Nürnberger Bratwürste mit dem Iran-Konflikt zu tun haben,' *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 24 February 2012.
4. Boden, *Die Berliner Currywurst*, 42.
5. Uwe Timm, *The Invention of Curried Sausage*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: New Directions Books, 1995).