

# Past masters

What would an 18th-century pub landlord make for lunch? Natalie Whittle on our renewed curiosity about historic food

**M**rs Peckham, Mrs Acton and Mrs Beeton never met. The first was the author of *The Complete English Cook: Or, Prudent Housewife*, published in 1790, a cookbook you'll need should you ever attempt boiled peacock. The second was a housekeeper who wrote *Modern Cookery for Private Families* in 1845, with a culinary omniscience that includes three ways to boil potatoes ("as in Ireland", "the Lancashire way", and "Captain Kater's Receipt"). The last was the author of the *Book of Household Management*, published in 1861, a doughty treatise on good cooking and good conduct.

Though strangers to each other's kitchens, these three women currently find their recipes warmed up at the same time in a seeming renaissance of historic authorities on food. Beeton and Acton are among 20 authors revisited in Penguin Books' new "Great Food" series, which celebrates cookery writing from the past four centuries.

From the *racomteur* recipes of Alexis Soyer, a French chef who valiantly tried to improve the restaurant food of Victorian London, to the *joie de vivre* of late-19th-century Italian businessman Pellegrino Artusi, these are hugely evocative pieces of history. And unlike many contemporary cookbooks, they are written with much flair and preambles. Here is Artusi on *spaghetti alla rustica*: "The ancient Romans left the consumption of garlic to the lower classes, while Alfonso King of Castile hated it so much he would punish anyone who appeared in his court with a hint of it on his breath. The ancient Egyptians were much wiser - they worshipped garlic as a divinity."

Quadrille Books, meanwhile, launches its "Classic Voices in Food" series this month with Eliza Acton and French chef Simone Prunier. But publishers are not the only ones dusting off their cookery book libraries. Marcus Wareing's new restaurant, Gilbert Scott, at the St Pancras hotel in London, emphasises British food heritage with Mrs Peckham's "Lobster of Leeds" served with burnt butter and black pepper, and Mrs Beeton's "Snow eggs" for pudding. Heston Blumenthal is also using books such as Hannah Wooley's *The Queen-like Closet or Rich Cabinet* (1672) and Patrick Lamb's *Royal Cookery* (1716) to serve up an antiquarian-modern feast at his new restaurant, Diner, which is wittily decked out with sconce lights shaped like Victorian jelly moulds to reinforce the old-is-new theme.

But if starry chefs are supposed to present a taste of the future, why are they looking over their shoulders to the past? Wareing doesn't see it like that: "Rather

than look at the past, what I think we're doing is looking at the producer... That used to be overlooked a bit, but now we look all the way to the grower; that's what's made us look at English food more."

In the resplendent Victoriana of the St Pancras hotel, he wanted to create a British menu that would speak to the building's architectural heritage. "We purchased quite a lot of old cookery books off eBay. My general manager Chantelle [Nicholson] already was a collector of them, and that's where the idea really came from."

Wareing and his team first tried the recipes in their "natural state" and decided whether they needed a more professional reworking: "As lovely as these recipes are, the general public could go away and cook [them] - it's my job to be able to introduce a modern style of cookery without damaging the recipe itself."

Which begs the question: how easy are

these recipes? At another restaurant steeped in history, Wiltons on Jermyn Street, London, which began life as an oyster barrow in 1742, head chef Andrew Turner kindly agreed to bring a supper menu of mixed heritage to life, using recipes from the "Great Food" books. It becomes clear that this historic meal is far from daunting to Turner, though he did encounter some basic problems: "It's really difficult to imagine how they would have presented the food... and none of the recipes is weighted; it's 'take a pinch of this, a pinch of that.'" Despite the lack of instruction, he made all the dishes on first attempt. He and sous-chef William Best added a few of their own refinements too.

On the menu are "water souchy", a soup made from freshwater fish, wine, vinegar and parsley, as written by William Verral, an early champion of French food during the mid-18th century. Verral recommends

"several sorts of small fish, flounders, gudgeons, eels, perch, and a pike or two"; Turner uses pike, fried in a little butter, and adds it to Verral's soup mixture with parsley root, celery and other vegetables: tangy but meaty and delicious. Interestingly, Turner sees this dish as a precursor to fish pie; a hearty, one-pot meal. But he finishes it with the flourish of courgette crabs fashioned with food cutters.

We move on to a recipe by 18th-century housewife Hannah Glasse for "Pigeon au poire", which Glasse describes as a "genteel" dish; Turner sees it as "cheffy and sharper... I'd have no issue putting this on the menu". Glasse's idea is to turn meat into fruit by stuffing the pigeon into a pear-like shape, and cutting one of its legs into an approximation of the stalk.

It looks simple enough as Turner rolls the pigeon flesh into an oval, but I can easily see this going wrong at home.

Imagining our forbears to have supped generously, we made another second course, this time from poet Gervase Markham's *The Well-Kept Kitchen*, written in 1615. Though his "Minced pie" of mutton and suet, cloves, mace, currants, prunes, dates and orange peel sounds rich and dry, it turns out to have a very pleasant texture and fragrant spiciness: "We were surprised by the level it came to," says Best. Even a sprinkling of sugar, faithful to the recipe, is not too disconcerting.

We finish with a Verral pudding - "A Dutch cream" - which is a proto *crème brûlée* flavoured with lemon and coriander. Turner has substituted lemongrass, producing a moreish aftertaste to the plump layers of cream.

Like many contemporary foodies, the "Great Food" writers are exhorting their readers to eat and live better - Colonel Wyvern, in *Notes from Madras*, gives detailed tips on how to make good curry, informed by his time stationed in Madras during British rule. And as he says, we can sometimes live better by learning from the past: "These time-honoured dishes will always be welcome. Has not the time arrived then for us to endeavour to resuscitate the ancient cunning of our cooks, and to take some pains to attain that end?"

But perhaps the last word must go to Artusi, who himself struggled to cook a 17th-century recipe by the Duke of Mantua's chef. "If the ancient Bolognese cook, meeting me in the afterworld, scolds me for it, I shall defend myself by explaining that tastes have changed for the better."

For recipes and Andrew Turner's methods, go to [www.ft.com/historicfood](http://www.ft.com/historicfood)



**Heritage** Main picture, clockwise from left: courgette crabs, 'pigeon au poire', 'a Dutch cream' and 'minced pie'. Above: Andrew Turner of Wiltons at work  
Joan Goldsmith

