

Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery Oral History Project

Interview with Peter Hertzmann

Interviewer: Dr. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

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I= Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

P= Peter Hertzmann

Beginning of the interview

I

So when did you start coming to Oxford?

P

I think it was about nine years ago. It was either Vegetables or the one after that but I think it was vegetables.

I

And how did you hear about it?

P

I found it online one day.

I

And when you came here, did you know people already?

P

Not personally, I knew a few names. I am still learning. I spent the last four nights in Mary Hyman's office in Paris. She has the original edition of the Oxford Companion and I was looking through the contributors and it is amazing how many of those people are associated with this symposium and still alive.

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Yes, that was very much a work from the symposium.

P

I continually find if for example I look under Foie Gras I see a paper done by Cathy Kaufmann given to the symposium maybe fifteen years ago that is still fantastic. There is a lot of people who are still here now and you can go up and say hello to. They have been around a long time doing good work.

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The first year you came, did you give a paper?

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No, I think I came and checked it out first. I am trying to remember but it's all deep and dark in there somewhere. I know I did a paper on Vegetables, availability in France in the 1850s that I presented but it never got into the proceedings because the editor accused me of having printed it elsewhere which I had not.

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You have been coming every year since?

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Yes.

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The more people I talk to the more they seem to have become lifers, they come back regularly. What is it about the symposium that attracts people?

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Fellowship is the most important thing. It is like a good meal where the most important thing is who you are eating it with. It is seeing people whom you only see once a year. Out of the nine I have been to, I have probably presented six times. My method is not to take something I have already written and make it fit the thing but to always start off with the idea. I typically, which I don't think is appreciated, is submit four proposals and see which one makes it. I have only researched things enough to write the proposal. So it is all original research after that because it seems interesting to me and it is the reason to follow through on that research.

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So can you tell us where you were born and where you grew up?

P

I was born in San Francisco but I grew up in the San Francisco Peninsula. In those days there was only one hospital in the area and my mother did not like it. She had worked in San Francisco in the hospital and did not like it. And I have lived my life in a one by five-mile ellipse, living for the last thirty-two years in the same place.

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And that is Palo Alto?

P

Palo Alto and then the two towns to the north. So I don't move around much. I have travelled to other places; I went to school in other places.

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And what did you train as and what did you do before food?

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Cooking, going back to the boy scouts at the age of eleven and then I seriously started to cook after I graduated from college. I was playing around while I was in college. It took me eight years to get a Bachelor's degree because I have been a neer-do- well for a long time and that was in college as well. I worked my way through school as a mechanical engineer getting a degree in photographic sciences and instrumentation which is optics and statistics. Got out of that when I graduated. I was involved with the mechanical optical design for the interior lighting of the space shuttle. I went from the space shuttle to doing a project that lasted a year. Then I was doing other light sources including some for the battlefield which was very interesting, counter measure stuff. Eventually I got into lasers. I went to a company called Spectra Physics. It was the first gas laser company in the mid -70s. Then I got into surgical lasers and in 1982 started a company called Laserscope which was a surgical laser company. I was one of the three founders of the company. It was whole body surgery. I quickly morphed from being an engineer to developing new procedures. I spent most of my time in the operating room with the doctors figuring out new ways to do procedures not all laser based. One of those procedures was the laparoscopic cholecystectomy which is taking out the gall bladder through the navel which became the biggest thing of the decade. I went off to join a training school where I was training doctors. We did twenty-five thousand a year in a period of about a year and a half. Then I stopped doing that. I was doing some consulting. Somebody came to me with a business plan and I wrote it and said if you get the money I will join you. So from Halloween 1994-1998 I was essentially the Head of the Clinical/Marketing side of this company that was doing an implant for central neural hearing loss. This was different from the cochlear implant where people can still hear but hearing aids are not working for them. In 1998 I quit that, retired and decided to do what I wanted to do. But my food stuff I started when I got out of school. I got involved with Chinese cooking. Got some training and wound up essentially from 1974 until 1994 all I cooked was Chinese food. For me food is not just cooking recipes but food is culture, history, policy all sorts of stuff to get into. You may be eating that dish but other things influence that dish especially when you are eating a cuisine from another country in your own country.

I

What influenced you to deal with Chinese food?

P

I have no idea. (laugh) It just seemed like the right thing to do. So my son in 1992 graduated from high school and left home. My wife and I decided full Chinese meals every night is a little too much food. So I got interested in doing Japanese cookery and quickly learned a few hundred dishes. We travelled to Japan a number of times. While it was interesting I found the cuisine somewhat boring. In 1994 I went to France for the first time. I had my typical epiphany and in 1997 I had the opportunity to spend a week in a restaurant specialising in truffles and foie gras. Fois gras for them was not opening a package. It was about harvesting it from the duck.

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Which restaurant was that?

P

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It was down in Sorges, the Auberge de la Truffe. One of my favourite things was going to the back of the walk in, these five gallon buckets of truffles, half full, each with a damp towel over it. I would just go in there, lift the towel up and put my head in and sit and breathe truffle aroma for a while. It was almost better than sex! Then in 1999 I had another opportunity to work in a couple of restaurants which I did. In 1999 I was travelling through France and visited one of the chefs I was with in '97 and I said I would like to spend an extended period of time with you and he said sure why don't you come in May, it's the fifth anniversary of the restaurant, the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the chateau and (Louis) Outhier will be here the whole time. I said ok. I had no idea at that time who Outhier was. I do now (Outhier trained under Fernand Point in La Pyramid). I started staging (interning) there and I staged in a couple of other places, Alsace, in Brittany, in Provence. I don't like to do the same thing over and over again. But I was older than everyone else including the chefs usually and I was not treated the same way as your typical stage would be. I had the opportunity to learn a lot more plus being a lot smarter than the average cook I was asking questions which they had never thought about. It was obvious that I was interested not only in the politics of the kitchen but the politics of public health in the restaurant. In questions like why they chose this particular stove over another, what was the reason for that? The chef from 2000 Jura when they changed the alcohol laws in France and people had to have a designated driver which they did not want to do to go to this restaurant twenty-six miles from civilization. The restaurant essentially went from busy to empty overnight. So he took over this hotel in Gruyere where they wanted to make a gourmet restaurant and I spent the portion of two summers with him there basically as a line cook. But I had the special projects when he found that the case of fruit had gone bad I had to see how much I could preserve from that and do something valuable with it. Which was great because it got me more and more into what I do now which is to cook without recipes. I am not a great fan of recipes as a way of learning to cook, or as a way of following specific rules. There are so many variations. Even the same cut of beef from different animals does not cook the same way. It is understanding those differences that is important to me. So that is sort of what I do so it is a combination of - like in Edinburgh (with Ben Reade) I was working three days a week, fifteen hours a day in the kitchen. There were only four of us for the entire restaurant. Front of the house and the back, there was no pass. You cook it, you deliver it and you wash up afterwards. You do the prep and you sweep the floor. You do the whole thing. So I was doing that fifteen hours a day. On my off days I did about eight hours a day.

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You got involved with helping out with the typesetting of the proceedings here. When did that start?

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I got so tired of taking people's word files as they are and you just make pdf files out of them. I think in those days we were just posting word files and they are horrible. They were all different because people don't understand that word from the pc, the layout is somewhat dependent on the printer that you put it on. It is not independent like it is on the Mac. So they put all their stuff in and it does not display properly on my screen. Since I have typesetting abilities I volunteered, I knew the editor. I have a graphics, video, photography background so it is not just cooking and stuff. I have had a lot of different paths that I have strewed through time. It turns out that you then combine the typesetting with a little bit of programming knowledge, scripting and it is not so difficult.

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From your time in Oxford have other doors opened for you?

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I: It is like when Claudia (Roden) was on the Radio once and I said "I know that person!" (laugh) but I would say actually no. It is through - like another group I am involved with the Butchers Guild, a whole carcass artisan butchers organisation in the United States so my paper this year a lot of the people who were my advisers or people I talk about things to or either part of that or from people I have met at that. So a lot of my meat industry thing comes through that organisation.

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And what got you involved in butchery as such?

P

Well, I am interested in all aspects but butchery is so misunderstood and also the way it is portrayed is often wrong. Another example is someone who kept saying charcuterie is synonymous with offal and they are absolutely not. Yes, you can do charcuterie with things that are also offal but most charcuterie that people buy nowadays outside France, the only offal it has in it is natural casings. None of the traditional British traditional sausages actually use anything other than meat and fillers. But I also have an interest in technology as was demonstrated in Dublin (Gastronomy Symposium).

I

And in true form where you sent four proposals! (laugh)

P

When you write a proposal you know what the people making that selection have in mind. Now the ones I sent to you did not have as wide a variety of subject matter as here because since I did not know for sure that I would get a plenary session I submitted two this year. One was very similar to what I am presenting here and the other was the concept of Waste of Food which I feel is greatly misunderstood. So one of the people reference food waste in the OED. However, there is actually no mention of food waste in the OED. The principal definition of offal in non-meat form is referring to the by-product, or the waste produced from the process. So separating wheat from chaff, the chaff becomes the offal, sawing wood the dust becomes offal. Not necessarily edible. Most things that you would try to classify, if you use it as a by-product, take that sawdust from the wood you make wallboard out of it. It is no longer offal.

I

I can hear the bell ringing so we are going to have to finish. Thank you so much.

End of interview