

My Travels with Food

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AFTER GROWING UP IN ENGLAND post WWII, on a severely rationed diet of meat and potatoes and overcooked vegetables, it was hardly surprising that when I departed my homeland for Italy in 1965 and encountered its abundant array of colors, flavors, and textures, I was completely blown away. It was love at first sight—or should I say first taste—when I arrived there at the tender

age of twenty after a train journey of twenty-four hours. Traveling from England to the Continent in the sixties entailed having all sorts of injections and vaccinations, and the seemingly never-ending, bumpy train ride buffeted my already bruised and painful arms mercilessly. The discomfort was soon forgotten, however, when I arrived in Italy and was welcomed by my new Italian family.

The first new food that I tried after I had



been in Italy just a few days, was fresh figs. I had always loved the dried figs we ate in England around Christmas, but this was September, and the settembrini fresh figs were in season. With my rudimentary Italian (I'd taken a few classes in England), I went to the fruit-seller and asked him for a kilo of figs. At least I thought that was what I asked for. It turns out I actually asked him for a kilo of vaginas, betrayed by one treacherous vowel at the end of the word. It was only later that I understood why everyone in the shop laughed so much. I decided to try one on the way home, and sat outside in the sun, peeling back the skin from the succulently ripe fruit and popping it into my mouth. Delectable, mouth-watering, sensual delight



followed that first taste, and before I knew it I had consumed the entire kilo. My deprived English body was not used to such exotic fare, and very soon I broke out in big orange welts all over my body, much to my chagrin and the gentle amusement of my new Italian family with whom I was living.

I married in 1973 and went to Egypt with my new American husband for our honeymoon. It was October, and we were in Cairo during the Yom Kippur war with Israel. From the top floor of our hotel, we watched the Israeli jets bomb the Cairo airport and listened to the clacking of the ticker tape machine bringing the latest news of the conflict. Between bomb blasts, I tasted my first fresh dates, yet another sensual, sweet delight, completely new to me, and so different from the dried dates we had always consumed during the holiday season in England. Washing them in small finger bowls, popping the papery black skin off the fruit, and then slowly nibbling their delicious sweetness, tinged with a slight sharpness that could pucker the lips remains one of the lasting



sensory memories of my honeymoon, along with descending in darkness into the great pyramid of Cheops at Giza.

Just a few years into my marriage, I announced to my husband that I wanted to go to Asia and visit the places where he had served when he was a Foreign Service officer with the State Department. He agreed that it was only fair, so with minimal luggage I set off alone for three months, landing first in Delhi, India, in the early morning when the air was filled with smoke from the many dung fires lit around the city. The pungent smells of the subcontinent and the spicy cuisine delighted me. I had grown up eating curries prepared by my father, who had served in India during WWII, but the varied curries I enjoyed in India were the real thing and far



more powerful than the pale English version I was used to.

After a few weeks traveling around India by bus and train, I took a plane to hop up to the mountain kingdom of Nepal, where I stayed in the mythic Kathmandu Guest House. I checked in at the American Embassy, as my husband had advised me to, and was surprised and delighted to be invited to the Marine Ball, being held in just a few days. A Marine Ball is held every year in American embassies throughout the world. While at the ball, I met and became friends with the American Ambassador. He invited me to dinner one evening with friends of his, and I had the unforgettable experience of eating borscht at Boris's Restaurant, made famous years later in the first of the Indiana Jones movies. Boris sat at our table and regaled us with stories of his peripatetic life in Ukraine, France, South America, London, and India, first as a ballet dancer with the famed Diaghilev Ballets Russes, then as restaurateur hotelier, and consultant for tourism to the Nepalese government, all of which was almost as colorful as his renowned ruby-red beetroot



soup. Thanks to the stimulating company and exotic surroundings, it was an unforgettable, magical evening.

Another culinary moment that I have never forgotten was when I visited Verona, Italy. I had been living in Rome for several years, but had never been to Romeo and Juliet's hometown. I was visiting with a close friend who went to Verona regularly, and one evening he took me to one of his favorite places—La Bottega del Vino (today known as the Antica Bottega del Vino). My goodness, what an amazing place to walk into off the street! A single step across the threshold back into the past! The current tavern dates back to 1890, but there has been a hostelry on that site since the sixteenth century, and the place just breathes history.

Bottles of vintage wine lined the walls from floor to high wooden ceiling, and a counter running along one wall with simple food enabled patrons to drink copious amounts of wine without ill effect. In the last few years, the rustic nature of the establishment has become more sophisticated, but the hospitable atmosphere with its delectable smells and noise of happy patrons remains unchanged. When I visited the establishment there was a man sitting at the counter with a pet lion cub on his shoulder, which added a refreshingly feral note to the already eclectic atmosphere. But it was when I tasted my first really good vintage Amarone wine that I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Smooth, rich, soft, no adjectives can describe it, but suffice it to say that I drank an entire bottle of it by myself. That night in the hotel was not a happy one, and I spent most of it throwing up the precious contents of my stomach. However, my taste for Amarone has not been impaired by that early excess, and I still enjoy the occasional glass, rather than the entire bottle.

I am sure there still await other dining adventures for me, and as a lover of the Middle East, I sometimes wonder how I would react if, as an honored guest of Arabs, I were offered the greatest delicacy possible: the eye from a roasted sheep. To chew, or swallow whole? That would be the question. As of now, that is pure conjecture, and I guess I'll just have to travel to the Arabian peninsula to find out what I would do.

The world has expanded greatly for me since I left the narrow confines of England so long ago, and my spirit of adventure is still alive and eager, and my appreciation of different cultures and cuisines continues to fascinate and enrich me. ♦