CULINARY JOTTINGS FOR MADRAS

or

A TREATISE IN THIRTY CHAPTERS
on
REFORMED COOKERY
for
ANGLO-INDIAN EXILES

by

'WYVERN'
(Colonel Arthur Robert Kenney-Herbert)

A facsimile of the 1885 [fifth] edition
originally published by
HIGGINBOTHAM
of Madras

With an introduction by
LESLIE FORBES

PROSPECT BOOKS
2007

This edition first published in Great Britain in 1994 by Prospect Books, Allaleigh House, Blackawton, Totnes, Devon TQ9 7DL.

New impression, 2007.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
A catalogue entry of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-903018-53-8

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Cromwell Press, Trowbridge..

INTRODUCTION

Wyvern's book begins with a subtitle as long as the queue in a Bombay bank and ends with the wish that by building a kitchen 'entirely separated from godowns and stabling, easily accessible from the house, and consequently continually subject to scrutiny and wholesome discipline ... ladies would find the supervision of their domestic economy a pleasure rather than a penance.' Between subtitle and finale, the heat and dust and intricate social nuances of nineteenth-century India rise up like clouds of a particularly vivid blend of garam masala.

No era was so concerned with keeping up appearances as the Victorian, and nowhere was the façade of empire more underpinned and overstuffed than in the military bungalows and colonial clubs of the jewel in Victoria's crown, India. Arthur Robert Kenney-Herbert ('Wyvern' to his readers), eldest son of a Warwickshire clergyman and brother of a school inspector who married into the aristocracy, was a connoisseur of the stuffiness as well as the stuffing. His career in the Indian army from 1859 to retirement in 1892 spanned the heyday of Britain's military and culinary empire; in *Culinary Jottings* he gives us a taste of both. For although this is a book of recipes, not history, it has the power to resurrect a group of people whose lifestyle now seems almost extra-terrestrial. Breakfast of devilled kidneys and bread freshly baked

'by your cook, Ramasámy' is prepared while camping on the Mysore plateau; raised pigeon pies arrive 'with the feet of the birds peeping invitingly from the centre'; an artistic omelette recipe is learned from a member of the Madras Civil Services during a halt on a regimental march from Bangalore to Seconderabad; and though far from civilization, dinner 'might have graced a *petit table* in the stranger's room of a London Club'.

Wyvern's recipes, while precise enough for a beginner to follow, are certainly not in the current shopping-list school of cookery writing. Nor do they have the parade-ground bark of his contemporary culinary colonels: humour and personality are never sacrificed at the altar of brevity. To avoid a cream sauce 'suggestive of the composition you would employ for fixing scraps in an album', a butter pat 'the size of a rupee' should be stirred in just before serving. For 'boiled' meat that is both tender and moist, the water must be 'muttering to you, not jabbering and fussing as it does when boiling'.

Nothing in the letters of recommendation written for his cadet nomination by his headmaster and tutor at Rugby School would indicate that Kenney-Herbert had the gift for language his book reveals. If anything, they make him sound a bit of a worthy plodder. All his kitchen poetry was reserved for the women to whom he dedicated his masterwork: the 'Ladies of Madras'. They must have appreciated its wit: five editions of *Culinary Jottings* were published in seven years.

Arthur Robert Kenney (his additional surname, Herbert, came later) arrived on the subcontinent as a nineteen-year-old cadet in October 1859, straight from Rugby into the

Madras Cavalry. In England, dining *à la Russe* had just recently been introduced, while in northern India the hungry Russian Empire's close proximity – divided only by Afghanistan from India – had spawned The Great Game and the first Afghan War. One young officer, more concerned with flies than spies, wrote home in that year: 'At night when the lamps are lighted at mess the flying bugs came in myriads, falling from the hanging lamps and punkahs into our soup and dishes and glasses. The other messes gave up dining in the evening in consequence of the number.'

Kenney-Herbert joined the Indian Army when the proportion of British to native troops was increased by fourfold after the Mutiny of 1857. Before the Mutiny, India had been administered by the East India Company – by commerce; afterwards, it was ruled by the British Government and the army. The military wives for whom Wyvern would assemble his jottings some twenty years later were cut from a less rugged cloth than their mothers and grandmothers who had lived through the Mutiny. One survivor of the attack on Delhi, Harriet Tytler, an officer's wife, too pregnant to mount her elephant in the flight from the besieged city, had given birth to her son in an ammunition wagon. Along the Grand Trunk Road from Delhi, she sojourned in *dak* bungalows where food, if it existed, was likely to be a curry of scrawny wild chicken known as 'sudden death' for obvious reasons.

It is hard to imagine Harriet leafing through any culinary jottings in her bungalow, unless it was Wyvern's chapter on camp cookery, in which he describes the blessings of a portable Acmé cooking stove for those

'whose duties demand several months of tent-life *per annum,* who would like to pick up a wrinkle or two in the matter of cookery under difficulties.' But the generations who succeeded Harriet had time on their hands. It was the era of the colonel's lady, when the word *memsahib* came to mean more than just the Indian honorific for addressing a white woman. It referred to an ideal, something unspoken (no officer was allowed to mention a woman's name in the mess), untouchable, and, most of all, unemployed.

The memsahibs arrived in their thousands on the 'fishing fleets' after 1860; Kenney-Herbert married one of them, Agnes Emily, in April 1862. She died in 1920. Under no circumstances did these later Anglo-Indian wives cook for themselves – or for anyone else. The most they expected to do was to write out their proposed menu in a dainty hand and then pass it to a native cook. As one woman put it, 'an army wife was not expected to do anything or be anything except a decorative chattel or appendage of her husband, and apart from participating in all sorts of horse sports, looking after her children and running a fairly decent dinner party, there her role ended.'

Typical dinner parties of the period are described by a Mrs. Maitland in her letters home to England. Bored with the rather dull and silent parties in Madras, where geese, turkey and joints of mutton were served as side-dishes and everything else was out of proportion, she complained, 'What would grandmamma say to the wastefulness of an Indian dinner? Everybody dines at luncheon, or, as it is called here, tiffin-time, so that there is next to nothing eaten, but about four times as much food put upon the

table as would serve for an English party. After dinner the company all sit in the middle of the great galley-like rooms, talk in whispers and scratch their mosquito bites.' While the English remained content to get stomach-aches from sour oranges, explaining complacently that nothing would grow in the heat, 'the ingenious French at Pondicherry have contrived to cultivate vines,' as had the ingenious Indians in Hyderabad.

Into the middle of this scene of culinary apathy marched Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General Arthur Robert Kenney-Herbert. One year away from being promoted to major when the first edition of his book was published, seven years from his lieutenant-colonelcy, it must have been his three years of quartermasterly duties in setting up camps and assigning rations that gave him enough confidence to take on the inefficiency he observed in Anglo-Indian domestic kitchens. He scolds his lethargic compatriots for their reliance on tins, 'the cloaks of carelessness and slovenly cooking,' and, in a fine chapter on local and imported vegetables, advises them to be more adventurous, to try making their savoury toasts with indigenous plants like *brinjals* (aubergines), *bande-cais* (okra) and coconut flower pods (still used in local Madras dishes), and to maintain little kitchen gardens in pots containing English curled parsley, marjoram, thyme, garden-cress and celery. For Menu No. XXV, he recommends a gratinée of *podolong-cai* (known as snake-vegetable in his day and snake-gourd in London's Southall markets today) when other vegetables are not available during the hot season. He suggests the white stalks of the coconut flower may be used instead of tinned asparagus – boiled, laid in a very

hot dish with plenty of butter melting over them. No toast needed. Here, as elsewhere in the *Culinary Jottings,* we get a taste of exotic local life as vivid as in any travel guide: 'The coconut flower-pods can be obtained now and then at Madras, for the toddy-drawers cut them off when tapping the palms for sap.'

In a cookery book for Madras it may seem surprising that the curry section is limited to thirty pages, but curry had been demoted. It was considered suitable only for the homeliest supper or luncheon, and with curry-making's loss of caste Wyvern mourns, 'The old cooks, who studied the art, and were encouraged in its cultivation, have passed away to their happy hunting grounds.' He redresses the loss with typical thoroughness, introducing us to such indigenous ingredients as curry leaf, tamarind, long pepper (a catkin-shaped form of black pepper) and 'Nepaul pepper' (a milder version of cayenne). Unfortunately, his championship came too late to convert many of his readers. It had become fashionable to admire everything from Europe and eschew everything native. Aspirational Madras housewives expected their cooks to learn the most up-to-date English and continental gastronomic principles. Inspired by the classic *Livre de Cuisine* of Wyvern's hero, Jules Gouffé (chef of the Jockey Club in Paris and one of the century's gastronomic stars), *Culinary Jottings* supplied the grammar of classical French dining in a vocabulary that the most ignorant young memsahib and her bewildered Indian cook could understand.

Wyvern's idea of a 'cosy, sociable little dinner' rather than the 'molten curries and florid oriental compositions of the olden time', consisted of soup, fish, two well contrasted

entrées served separately, one joint, game, a dressed vegetable, one *entremets sucré,* an iced pudding, cheese with *hors d'oeuvre* and dessert. To modern ears this menu-planning sounds over elaborate, even fatal, considering the tropical climate. Yet, at the time, grand Anglo-Indian households were largely carnivorous, and the average British soldier had a daily allowance of one pound of lamb or beef in summer and one and a half pounds in winter (reduced from the two pounds that was the norm fifty years earlier), supplemented by a pound of bread and one-fifth of a pint of spirit. In her diary, Harriet Tytler writes that as a child, she was given mutton every day, 'finishing the Sunday roast on the following Saturday. Never a soup, a pudding or fruit all the year round.' Her uncle, an invalid, 'lived on chops, principally'. By comparison, the *Jottings'* emphasis on fish, salads and fresh vegetables must have seemed a positive feast.

Kenney-Herbert agreed with critics who said that the English lacked general knowledge of kitchen work and were especially ignorant about vegetables. Lumpy mash and greasy chips are to be expected when we have not bothered to find out the merits or demerits of the tubers we buy. 'We ought not to expect all potatoes to turn out equally floury as a matter of course, and blame the cook if he fail so to serve them.' He proposes vegetables, fish and pasta that are lightly cooked and simply presented, a heresy that must have startled his Anglo-Indian readers as much as it did their Indian cooks. Up until the late 1980s, the cooks on Kashmiri houseboats and in old British tourist bungalows would still produce cabbage boiled as vigorously as a football shirt and then reconstituted into the shape

of a Chinese pagoda, a legacy of Victorian recipes learned from generations of memsahibs who had not read their Wyvern.

Kenney-Herbert's book is full of surprisingly contemporary ideas. In an aside that might well have been written at the height of *nouvelle cuisine*'s folly, he urges that 'funny devices cut out of vegetables and dotted about a dish should be forbidden, for they suggest to the hypercritical mind an idea that perhaps *fingers* have been busily employed in arranging them.' He liked his salads dressed with vinaigrette (about eight parts oil to one part vinegar) made of the best quality olive oil from Lucca, and his juicy little chops with 'the marks of the grid-iron' plainly visible. It sounds like a meal eaten last week at a fashionable London restaurant.

Despite his often condescending manner towards women, 'natives', the working class – in fact, towards anyone apart from the middle class, public school, male strata to which he himself belonged – Kenney-Herbert was progressive for his time and position. A sense of more than just culinary reform permeates his book, perhaps reflection of the wave of reform that washed over India itself after the Mutiny. The British, previously aloof from those they governed, had learned from the Mutiny that they would have to keep in closer touch with Indian opinion if a similar event was not to recur. In this new spirit, Kenney-Herbert urges his readers to make friends of their chefs rather than abusing them, behaviour he clearly considers more likely. 'Unless amicable relations exist between the cook and his mistress or master,' he writes, 'the work will never be carried out satisfactorily.' He makes an epic

journey into the airless room 'as black as Erebus', where the walls are 'lined by an ancient coating of soot' and a 'mass of patriarchal looking cobwebs' hangs from the rafters: the colonial kitchen. In a scathing chapter, 'Our Kitchens in India', he blames their filthy and unproductive conditions on the memsahib's isolation from her servants' workplace. 'Who is really to blame for a great deal that I have shown you? Is it the cook's fault that a wretchedly mean, carelessly constructed godown is given him for a kitchen; that the place is inconveniently far from the house ... that, owing to faulty construction, the room "smokes" dreadfully, and that there is scarcely sufficient light in it to detect dirt?'

It is not of 'native' kitchens that he writes; then and now those were breezy, open-air affairs. No, the 'dismal hovels' referred to were attached to spacious garden houses of Palladian grandeur. 'I could have fancied myself transported into Italy, so magnificently are they decorated,' wrote one woman on arriving in Madras in 1780. Eclipsed commercially in 1772 by Calcutta, socially, Madras's position as the earliest important British settlement in India meant that it retained considerable status. According to the *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* of 1898 (whose recipes were heavily influenced by Wyvern's more erudite and amusing book) the cost of living in Madras was half again as much as Bombay and Calcutta. Embedded in the discussion of the relative merits of cows', goats' or asses' milk for nursing babies is the note that smart dress is considered more than usually desirable in Madras, 'as the afternoons are very generally spent at what is to all intents and purposes a garden party'. Ostrich feathers, however,

were not recommended, 'they are taken out of curl at once by the sea breeze'.

Sailing in on the Bay of Bengal's sultry, feather-wilting breeze came boatloads of prim Victorians swathed in corsets and petticoats. By 1888 they would have been clutching their revised editions of Mrs Beeton, with its eight pages on Indian cookery, its five pages on the correct folding of serviettes, its infinitely useful chapter on how to form a Venetian villa out of nougat, with the obligatory swan in Italian biscuit. The new arrivals stepped into an average temperature of 95 degrees Fahrenheit on one of the widest and longest urban beaches in India. Framing the beach was an Arabian Nights version of Cheltenham redesigned by Piranesi, Kipling's 'withered beldame brooding on ancient fame'. Near Mohammed ali Wallajah's domed Chaepuk Palace stood the Ice House, a circular building of the 1840s where British residents once stored ice for their brandy in huge blocks cut from North America's frozen lakes. Behind the neoclassical front were such bulwarks of the Raj as the Madras Club, reputed to have the longest bar in India (where women, of course, were forbidden), and Spencer and Co., a department store which opened in 1860 and expanded with the Empire to supply essentials like Ovaltine, paraffin and Spencer's Torpedo Number One Cooking Range.

Before reaching the safe haven of Spencer's, however, one had to negotiate the beach. The armada of three-log catamarans and ebony-skinned fishermen which first greeted Victorians sailing into Madras harbour is still there. The fishermen still paddle out in the 4am chill to catch pomfret, shark and shrimp, and they still wear no

sort of covering, as William Hickey remarked in the 18th century, except 'a small piece of rag, not entirely hiding their members, a very awkward exhibition for modest girls on their arrival'. But visitors arriving by sea no longer have to embrace the fishermen's hard brown torsos for a piggyback to the shallows, as once they did.

Hickey's modest girls, after the shock of touching brown flesh, apparently took to heart Mrs Beeton's advice on Indian housekeeping: 'The mistress cannot undertake personal supervision of her kitchen, which is not in the house or bungalow, but outside, and very likely some distance away.' These are the girls, the 'apathetic many' chastised by Kenney-Herbert for handing everything over to their butlers, 'sometimes through sheer ignorance, sometimes on account of idleness, and sometimes because they were not physically equal to the exertion.' The result was charcoal ash in the soufflé (or what passed for a soufflé), asparagus bathed in flour and water, and pastry that recalled nothing better than layers of baked talc laid one on the other.

No effort was made to give servants the modern appliances and ingredients necessary to produce the immodest menus expected of them. 'Dinners of sixteen or twenty, thoughtfully composed, are *de rigueur*;' Wyvern writes. 'Our tables are prettily decorated; and our *menu* cards discourse of dainty fare in its native French. ...Could we but raise the curtain, and examine our cook-rooms, and all that in them is, just before we lead the way to the banquet, should we not be actually dumb-foundered at our own audacity?' At high officials' household auctions, he says, one found a striking contrast between the drawing

room's mountains of furniture, 'principally by Deschamps', and the kitchen's pitifully few useful sundries, an indication that the mistresses of Anglo-Indian households, like their guests, placed infinitely more importance on surface than structure.

Understandably, the author of such ungentlemanly criticism felt the need of a pseudonym. One assumes that Arthur kept his gastronomic career well hidden, at least from his superiors in India, for there is no mention made of it in his military papers, nor in the excruciatingly dull diaries of the Right Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant Duff, Governor of Madras when Kenney-Herbert was military secretary. Even in Wyvern's supposedly autobiographical *Furlough Reminiscences, A Potpourri of Reflections, Observations and Incidents compiled From the Diary of a Happy Holiday in England,* the disguise never slips. His old school, Rugby, is camouflaged under the name 'Avonby', and old friends become Dickensian allegorical figures to his Mr. Pickwick. During one of several country house visits (possibly to the Sitwells' in Warwickshire, where Grant Duff mentioned Kenney-Herbert had been in 1869), he remarks that for those interested in getting closer to the Fairer Sex, 'Let every man work up cooking'. But his interest in a pretty ankle is no more than a passing one: gastronomy remains Wyvern's true love. Describing the picnic of his greengrocer's buxom wife during a visit to the Windsor Review, he shows a Kiplingesque delight in lists and dialect: 'a nice leg of cold boiled pork, a few pounds of sliced 'am, a cold kidney pie and some sausages. A bit of pickled 'erring or mackereal and a few 'eads of lettuce, with a cucumber if they're reasonable, is what few can

say no to; and then, to be sure, there's bread and butter, cheese, spring honions, and radishes; jam turn-hovers, fruit puffs and such like, a sweet raisin cake and hany fruit that's plentiful.'

Kenney-Herbert has the roguish jocularity of what Noel Coward called 'a famous monumental man, an officer and gentleman' – but without the splendid insularity expected of one of the British Raj's stout upholders. He is not a chauvinist, a supporter of 'British is Best' like Mrs Beeton and her predecessor, Hannah Glasse. In all his books (and he wrote several), his countrymen are mocked: for their heavy hand with vinegar in salads, and their 'absolute barbarism' in heaping up two or three sorts of vegetables on the same plate with roast meat and gravy; for their belief that light wines, light dishes, light anything, are 'Frenchified and but ill-adapted to sustain the thews and sinews of burley Anglo-Saxons'; for the delight they take in quantity and display. 'Masses of incongruous diet may be necessary at a yeomanry festival,' he writes, 'or after an Agricultural Show at the county town', but educated, refined and travelled people would be better satisfied 'with a little, really well considered.'

This assault is not led without a precise battle plan and an admirable batterie de cuisine for bringing the colonial kitchen into order. Knowledgeable about the latest kitchen equipment and food technology, he recommends the 'newly-introduced' peppermills, and the efficacy of Warren's Cooking Pot and Vegetable Steamer (especially useful during a campaign in Afghanistan), through which many people in India had recently become familiar with the process of steaming. At the local bazaar forge he finds

that, with a little foresight, such essentials as iron omelette pans, fire grates and English roasting jacks could be easily made. Having observed one of these jacks in a locally designed kitchen, he knew its advantages: 'Dripping, a thing previously unknown in the establishment, became a highly valued commodity; and the meat was sent up full of gravy and with that crisp browning that can only be obtained by careful roasting.' Old-fashioned diners who must have horseradish with their roast beef and dripping can grow it quite well at Bangalore, a town about 150 miles west of Madras, and at Ooty, summer residency of the Madras presidency. Failing that, the scraped root of local *moringa,* the drumstick tree, is a good substitute when mixed with mayonnaise.

A note of wistfulness creeps into the book whenever Kenney-Herbert mentions Ooty or the 'Neilgherries', the Blue Mountains of Coimbatore (now the Nilgiris), whose moderate climate allowed enterprising amateurs like him to grow European vegetables not otherwise available on the burning plains around Madras.

Sir Richard Burton also extolled the Nilgiris' culinary delights in his 1851 book, *Goa and the Blue Mountains:* 'During your first fortnight ... you luxuriated in the cool air. Your appetite improved. The mutton had a flavour which you did not recollect in India... You praised the vegetables, and fell into ecstasy at the sight of peaches, apples, strawberries and raspberries, after years of plantains, guavas and sweet limes.'

For Burton, however, the novelty of Ooty's fresh vegetables was soon overshadowed by the staleness of its social life. 'You dress like an Englishman, and lead a quiet

gentlemanly life – doing nothing ... your monthly bills for pale ale and hot curries, heavy tiffins and numerous cheroots tell you, as plainly as such mute inanimate things can, that you have not quite cast the slough of Anglo-Indian life.'

Perhaps the stifling repetition of Anglo-Indian life (or the even more stifling bar bills for its military gentlemen) palled on Kenney-Herbert as well, and gave him the impetus to begin writing. From his references to the gardens he cultivated at Bangalore and Secunderabad (British suburb of Hyderabad), it is clear that he liked to get his hands dirty. You could say that he was less interested in the façade than in the scaffolding that supported it. His preference for flavour over presentation is unusual even in today's cookery books, as is his military precision in describing the basic framework of classical French cooking. It makes his book as practical for modern cooks as it must have been for bewildered young memsahibs.

'Whatever became of old Archie?' asks Noel Coward at the end of a song about officers of the Raj. 'I hear he departed this life, after rounding up ten sacred cows in Karachi, to welcome the Governor's wife.' We know a little of what happened to Wyvern. After retirement, he returned to England, where in London he continued to kill off culinary sacred cows at his Commonsense Cookery Association, and, later, at a school attached to it in Sloane Street. This was in being by 1894, when he is listed as its Managing Director.

In her book, *Spices, Salt and Aromatics in the English Kitchen,* Elizabeth David quotes the Colonel's aims as given in a contemporary interview with *The Epicure*

magazine: 'Briefly sketched, the principles we advocate are economy in conjunction with thoroughly good cooking, no waste, and the production of good effects without the employment of ready-made sauces and flavourings. We are strongly opposed to over-ornamentation, the use of fancy colours in savoury cooking, and "poaching" on the confectioner's "preserves" by using forcing bags with pipe. ..."Pretty-pretty" dishes at the cost of flavour and much valuable time – are a mistake in private houses where the kitchen staff consists of two or three persons. ...Simplicity in cooking, simplicity in materials, and simplicity in dishing up are consequently a feature of my teaching.'

Until recently, I believed that the energy required to proclaim this iconoclastic manifesto had sapped Kenney-Herbert's remaining creativity, for although he continued to write good, sound cookery books, none had the magic of *Culinary Jottings.* Perhaps he felt so too; they were lumbered with such prosaic titles as *50 Breakfasts*, *50 Lunches*, *50 Dinners*, and in 1903, *Sensible Cookery for English Households*. After his death in March 1916, this collection joined all the other diaries, letters, curry recipes and reminiscences of military gentlemen whose retirement from active service in India to cottages in Sevenoaks or Guildford left them too much time to reflect on their more colourful past. It seemed to me a sadly anticlimactic ending for the Colonel. Then one day in the India Office Library I found a 1907 'cheap edition' of Wyvern's *Picnics and Suppers.* Into it was pasted this handwritten note:

Presented to the India Office by HRC Carr, Jan 1978. I believe this was the last of my grandfather's books on cookery. His son Robert, for some time an instructor at Sandhurst, lost his right

arm in the Boer War; he had no issue. His daughter, Enid, was my mother. While my parents were in India I went to him for my holidays – in memory of a gastronomic heaven.

No cookery writer could ask for a finer tribute.

Leslie Forbes
August, 1994

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The first edition of *Culinary Jottings* was published by Higginbotham and Co. in Madras in 1878. The edition reprinted here is the fifth Madras edition. There was a simultaneous London edition by Richardson and Co. A sixth Madras edition appeared in 1891, and a seventh was published in Madras and London in 1907 under the title *Wyvern's Indian cookery book*. Much of the contents of *Culinary Jottings* were recycled in a book called *Common-sense Cookery for English Households* (omitting, of course, the Indian material), published by Edward Arnold in 1894.

Many of Kenney-Herbert's other books are listed in Elizabeth Driver, *A Bibliography of Cookery Books Published in Britain 1875–1914* (Prospect Books, 1989).