

THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

# FOOD

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THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

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# FOOD

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You can't even take shelter in a library because there's a very good chance it will now be the site of a Malaysian/Persian hybrid pop-up restaurant.

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## ...TO START

**F**ood is everywhere in the Western world, which is just as well because we wouldn't last long without it. But now it has gone far beyond its primary role as essential sustenance to become a central part of modern culture. These days it's impossible to turn on the TV without stumbling across someone demonstrating a recipe, someone else screaming profanities about another's culinary skills, or a large American man attempting to devour a hamburger the size of a small child.

And it's not just TV. You can't pick up a newspaper or magazine without finding a celebrity telling you how to cook, a chef telling you how to eat or a supplement featuring a celebrity chef doing both. Pubs are becoming gastropubs, street vendors are opening restaurants and trained chefs are taking to the street. You can't even take shelter in a library because there's a very good chance it will now be the site of a Malaysian/Persian hybrid pop-up restaurant, a supper club or the location for a post-ironic tweed-clad street food collective's 'twist' on the Wimpy burger.

Even sitting down to dinner with friends won't help. As you eat, conversations frequently turn to recollections of great meals you've had, where you've eaten recently, and what you've cooked this week. At the same time, you will be expected to analyse every bite of the food on your plate, listen to a detailed explanation of the cooking techniques involved and the precise sources of each individual ingredient, *and* plan where you should go for brunch tomorrow.

The rules have changed. It's no longer enough to be a food lover who once attempted something Keith Floyd cooked on TV. Now you have to be a food worshipper with a wealth of experience under your belt, a desire to analyse (and photograph) everything you consume ('I know it looks like a slice of cheddar and a cream cracker, but it's a "deconstructed, scallion-drop, rustic cheese biscuit"') and a depth of knowledge that could win you Mastermind. ('And your specialist subject?' 'Obscure world cuisine, 1800 to the present day.')

The subject of food is increasingly a minefield where, in order to survive with your credibility intact, you will be expected to know exactly what's being talked about when your dinner companions are discussing the relative merits of *bo ssam* and *warabi-mochi* – or Korean pork in a lettuce leaf and a Japanese pudding made with bracken starch, if you prefer.

The days of just sitting back and having a pleasantly relaxed dinner are long gone. Food is to be studied and dissected as much as it is masticated and tasted. If that

sounds like too much hard work, you're right. And that's why this book exists.

You may wonder why the term 'food worshipper' is to be preferred to the ubiquitous 'foodie'. The fact is that the people who get described as 'foodies' loathe the word. The use of the term thus shows you up as a non-foodie, which is not the food bluffer's objective.



'Food worshipper' suggests a level of cult devotion entirely appropriate to the world of food.

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What better description might there be for these extreme lovers of food? Good question. So far, at the time of publication, no single universally adopted term has yet emerged. 'Food connoisseur' is a bit pompous; 'food lover' is perfectly acceptable, although it does leave the door open for jokes about inappropriate behaviour with chocolate eclairs. For the bluffer, however, 'connoisseur' and 'lover' don't quite cover the level of obsession you are about to encounter. 'Food worshipper', on the other hand, suggests a level of cult devotion entirely appropriate to the world of food.

You must also be loath to use the word 'passion'. It is something you will hear a lot in food-based conversations, and must be avoided at all costs. You must never say, for

example, 'It's so lovely to meet an artisan producer who's so passionate about what they do' or 'so passionate about the welfare of their animals' or 'so passionate' about every other tiny aspect of their food business. If you want to eulogise about an artisan baker who is 'passionate' about using only organic rice paper from a Vietnamese workers' cooperative, then think of another word. 'Zealous' or 'enthusiastic' are good ones.

This is a fascinating and often complex world you are about to immerse yourself in, but, with the right guidance, your talent, and a grasp of facial expressions ranging from piety to insouciance, you're going to be fine. This short but definitive guide will conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about food, and equip you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easily remembered nuggets of essential information that might even allow you to be accepted as a food expert of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your forensic knowledge of the subject – without anyone discovering that, until you read it, you didn't know the difference between the *sous vide* method and the Maillard reaction.

Ladies and gentlemen. Bluffing is served...

# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

**T**he *Cambridge World History of Food* runs to several thousand pages and two shelf-threatening volumes. This chapter is going to attempt to cover much the same ground in approximately one-eleventh of a Bluffer's Guide. It's a big task and one that is, frankly, unlikely to be easily accomplished.

However, don't lose heart. You will be relieved to discover that a comprehensive knowledge of food is not the bluffer's way. Instead, your cunning strategy is to be armed with the salient points, to avoid too many questions and to be able to bring a conversation back to the subjects you do know.

The downside of the subject matter is its breadth. The advantage, therefore, is also its breadth. There is no shame in admitting that you don't know everything about food (How can you possibly know everything when there are so many world cuisines and so many regional variations within them?), provided that you know enough – or can bluff enough – around the gaps in your knowledge.

## THE HUMILITY RUSE

There are points to be scored by accepting your limitations. The irony of this particular *Bluffer's Guide* is that it is preparing you to go up against food worshippers who, in around 90% of cases, are also bluffing. It might be to a lesser extent, it might be to a greater extent, but take it as gospel: the overwhelming majority of people who claim to know about food are bluffing.

Take the person who's a self-proclaimed expert on Japanese food. No, they are not. They may believe they are, but they are wrong. How can this be stated with such confidence? Because the famous Japanese chef Nobu Matsuhisa does not consider himself to be a sushi expert. The average sushi chef will spend the first year or two of their career cooking nothing but rice. They are not allowed anywhere near a piece of seaweed, let alone a piece of fish or a sharp knife, for months – in some cases years. This process instils a degree of humility, which is why a man in the fifth decade of his career and who owns 25 Japanese restaurants worldwide still thinks he's a sushi novice. And that's why it can be said that someone who's looked up sushi online, picked a plate of *sashimi* off a conveyor belt, and once bought a pack of cellophane-wrapped fish and rice from a cold cabinet is not an expert.

Sushi chefs, however, can teach the bluffer a great deal, as a similar degree of humility is a useful weapon in the bluffing arsenal that, genuine or practised, will make you more credible. Unless the person you are jousting with is a professional restaurant critic or chef (*and* has

accumulated half-a-million air miles eating around the globe), it's a near 100% certainty that they will be bluffing about at least some aspect of the food they are discussing. The seasoned bluffer – in other words, anyone with this book at his or her disposal – can assume an attitude of supreme nonchalance and cheerfully admit his or her shortcomings over certain cuisines. In a world where bluffing is the norm, it is perhaps those quietly candid moments that are the most powerful. They show a sense of modesty, a willingness to learn about new things, and permit one to make statements such as: 'Well, that's the thing with food – you can't know everything, and it's the journey of discovery that I enjoy the most.' And then, of course, you will gently steer the conversation back to the food-related subjects with which you are the most familiar.

## **IS IT AUTHENTIC?**

You will also find one word cropping up at very regular intervals: 'authenticity'. It is, it seems, every food worshipper's *raison d'être* to find the most 'authentic' experience they can. Whenever you go to an ethnic restaurant of any description, the first question you'll be asked, even before 'Was it any good?' or 'Did you like it?' will be, 'Was it authentic?' This is a very good thing; rarely has there been a question that serves as a finer opening gambit for bluffers.

Many lesser food-worshipping types would panic at the question. At its heart it seems to ask how well-travelled you are and how able you are to recall individual dishes

consumed on those travels. It also presumes, of course, that what you tried on those travels were quintessential examples of the dishes in question (and they probably weren't). The assumption, therefore, is that if you haven't travelled and if your vocabulary, memory and taste buds do not work closely in sync, your opinion is of lesser importance. This is nonsense. The question of 'authenticity' is actually the perfect opportunity to demonstrate a small but perfect knowledge of food history and, should you require, deflect attention from your own experiences or lack of them.

Let's take a few famous dishes as examples.

## **THE CLASSIC AMERICAN HAMBURGER**

The clue is in the name. The original meat patty was a German sausage named after the city of Hamburg (the Frankfurter would be another good example, of course). As it happens, what we now know as the hamburger – a small patty of minced beef – existed before the Germans claimed to have invented it; there are ancient Italian and Russian versions, to name but two. However, when German sailors emigrated to the USA taking their small beefy cakes with them, the 'hamburger' name stuck. So when someone asks you if the hamburger you ate the other day was 'authentic', you can smile knowingly and begin a short lecture in food history and geography. Or declare it to be as authentically American as apple pie – because that probably originated with the Dutch and then came over to the USA from England with the Pilgrim Fathers.

## SPAGHETTI BOLOGNESE

In Bologna, the pasta most commonly eaten is tagliatelle or lasagne. Their meat sauces use hearty chunks of meat simmered down into something known as *ragù alla bolognese*. Accordingly, spaghetti is not a pasta particularly associated with Bologna. The ‘authenticity’ question in relation to spag bol is therefore a bluffer’s gift. It should, strictly speaking, be a tag bol.

If you want to talk ‘authentic’ Italian, you’re probably looking at the sort of feasts Nero is said to have enjoyed: sculpted pork statues, stuffed womb of sow and food eaten off naked women. (Interestingly enough, this practice, known as *nyotaimori*, lives on to this day in Japan. See how that one plays out at your local trattoria or branch of Pizza Express.)

## TEMPURA

*Tempura* refers to little slices of fish or pieces of vegetables served in a coating of the lightest, airiest, most delicate batter known to man. With the possible exception of *sushi* and *sashimi*, few things scream Japanese cuisine more than a piece of tempura. You can guess what’s coming, of course... In fact, tempura is Portuguese in origin and probably arrived in Japan via Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century. So, was that tempura course you enjoyed the other night authentic? No, of course it wasn’t; it was Portuguese food in a Japanese restaurant.

## INDIAN FAVOURITES

It is widely known that chicken tikka masala isn't actually Indian in origin. The tikka bit is Indian (*tikka*, by the way, apparently translates as 'bits') but the 'masala' element originated in Scotland. As the story goes, at some point in the 1970s a customer at Glasgow's Shish Mahal restaurant complained that his chicken was too dry, so chef Ali Ahmed Aslam rustled up a sauce – a 'masala gravy' – made with a few spices and a tin of condensed tomato soup that he had to hand. The rest is, as they say...

That means, of course, that if you want an authentic experience in an Indian restaurant, you'll have to pick something much more traditional, like a vindaloo. Only that's also Portuguese: *carne de vinha d'alhos*, a dish of meat with wine (*vinha*) and garlic (*alho*). In the Indian version, wine becomes vinegar and there are more spices and aromatic ingredients than just garlic, but it's still based on a European original. And we'll come to the spices in due course...

(Ironically, chicken tikka masala has made it back to the Indian subcontinent, so you could find a restaurant serving it and order a portion, in which case you can be in India eating a genuinely 'authentic' Scottish meal.)

## FISH AND CHIPS

It surely doesn't get more authentically British than fish and chips. There's a great sense of nostalgia – genuine or otherwise – towards the original and perennial fast food. Nothing says Great British tradition like cod and chips

out of a newspaper on the seafront, vinegar dripping from your fingers, a pickled onion resting on the side.

Only – as you’ve no doubt realised – fried fish is Portuguese. Again. In the seventeenth century, Jewish refugees from Portugal introduced deep-fried fish – *peixe frito* – to Britain. You can also argue, of course, that potatoes aren’t authentically British, as we didn’t get them until the sixteenth century, when Sir Walter Raleigh or Sir Francis Drake brought them over from the Americas, depending on which version of the tale you believe.



If ‘authentic’ means food that’s indigenous to a nation, then the Brits should be eating moles and badgers.

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You might see now why the ‘authenticity’ question is manna from heaven for the bluffer. It boils down to one simple element: where – or, more accurately, when – does one draw the line? If ‘authentic’ means food that’s indigenous to a nation, then the Brits should be eating moles and badgers. Pasta in a tomato-based sauce wouldn’t exist in Italy, as tomatoes originated in South America and didn’t get introduced to Europe until around the sixteenth century. India would be eating much blander food if it weren’t for the Portuguese (naturally), who introduced them to the chilli pepper.

On that note, the Spice Route is a marvellous bit of food history with which to demonstrate your superior (if limited) knowledge. It also explains how the Portuguese became such a power in the food world, even if it was only for a very short time.

## **HOT AND SPICY**

In a nutshell, the Spice Route refers to the trade lines between the key historic civilisations of Asia, Africa and Europe. It was this trading that saw spices such as cinnamon, ginger and cardamom spread from their origins and pop up in various bits of world cuisine. They're also the reason that chillies – ostensibly originating in Central and South America – spread to Asia.

Trade in spices started well before the beginning of the Christian era in the Middle East, pretty much the busiest point for overland caravans (in their original sense, rather than the one in front of you on a single carriageway). As various forces became more powerful – for example, Islam and the Ottoman Empire – overland routes started to close, pushing people in different directions and aiding the growth of the sea routes.

By the fifteenth century, Muslim traders dominated the sea trade throughout the Indian Ocean, shipping spices from sources in the Far East and India to the Persian Gulf and Red Sea and then overland into Europe. So, in order to avoid the high taxes being charged by the Ottoman Empire who now controlled the routes, Europe looked for an alternative. Thanks to Portuguese explorer Vasco da

Gama, they found one. In 1498, da Gama pioneered the Europe to Indian Ocean route via Africa, sailing around the Cape of Good Hope.

There is, of course, rather more to it than that, but this is a food guide, not a history lecture. There's lots of good information about the Spice Route out there, but the basics should be enough to back up your points. Trading has been going on for centuries (which is why even Tudor recipes include ingredients such as mace and nutmeg), politics have forced assorted changes, and we have all pretty much benefited from the hybrid cuisines that have resulted. The other key benefit is the easy dismissiveness with which you can now deflate the 'authenticity' argument. After all, what is the cut-off point? When does a dish 'belong' to a particular country rather than being an amalgamation of ingredients that were never indigenous in the first place?

In the case of chilli peppers and Asia, the former are a relatively recent introduction courtesy of Christopher Columbus who first brought them back to Europe from Central and South America, and the Portuguese traders who took them further east. And, very possibly, other traders then took them from India to Eastern Europe and Turkey and then to Hungary: how else do you think paprika became a key ingredient of goulash?

On the subject of travels and food, there is a long-held belief that Marco Polo introduced pasta into Italy after seeing the noodle in China. Happily, in bluffing terms, this theory holds as much weight as the famous April Fool about spaghetti growing on trees.

The most likely explanation is that Arab invaders introduced a dried noodle-like foodstuff to Sicily in the eighth century. (There is also evidence that a durum wheat noodle existed in the region as early as the first century, although it was baked rather than boiled.) Pasta, you may wish to note for pontification purposes, translates as 'dough' or 'paste', and shares the same root as 'pâté' and 'pastry'.

## **SPREAD OF THE SPUD**

And while on the subject of carbohydrates, this seems a good time to look at the potato. As Asia got the chilli, Europe got the humble spud. Peru is where the potato originated and the country still grows some 4,000 varieties. Although it was around the mid-sixteenth century that the British Isles first came across this vegetable, potatoes weren't eaten in any great number until 200 years later. Now, of course, it's hard to keep up with demand.

Initially, the potato wasn't too popular. Indeed, when Prussia suffered famine in 1744, King Frederick the Great had to order his people to consume them. In England, their connection to Spain had eighteenth-century farmers denouncing potatoes as a Roman Catholic threat, and France was not too keen on them either. And then, in the late eighteenth century, along came Antoine-Augustin Parmentier.

As you'd expect from someone who gave his name to a potato dish, he was a bit of a fan. Legend has it that, as a rather inept soldier (how else do you describe someone

captured by the Prussians five times in the Seven Years War?), Parmentier existed on a prison diet of very little but potatoes – and remained healthy. After the war, the trained pharmacist took a greater interest in nutrition, with a particular focus on the foodstuff that had kept him alive. He was also something of an early PR man, organising assorted publicity stunts to promote his beloved vegetable. One of these, an all-potato dinner for members of France's high society, is said to have included Thomas Jefferson, who, at that time, was America's commissioner in Paris. When Jefferson became president, the story has it that he served fried potatoes, in the French style, to his guests. And that could well have been the birth of French fries in the USA. Even if it isn't strictly verifiable, it's definitely worth a bluff.