



# PEARLS OF *wurst*dom

IF YOU WANT TO GET TO KNOW SOMEONE, SNEAK A PEEK INSIDE THEIR FRIDGE – AND THE SAME GOES FOR CULTURES AND COUNTRIES. BY BRANDON DE KOCK.

Google ‘food and travel writing’ and you get 300 million results. But is it a career or tautology? After all, sustenance is important to our dark art. If you don’t eat and drink when you travel, you die (talk about a bad trip!). More importantly, when you stop thinking about food as biofuel to get you from one Eiffel Tower to the next, you begin to realise that menus are the eyes of nations: windows to their souls.

Start by looking up. If the *carte du jour* is backlit, numbered and the word ‘meal’ appears more than once, you are in a comfort zone; a machine for sending fax-burgers from Spamerica to the world.

But no risk means no reward, and isn’t that why you left home in the first place? So next time hunger pangs, wherever you find yourself, go one road back from where your tourist map ends. That’s where you’ll stumble across locals – and the truth.

I found both in Lipsi, Greece. It was an arbitrary stopover during a week’s sailing in the Aegean courtesy of Sailing Cruises in Comfort or, as its fabulous Dutch owner Loes ‘the bikini queen’ Douze calls it, ‘chic sailing, dahrling!’ This voyage of discovery had a distinctly Hellenic cooking theme and our host was my new friend and chef Theodore Kyriakou, who launched the Real Greek chain in London and lives up to the name.

As our shipmates headed towards the marina and its taverns flogging lasagne for lunch, Theodore led us just around the corner – literally. The tables looked like they’d washed up on the tide, there was no signage and the googly-eyed patrons wearing faded board shorts, coffee stains and flip-flops were just this side of smelly. ‘Ah,’ said our Greek, ‘this is exactly what I was hoping for!’

He ordered ouzos and pointed towards a tiny room where a man and his cats were sacrificing entrails on a braai. Big deal. So we sat and drank fiery milk and as we did, a humble procession of small bowls of edibles began. Roasted nuts, piquant olives, crusty bread and the *coup de grâce*, not entrails, but chargrilled octopus tentacles, cut into smoky morsels that tasted more islander than isle. As long as you keep drinking, the nibbles keep coming. Bar snacks? Hardly. More like barbecued insights into a life far, far away from our familiar ocean basket or the Teflon memories of pasta served up at the quayside.

Sometimes, epicurean epiphanies are hidden right in front of you. Take Germany, for example, where everything’s boiled and starchy, fermented and cabbagy, or neatly stuffed into that firm salute to Aryan utilitarianism: the wurst. From Brat and Bock to Knack and Weiss, every sausage tells a story, even in Berlin, Europe’s bipolar epicentre where the

scars still itch 20 years after the fall of the wall.

My Belgian mate David introduced me to the mysteries of the old East in a place called the Weinerei where a two Euro donation buys a bottomless glass. Stumbling home in the no man’s land between hunger and sleep, he barked, ‘Currywurst!’ and dragged me towards a derelict caravan manned by a man of unknown persuasion. There were two options: veal or pork, grilled, sliced up, smothered in ketchup, sprinkled with curry powder, and garnished with a two-pronged plastic fork. So, to recap: Indian spice, American sauce and German wors. Get your lips around Currywurst, and you’ll start to get your head around this slut of a city.

I could fill books with this sort of stuff: from putrid, yet heavenly, durian fruit in Malaysia to buckets of fried and battered popcorn shrimp in the subways of Atlanta. Some people see a bag of biltong, I see an endless trek from the safety of a castle and a beautiful mountain, to a faraway place filled with creatures from Dutch nightmares where the only certainty was uncertainty. The deeper you look, the better it gets.

Likewise, while the masses flash away their memory cards at Big Ben or Covent Garden, I’ll be wandering around Smithfield. You won’t find it in the tourist guides, but it’s one of London’s oldest markets – where William Wallace was hung, drawn and quartered 700 years ago and butchered beasts have been traded ever since. The fleshmongers do their thing from midnight to sunrise and after that the hipsters arrive and chefs come on shift at contemporary cafés like Mr Hix’s Oyster & Chop House, the venue of an unforgettable and delicious history lesson.

The pork crackling was life changing and the house ale full of the flavours that make commercial brews blush. And then there was the beef and oyster pie. Deluxe surf-and-turf, our waiter proffered, has been a London staple for centuries, but its ratios have changed. The early years were filled with cheap and cheerful tons of oysters, bolstering up two or three small chunks of precious beef. Back then, killing cows wasn’t the feed-lot-and-factory sport we know today. Fast-forward to now and the pie’s been flipped: beef is stuffing and the oysters are rare. In fact, you get two – one inside and one on top – a slippery reminder of the passing of time.

As I pondered my pastry, I couldn’t help thinking that in front of me lay a gourmet tribute to the rise and fall of an empire; a symbolic nod to the changing fortunes of a Great Britain that once ruled the waves and for whom a tiny group of islands called the Falklands, half an ocean away, is the last remaining oyster in a once proud pie. Try getting that kind of insight from Ronald McDonald. ☺

Bar snacks?  
Hardly.  
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KITCHEN CATS WOULD HORRIFY public-hygiene officials in most restaurants, but in the Greek Isles, they’re a sure sign that something deliciously fishy has just come off the braai.