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“Concern and sympathy in a pyrex bowl”: Cookbooks and Funeral Foods

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Introduction

Special occasion cookery has been a staple of the cookbook writing in the English speaking Western world for decades. This includes providing catering for personal milestones as well as religious and secular festivals. Yet, in an era when the culinary publishing sector is undergoing considerable expansion and market segmentation, narratives of foods marking of one of life's central and inescapable rites—death—are extremely rare. This discussion investigates examples of food writing related to death and funeral rites in contemporary cookbooks.

Funeral feasts held in honour of the dead date back beyond recorded history (Luby and Gruber), and religious, ceremonial and community group meals as a component of funeral rites are now ubiquitous around the world. In earlier times, the dead were believed to derive both pleasure and advantage from these offerings (LeClercq), and contemporary practice still reflects this to some extent, with foods favoured by the deceased sometimes included in such meals (see, for instance, Varidel). In the past, offering some sustenance as a component of a funeral was often necessary, as mourners might have travelled considerable distances to attend the ceremony, and eateries outside the home were not as commonplace or convenient to access as they are today. The abundance and/or lavishness of the foods provided may also have reflected the high esteem in which the dead was held, and offered as a mark of community respect (Smith and Bird).

Following longstanding tradition, it is still common for Western funeral attendees to gather after the formal parts of the event—the funeral service and burial or cremation—in a more informal atmosphere to share memories of the deceased and refreshments (Simplicity Funerals 31). Thursby notes that these events, which are ostensibly about the dead, often develop into a celebration of the ties between living family members and friends, “times of reunions and renewed relationships” (94). Sharing food is central to this celebration as “foods affirm identity, strengthen kinship bonds, provide comfortable and familiar emotional support during periods of stress” (79), while familiar dishes evoke both memories and promising signals of the continued celebration of life” (94).

While in the southern states and some other parts of the USA, it is customary to gather at the church premises after the funeral for a meal made up of items contributed by members of the congregation, and with leftovers sent home with the bereaved family (Siegfried), it is more common in Australasia and the UK to gather either in the home of the principal mourners, someone else's home or a local hotel, club or restaurant (Jalland). Church halls are a less common option in Australasia, and an increasing trend is the utilisation of facilities attached to the funeral home and supplied as a component of a funeral package (Australian Heritage Funerals). The provision of this catering largely depends on the venue chosen, with the cookery either done by family and/or friends, the hotel, club, restaurant or professional catering

companies, although this does not usually affect the style of the food, which in Australia and New Zealand is often based on a morning or afternoon tea style meal (Jalland).

Despite widespread culinary innovation in other contexts, funeral catering bears little evidence of experimentation. Ash likens this to as being “fed by grandmothers”, and describes “scones, pastries, sandwiches, biscuits, lamingtons—food from a fifties afternoon party with the taste of Country Women’s Association about it”, noting that funerals “require humble food. A sandwich is not an affront to the dead” (online). Numerous other memoirists note this reliance on familiar foods.

In “S is for Sad” in her *An Alphabet for Gourmets* (1949), food writer M.F.K. Fisher writes of mourners’s deep need for sustenance at this time as a “mysterious appetite that often surges in us when our hearts seem breaking and our lives too bleakly empty” (135). In line with Probyn’s argument that food foregrounds the viscosity of life (7), Fisher notes that “most bereaved souls crave nourishment more tangible than prayers: they want a steak. [...] It is as if our bodies, wiser than we who wear them, call out for encouragement and strength and [...] compel us [...] to eat” (135, 136). Yet, while funerals are a recurring theme in food memoirs (see, for example, West, *Consuming*), only a small number of Western cookbooks address this form of special occasion food provision.

Feast by Nigella Lawson

Nigella Lawson’s *Feast: Food that Celebrates Life* (2004) is one of the very few popular contemporary cookbooks in English that includes an entire named section on cookery for funerals. Following twenty-one chapters that range from the expected (Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, and wedding) to more original (children’s and midnight) feasts, Lawson frames her discussion with an anthropological understanding of the meaning of special occasion eating. She notes that we use food “to mark occasions that are important to us in life” (vii) and how eating together “is the vital way we celebrate anything that matters [...] how we mark the connections between us, how we celebrate life” (vii). Such meals embody both personal and group identities because both how and what is eaten “lies at the heart of who we are—as individuals, families, communities” (vii). This is consistent with her overall aims as a food writer—to explore foods’ meanings—as she states in the book’s introduction “the recipes matter [...] but it is what the food says that really counts” (vii). She reiterates this near the end of the book, adding, almost as an afterthought, “and, of course, what it tastes like” (318).

Lawson’s food writing also reveals considerable detail about herself. In common with many other celebrity chefs and food writers, Lawson continuously draws on, elaborates upon, and ultimately constructs her own life as a major theme of her works (Brien, Rutherford, and Williamson). In doing so, she, like these other chefs and food writers, draws upon revelations of her private life to lend authenticity to her cooking, to the point where her cookbooks could be described as “memoir-illustrated-with-recipes” (Brien and Williamson). The privileging of autobiographical information in Lawson’s work extends beyond the use of her own home and children in her television programs and books, to the revelation of personal details about her life, with the result that these have become well known. Her readers thus know that her mother, sister and first and much-loved husband all died of cancer in a relatively brief space of time, and how these tragedies affected her life. Her first book, *How to Eat: The Pleasures and*

Principles of Good Food (1998), opened with the following dedication: "In memory of my mother, Vanessa (1936–1985) and my sister Thomasina (1961–1993)" (dedication page). Her husband, BBC broadcaster and *The Times* (London) journalist John Diamond, who died of throat cancer in 2001, furthered this public knowledge, writing about both his illness and at length about Lawson in his column and his book *C: Because Cowards Get Cancer Too* (1999).

In *Feast*, Lawson discusses her personal tragedies in the introduction of the 'Funeral Foods' chapter, writing about a friend's kind act of leaving bags of shopping from the supermarket for her when she was grieving (451). Her first recipe in this section, for a potato topped fish pie, is highly personalised in that it is described as "what I made on the evening following my mother's funeral" (451). Following this, she again uses her own personal experience when she notes that "I don't think anyone wants to cook in the immediate shock of bereavement [...] but a few days on cooking can be a calming act, and since the mind knows no rest and has no focus, the body may as well be busy" (451). Similarly, her recipe for the slowly hard-boiled, dark-stained Hamine Eggs are described as "sans bouche", which she explains means "without mouths to express sorrow and anguish." She adds, drawing on her own memories of feelings at such times, "I find that appropriate: there is nothing to be said, or nothing that helps" (455).

Despite these examples of raw emotion, Lawson's chapter is not all about grief. She also comments on both the aesthetics of dishes suitable for such times and their meanings, as well as the assistance that can be offered to others through the preparation and sharing of food. In her recipe for a lamb tagine that includes prunes, she notes, for example, that the dried plums are "traditionally part of the funeral fare of many cultures [...] since their black colour is thought to be appropriate to the solemnity of the occasion" (452). Lawson then suggests this as a suitable dish to offer to someone in mourning, someone who needs to "be taken care of by you" (452). This is followed by a lentil soup, the lentils again "because of their dark colour ... considered fitting food for funerals" (453), but also practical, as the dish is "both comforting and sustaining and, importantly, easy to transport and reheat" (453). Her next recipe for a meatloaf containing a line of hard-boiled eggs continues this rhetorical framing—as it is "always comfort food [...] perfect for having sliced on a plate at a funeral tea or for sending round to someone's house" (453). She adds the observation that there is "something hopeful and cheering about the golden yolk showing through in each slice" (453), noting that the egg "is a recurring feature in funeral food, symbolising as it does, the cycle of life, the end and the beginning in one" (453).

The next recipe, Heavenly Potatoes, is Lawson's version of the dish known as Mormon or Utah Funeral potatoes (Jensen), which are so iconic in Utah that they were featured on one of the Salt Lake City Olympic Games souvenir pins (Spackman). This tray of potatoes baked in milk and sour cream and then topped with crushed cornflakes are, she notes, although they sound exotic, quite familiar, and "perfect alongside the British traditional baked ham" (454), and reference given to an earlier ham recipe.

These savoury recipes are followed by those for three substantial cakes: an orange cake marbled with chocolate-coffee swirls, a fruit tea loaf, and a rosemary flavoured butter cake, each to be served sliced to mourners. She suggests making the marble cake (which Lawson advises she includes in memory of the deceased mother of one of her friends) in a ring mould, "as the circle is always significant. There is a cycle that

continues but—after all, the cake is sliced and the circle broken—another that has ended” (456). Of the fruitcake, she writes “I think you need a fruit cake for a funeral: there’s something both comforting and bolstering (and traditional) about it” (457). This tripartite concern—with comfort, sustenance and tradition—is common to much writing about funeral foods.

Cookbooks from the American South

Despite this English example, a large proportion of cookbook writing about funeral foods is in American publications, and especially those by southern American authors, reflecting the bountiful spreads regularly offered to mourners in these states. This is chronicled in novels, short stories, folk songs and food memoirs as well as some cookery books (Purvis). West’s memoir *Consuming Passions: A Food Obsessed Life* (2000) has a chapter devoted to funeral food, complete with recipes (132–44). West notes that it is traditional in southern small towns to bring covered dishes of food to the bereaved, and that these foods have a powerful, and singular, expressive mode: “Sometimes we say all the wrong things, but food [...] says, ‘I know you are inconsolable. I know you are fragile right now. And I am so sorry for your loss’” (139). Suggesting that these foods are “concern and sympathy in a Pyrex bowl” (139), West includes recipes for Chess pie (a lemon tart), with the information that this is known in the South as “funeral pie” (135) and a lemon-flavoured slice that, with a cup of tea, will “revive the spirit” (136). Like Lawson, West finds significance in the colours of funeral foods, continuing that the sunny lemon in this slice “reminds us that life continues, that we must sustain and nourish it” (139).

Gaydon Metcalf and Charlotte Hays’s *Being Dead is No Excuse: The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral* (2005), is one of the few volumes available dedicated to funeral planning and also offers a significant cookery-focused section on food to offer at, and take to, funeral events. Jessica Bemis Ward’s *To Die For: A Book of Funeral Food, Tips, and Tales from the Old City Cemetery, Lynchburg, Virginia* (2004) not only contains more than 100 recipes, but also information about funeral customs, practical advice in writing obituaries and condolence notes, and a series of very atmospheric photographs of this historic cemetery. The recipes in the book are explicitly noted to be traditional comfort foods from Central Virginia, as Ward agrees with the other writers identified that “simplicity is the by-word when talking about funeral food” (20). Unlike the other examples cited here, however, Ward also promotes purchasing commercially-prepared local specialties to supplement home-cooked items.

There is certainly significantly more general recognition of the specialist nature of catering for funerals in the USA than in Australasia. American food is notable in stressing how different ethnic groups and regions have specific dishes that are associated with post-funeral meals. From this, readers learn that the Amish commonly prepare a funeral pie with raisins, and Chinese-American funerals include symbolic foods taken to the graveside as an offering—including piles of oranges for good luck and entire roast pigs. Jewish, Italian and Greek culinary customs in America also receive attention in both scholarly studies and popular American food writing (see, for example, Rogak, Purvis). This is beginning to be acknowledged in Australia with some recent investigation into the cultural importance of food in contemporary Chinese, Jewish, Greek, and Anglo-Australian funerals (Keys), but is yet to be translated into local mainstream cookery publication.

Possible Publishing Futures

As home funerals are a growing trend in the USA (Wilson 2009), green funerals increase in popularity in the UK (West, *Natural Burial*), and the multi-million dollar funeral industry is beginning to be questioned in Australia (FCDC), a more family or community-centered "response to death and after-death care" (NHFA) is beginning to re-emerge. This is a process whereby family and community members play a key role in various parts of the funeral, including in planning and carrying out after-death rituals or ceremonies, preparing the body, transporting it to the place of burial or cremation, and facilitating its final disposition in such activities as digging the grave (Gonzalez and Hereira, NHFA). Westrate, director of the documentary *A Family Undertaking* (2004), believes this challenges us to "re-examine our attitudes toward death [...] it's one of life's most defining moments, yet it's the one we typically prepare for least [...] [and an indication of our] culture of denial" (PBS). With an emphasis on holding meaningful re-personalised after-disposal events as well as minimal, non-invasive and environmentally friendly treatment of the body (Harris), such developments would also seem to indicate that the catering involved in funeral occasions, and the cookbooks that focus on the provision of such food, may well become more prominent in the future.

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