

## TEXT review

### The pain and pleasure of a meal eaten alone

*review by Jillian Adams*



*Dining Alone: Stories from the table for one*

Barbara Santich (ed)

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Barbara Santich is an internationally recognised culinary historian who holds an important place in the field of food studies in Australia. Santich has been teaching food writing at the University of Adelaide since 2007 and initiated its Graduate Program in Food Studies. She also teaches in the Graduate Certificate in Food Writing. The author of eight books on historical food traditions, Santich's earlier title, *Bold Palates: Australia's Gastronomic Heritage* (Santich 2012), tells a history of Australia and Australians through our changing food preferences. *Dining Alone*, by contrast, is a compilation of short stories, mostly on the theme of dining alone, written by Santich's food writing students between 2007 and 2013, as part of their overall assessment towards a Graduate Certificate in Food Writing at the University of Adelaide.

Food writers 'recognise the importance of communicating to readers the taste of a particular food or dish, whether in a restaurant review, a work of fiction or a journalistic article' (4). Santich's students were encouraged to taste a variety of foods and to find 'words to match the flavours and textures they were tasting' (4), and this is apparent in their stories. Tibbie Chiu describes in 'A date with destiny' a perfectly cooked cube of veal surrounded by a 'smoke haze smelling of pine forest' and, for dessert, 'a decadent climax of chocolate' (51). Lisa Dempster describes moussaka in 'From Mykonos to Meteora', as 'eggplant baked the colour of mince and thick layers of potato shiny with béchamel' (59), while

Elizabeth Black's narrator in 'Under the sea' conveys an unsettling meal with her partner through the imagery of an angry sardine presented coiled with its tail ... thrust into its mouth in a final act of aggression' (42).

Descriptions of food are memorable features of many classic novels – I can still see Emma's wedding feast in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and tables laden with cakes and ices in Giuseppe de Lampedusa's *The Leopard*. The food described and eaten in the stories in *Dining Alone* is as memorable, but tends to be peripheral to the narratives. The stories are about the occasion (or lack of it), and how each diner came to be dining alone. I took comfort that, like me, for whatever reason, these diners feel a degree of discomfort when dining alone; only a few of the characters take great pleasure in the ability to savour food without company. The stories in this collection describe both the pleasure and discomfort of dining alone from the point of view of diners as well as waiters and chefs. They describe the conversations, dining environments, and the other customers.

Thirty-eight students in the Graduate Certificate in Food Writing course contributed to this collection of stories about dining alone. With so few words (probably due to the assignment word limit) the narrative and characters lack depth in many stories. Although I enjoyed this collection and the variety the student writers managed to generate in this single topic, I found myself distracted by the many broken relationships that drove people to eat alone, and of the many impatient waiters. The act of eating alone is often seen as a sad, solitary act undergone through the necessity to eat rather than for the sheer epicurean pleasure of appreciating flavours and tastes and artful presentation and combinations without distraction. I recall American food writer MFK Fisher's writing on eating alone – how in overcoming the discomfort normally felt, the diner can derive great pleasure from the occasion. She wrote:

They [people] try to forget that frightening truth. They read the newspaper or turn on the radio if they are at home. More often they flee from themselves to friend-filled clubs, or to the noisiest nearest restaurant, where other alone humans eat crowded together in a hungry ugly mob... It is a pity, an occasional meal with himself is very good for Mr. Doe. It gives him time to look about him; quiet in which to savor [sic] his present mouthful; opportunity to broil his steak in a new way or try again those dishes his wife hates. (Fisher 2004: 96)

Fisher's subject is clearly the male diner whereas most of the writers and protagonists in this collection are women. Nevertheless Fisher provides a useful anecdote: that when Lucullus, the Roman host famous for his fabulous dinners and elaborate menus, dined alone, he required his servants to pay the utmost attention to the dinner, for 'At such times Lucullus dined with Lucullus' (96). In *Dining Alone*, the opportunity to dine and have some time alone to

reflect on dining is largely overlooked, and it would have been refreshing to see this and other aspects of eating alone given more coverage. A broader range of eating alone experiences could have given this collection greater variety, and might include, for instance, ordering room service and eating alone in a hotel room, solitary meals eaten at home, a sandwich in the park or eaten on the run during a rushed lunch break, or even the solitary binge eating done by people suffering from eating disorders.

Although the collection is presented as fiction, most of the stories are written in the first person, which suggests that they are written from lived experience. I felt the genre became somewhat confused. Stories such as Suzanne Le Page Langlois' 'Don't dine alone – take an iPad to dinner' (80), a clever 'how to' piece offering useful advice on getting the service when dining out alone and David Gilligan's, 'A late lunch', a compassionate piece about the customers he observed, and engaged with, over a period of time as they dined alone in his café (70) felt more like non-fiction. Marianne Duluk's 'A recipe for nourishment', which described how she indulged her senses when dining alone when her French vegan husband was away seemed most likely fiction (17). As a reader, this was confusing, and I would have preferred knowing which stories were fiction and which were non-fiction.

What the collection does brilliantly, is to demonstrate the important role that food plays in our lives – whether these are ordinary or celebratory moments, times of grief and pain, or occasions of happy aloneness: Mandy Rowe's character in 'Chardonnay or Nebbiolo' finds no solace in her meal as it only endorses her aloneness (140); Caroline Pearce's character in 'Taking flight' remembers a 30-year marriage in a bowl of mussels (110); Camellia Aebischer's character in 'Greg' flees from a blind date and finds solace in a packet of macaroni cheese (31); Nathalie Craig's narrator in 'Cutting ties' is alone even when dining with a group of people (54); Lisa Dempster in 'From Mykonos to Meteora' celebrates the joy of eating when you are hungry (58); and La Vergne Lehmann's 'I just can't dine alone anymore' connects dining alone with a scandalous story in Australian political history (90).

As I read the stories in this collection I imagined them appearing as short articles in the weekend magazines that come with Saturday and Sunday newspapers. Santich is a trail-blazer who is shifting culinary writing from its safe and traditional space and allowing it new life as short fiction. The University of Adelaide plans to cease the Graduate Program in Food Studies but should be congratulated for its encouragement of food studies as an academic pursuit and Wakefield Press thanked for publishing this collection, encouraging food writing and giving these students the opportunity to present their writing to a wider audience.

## **Works cited**

Fisher, MFK 2004 'On Dining Alone', *50th Anniversary Edition M.F.K Fisher*,

*Jillian Adams graduated with honours in Geography and majors in Literature and Journalism and Fine Arts and went off to Paris to pursue a career in hospitality. She is a qualified teacher, a graduate of Cordon Bleu in Paris, and, until recently, was the Training and Development Manager of Coffee Academy, a joint initiative of Douwe Egberts Australia and William Angliss Institute. She completed a Masters in Oral History and Historical Memory at Monash University in 2011. Her book Barista a guide to espresso coffee published by Pearson Australia is used widely in espresso coffee training in Australia and overseas. A Good Brew: H. A. Bennett & Sons and tea and coffee trading in Australia, tells the story of social and cultural change in Australia through the rich stories of people involved in our tea and coffee industries and was published in 2013. In January 2012 Jillian commenced study towards her PhD at Central Queensland University in the School of Education and Creative Arts. Her PhD uses creative nonfiction, based on oral histories along with research into food writing in post-war Australia, to challenge the static and often nostalgic impressions of the housewife in the 1950s. She has co-edited a special edition of on-line journal MC, has published papers in numerous academic journals and presented papers at local and international conferences.*

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