

Pair Alcohol With Food. John D. Porter and 'The Chef Suggests

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One is perfectly safe in asserting that the art of cookery is the art of civilisation.¹

In this Australia of ours, the lack of imagination concerning excellent wine and good food is lamentable.²

'*The Chef Suggests*. Strange and exciting dishes with delicacies of the table for to-day and to-morrow' 'Compiled and collected' by John D. Porter and published in 1949 has sat among my cookery books unregarded for several years.³ Chancing to take it down for some research, I was unprepared for what I found but delighted that I had found it. It struck me as unique among Australian cookery books with its combination of recipes, a guide to wines and pairing wines with dishes, and vignettes on culinary and hosting practice. At the time of its publication it garnered praise in London:

AND there's been London acclaim for an Australian author in recent weeks. Andre L. Simon in the spring number of his London gastronomical journal, "Wine and Food," had nice things to say about John D. Porter's Australian-published "The Chef Suggests'. Says Andre L. Simon 'This is the first book written by an Australian and published in Australia that may be considered a serious attempt at lifting the approach of the people of Australia as a whole to their daily food from the lower ranges of mere feeding to the higher levels of gastronomy.'⁴

"C.B." writing in the Australian magazine *The Bulletin* said it was 'Probably the first book published in Australia to elevate Australian food and wine into world class as material for gastronomic pleasure...'⁵

High praise indeed. Yet the book or Porter doesn't come up in conversations, articles, or papers about Australian cookery books, at least none to my knowledge.

This article aims to redress that.

John D. Porter

I found scant biographical information on John D. Porter. He was an ex-journalist; formed a concert party, Porter's Mob, which entertained troops during World War Two; was the author of *How to Build Caravans* and of *Our Fertile North*; and that he turns his backyard in Melbourne into a cocktail bar for 80 plus guests at Christmas where he cooks a range of meat and game all cooked in Australian wine and some in mud as a result of studying indigenous cuisine in central Australia. He isn't mentioned in Ross Fitzgerald's and Trevor L. Jordan's *Under the Influence. A History of alcohol in Australia*.⁶

¹ Porter, John D. *The Chef Suggests*, National Press 1949 p.11

² Porter... 1949 p.13

³ Porter... 1949 .

⁴ Irving, Freda, 'Author, artist in the news', Roundabout, *The Argus*, 24 May 1950 p.10

⁵ 'Personal Items' 20 December 1950 p.

⁶ Fitzgerald, Ross and Jordan, Trevor L., *Under the Influence. A History of alcohol in Australia* HarperCollins 2009

The aim of the book

Porter in his Introduction says, 'My first object in publishing this book has been to afford you gastronomic pleasure, but I hope, to stimulate your interest in good food and wine.'⁷ To achieve the former, he compiled 'rare and delightful recipes from the four corners of the earth,⁸ and all the interesting and amusing pieces of gastronomic sense or nonsense ... for (the housewife's) joy or edification'.⁹ To achieve the latter he covered all manner of things wine.

The book is informally divided into two parts:

- The first is all about wine and the fusion (pairing) of wine and food.'
- The second is the recipes from the four corners of the earth.

The audience for the book

The 'Australian housewife' who is the audience for the book I suggest is upper middle class, to upper class, not employed in work outside the home, with a better than average household income - at least enough to keep on hand a minimum of white and red wines, sherry and brandy for the preparation of good dishes'.¹⁰ To the charge that this 'savours of extravagance' he replies: 'Extravagance! Why, in very few of the recipes of this book will you find that the extra cost of any dish would involve an extra expense of more than a few pence. But the resulting gain, both in nutritive values and in the extra zest given to the meal, will far outweigh any such small expense'.¹¹

Wine and the fusion (pairing) of wine and food

In this Australia of ours, the lack of imagination concerning excellent wine and good food is lamentable.¹²

Porter gives two reasons for pairing alcohol with food.

First: 'Good food is prepared to be enjoyed and as this enjoyment is to a great extent dependent on the proper functioning of the gastric juices, everything that will assist to the end is to be encouraged.... Anything which adds to the enjoyment, or the anticipated enjoyment of a meal, or the removal of disturbing states of mind, will increase the appetite and promote the normal physiological process of digestion. This is probably the great value of alcohol in civilised life'.¹³

Second: 'When wine joins a meal, the eating gets better. First time you set tooth to such dishes you'll note the difference. The goodness you taste is not the flavour of wine alone. It's the true flavour of the food that wine discovers for you'.¹⁴

⁷ Porter...1949 unpaginated

⁸ The recipes are not 'from the four corners of the earth' They are from a very limited number of different cuisines. There are no recipes from China, Japan, South East Asia, or South Asia for example,⁸

⁹ Porter... 1949 pp.12

¹⁰ Porter ... 1949 pp.11 - 12

¹¹ Porter... 1949 p.12

¹² Porter... 1949 p.13

¹³ Porter... 1949 p.13

¹⁴ Porter... 1949 p.14

What Wines To Serve

We have a long way to go before our more popular types of wines are generally considered a useful adjunct to the meal, rather than a mouth-wash.¹⁵

Porter gives a 'safe guide' for wine and food pairing.

Soup ...Dry sherry ... Serve dry and cool, not ice-cold.

Oysters, Fish, Shellfish - any Dry White Wine ,Chablis...Serve cold (say, 50 degrees F)

Roast Beef, Lamb Steaks, Chops, Pork - Claret ... Serve at room temperature (never off the ice)

Creamed Dishes or White Entrees - Any Dry White Wine

Wild Duck or Game - Burgundy ... Served moderately cool (not iced)

Poultry - Champagne ... Serve ice-cold with poultry, so that the glass becomes bedewed with condensed moisture

Dessert - Port or any other Sweet Wine ... Serve at room temperature. Many connoisseurs prefer a rich Sherry; some Sweet Sauterne

With the coffee - Brandy .. Serve as a liqueur

For afternoons and Evenings - Any wine, but sweet wines or Sweet Sauternes are preferred, served with biscuits or cakes.¹⁶

Customs Regarding Wine Service

Porter describes behaviours which if followed will 'enhance the enjoyment of good wines'.¹⁷

The host and his guests should always regard wines as an accompaniment to a certain type of food.

The host should not reserve the use of wines only to his formal dinners. The use of wine should be increased to a common occurrence.

When serving several wines with a dinner the effect to strive for is one of stepping through the lesser wines to the great wine usually served with game or roast.

He describes Decanting, Opening the bottle and Serving the wine.

Australia's Popular Vintages

Here Porter gives snapshots of 20 styles of wine. For example:

Australian Hock: A dry wine, agreeable grape acidity, slight greenish-amber colour, light in alcohol, mostly made from Pedro and Riesling grapes. The Riesling and Traminer wines are reminiscent of good Rhine wines.¹⁸

Claret: Claret is the popular name applied to any dry, tart, light and medium red table wine of ruby red colour. Wines of this type are the most widely used mealtime wine in almost every country in the world.¹⁹

¹⁵ Porter... 1949 p.17

¹⁶ Porter ... p.45

¹⁷ Porter ... p.31

¹⁸ Porter ... p.47

¹⁹ Porter ... p.49

Muscat: Muscat is a dessert wine made from and having the unmistakable flavour and aroma of Muscat grapes. It ranges in colour from golden and dark amber red.

Foreign Dishes

There are 'foreign dishes' throughout the book. This chapter has recipes for 'hors d'oeuvres', many of them French – for example Anchois Sur Canapes²⁰; Croutes D'Ecrivisses Tartare.²¹

Entertaining

Here Porter suggests food, tableware, crockery, setting and seating for entertaining guests or 'one's women friends' at main meals in the day - Breakfast, Luncheon, Dinner and also for a Buffet.

Buffet service is a happy and popular form of entertainment because seating capacity need not limit the number of guests, and because informality makes service easy. At luncheon, Sunday night supper, afternoon or evening party, guests group themselves, seated or standing, with a pleasant freedom of choice.²²

Recipes from the four corners of the earth²³

Other than Anglo-Australian the cuisine from which the most recipes come, or at least the most dishes are named, is French. For example: Sole A La Vin Blanc²⁴; Frogs Legs A La Poulette²⁵; Foie De Mouton A La Patraque²⁶.

Single entry recipes from other cuisines: there is one nominally Russian – Bortch²⁷; and three nominally Spanish - Catalanian Soup²⁸, Fricasse Of Fowl Espaniola²⁹ Pigeons Seville³⁰; two nominally Italian – Spaghetti Tetrzzini³¹, Chicken Liver A La Italienne³².

The exception here is recipes for curries which have a chapter to themselves. For example: Vegetable Curry³³, Curried Tinned Salmon³⁴, Bombay Curry.³⁵

Whatever the cuisine Porter assures the home cook that 'Although some of the recipes call for several ingredients, they are only what the average housewife has in her kitchen, and all (the recipes) are comparatively simple to make'.³⁶

²⁰ Porter ... p.69

²¹ Porter ... p.70

²² Porter ... pp.39 - 43

²³ Most of the world's cuisine are not covered: Chinese, Japanese, South East Asian, South Asian, Mediterranean, American ...

²⁴ Porter ... p.98

²⁵ Porter ... p.112

²⁶ Porter ... p.125

²⁷ Porter ... p.82

²⁸ Porter ... p.83

²⁹ Porter ... p.138

³⁰ Porter ... p.139

³¹ Porter ... p.112

³² Porter ... p.136

³³ Porter ... 1949 p.168

³⁴ Porter ... 1949 p.168

³⁵ Porter ... 1949 p.169

³⁶ Porter ... 1949 p.12

There is, I believe, hardly another line of human endeavour which requires a greater amount of genuine enthusiasm and devotion to assure ultimate success.³⁷

Recipe Chapter Type 1#

The recipe chapters are of different types. Soup has notes on preparation and classification – clear soup, thick soup, purees. It then has 28 one sentence descriptions of Consommés - clear soups, for example Daumont – Clear beef stock with fine tapioca, and a garnish of champignons and cooked ox palates cut into julienne strips.³⁸ It then has 24 one line descriptions of Creams, Puffs, and Other Thick Soups for example Potage Asparagus – Filtered rice and cream soup, with asparagus points.³⁹ Finally it has full recipes for another 18 soups for example Fish Asturias⁴⁰.

For Every Gourmet

Put into a stew-pan 12 onions, 1 turnip and a head of cabbage, some butter, 1 quart of white stock, stew till tender. Add another quart of stock, pulp the vegetables and boil with the soup for ½ an hour, stirring constantly. Just before serving, stir ½ pint of boiling cream, and about 20 butter-onions pickled and boiled soft in milk and water. Season with salt and cloves, thicken with rice and flour worked with butter.

Recipe Chapter Type 2#

This chapter type is composed of recipes only on one food type like Game and Poultry with recipes for Breasts of Poultry Dolores⁴¹, Duck With Macaroni⁴², Chicken Saute Budapest⁴³ among 15 recipes in the chapter.

Duck With Macaroni

A young duck, 1 lb of tomatoes, 1 gill of red wine, mixed herbs, salt, pepper, butter or oil, macaroni.

Chop the tomatoes and put them in a saucepan with a little butter or oil. Cook till soft, then add the duck, the wine, and the herbs and season with salt and pepper. Chop the duck liver very finely and add it to the sauce. Simmer 1 ½ hours and before serving mix in the macaroni.

Pairing With Wine

Some recipes call for wine in the ingredients - red or white usually but no specific type. None of the recipes are paired with a particular wine. Cooks will have to decide what to pair a dish with by referring back to the guide to pairing in the chapter What Wines To Serve. For example the Consommés as soups pair up with Dry Sherry served dry and cold, not ice cold. Game dishes pair up with Burgundy served moderately cool (not iced).

Desserts With Wine

This chapter has recipes for desserts made with wine as an ingredient. For example Apples Esmeralda made with rum or a Syllabub made from milk or cream, sugar, and sherry.⁴⁴

³⁷ Porter ... 1949 p.15

³⁸ Porter ... 1949 p.77

³⁹ Porter ... 1949 p.79

⁴⁰ Porter ... 1949 p.84

⁴¹ Porter ... 1949 p.136

⁴² Porter ... 1949 p.136

⁴³ Porter ... 1949 p.137

⁴⁴ Porter ... 1949 p.147

Menus

He has 17 pages of suggested Menus each having the dishes and the wine. For example:

Company Dinner In The Oven⁴⁵
Sea Food Cocktail
Crackers
Veal Chops in white wine
Stuffed Baked Potatoes Buttered Broccoli
Bran Muffins, heated
Orange Marmalade
Chilled Sauterne wine or Claret or Burgundy
Apple crisp with top milk
Coffee if desired

Continental Cooking Is Popular

This is a curious item in the book, a one-pager from Melbourne restaurateur Joseph Molina 'who provides continental dishes for his guests who have already cultivated civilising eating habits, writes Porter⁴⁶. Molina says:

'Today I am pleased to find that more and more Australians are showing a preference for continental dishes ... The trend shows Australians are taking a more intelligent interest in what they eat and how it is prepared ... If Australians were bad cooks and eaters before the war (Second World War), it was because they never had been taught the art of eating and drinking.'

It's unclear what the purpose is for this inclusion. I can only guess that it supports Porter's view that the art of cookery is the art of civilisation and that people can be taught the art of eating and drinking.

Outdoor Cooking

This is the last chapter in the book. 'Outdoor fireplace cooking is fast becoming an art among the great majority of Australian holiday-makers'.⁴⁷ This chapter gives them advice on how best to do it from building fireplaces to what to cook.

Meals planned should be simple and accessories should be unbreakable. It's not fun to juggle a lot of utensils and so as much of the food as possible ought to be eaten from the hand. Corn on the cob is a natural and meat eaten on rolls helps.⁴⁸

He also suggests lamb chops, alternated on skewers with small white onions and tomato halves which should be basted with a barbecue sauce.

He then takes the readers on a picnic party, describing the preparation, the cooking and the utensils. 'It's a good idea', he advises, 'to take all the essentials you will need for the meal without relying on the slender hope that this piece of kitchen equipment or parcels of food may be purchased en route'.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Porter ... 1949 p.187

⁴⁶ Porter ... 1949 p.200

⁴⁷ Porter ... 1949 p.211

⁴⁸ Porter ... 1949 p.212

⁴⁹ Porter ... 1949 p.203

Final thoughts

I have endeavoured in some small manner, to place before the Australian housewife the benefits of a more intense study of the culinary art as brought about by the fusion of wine and food.⁵⁰

John D. Porter's *The Chef Suggests* has been lost to the Australian cookery book world. It ought not to be. It is idiosyncratic as the best cookery books are. Porter is an entertaining writer. The subject matter is wide-ranging. He is prodigiously knowledgeable on both wine and food, unusual for that time among cookery book writers. It's cuisine range was limited but that wasn't unusual for the time. There is much in the book worth contemplation and discussion.

⁵⁰ Porter ... 1949 unpaginated