Naturally Delectable

NATURALLY DELECTABLE PORTRAYS CHARLES DARWIN’S documented gustatory penchant for the well-cooked flesh of exotic animals. While studying at Cambridge University, a youthful Darwin belonged to the Glutton Club, whose members were devoted to capturing, cooking, and eating uncommon countryside animals. Later, on his voyage with HMS Beagle, Darwin hunted and ate unfamiliar species, reveling in dining outdoors beside a campfire. In creating Naturally Delectable I explored the uncharted “gaps” within the historical record in order to fictionally reposition the budding naturalist as a prospective author of a series of “New World” cookery books. A tongue-in-cheek blend of fact and fiction, Naturally Delectable’s action occurs during one night in Valparaiso—on the eve of Darwin’s twenty-third birthday—where a small, celebratory dinner is planned.

There is no animal on earth that does not taste delicious when properly cooked. Indeed, my penchant for exotic flesh might appear unholy to those reared on a diet of beef, pork or chicken, however I find it natural to delight in new flavours. In my Cambridge University days a few chums and I founded the Glutton Club, because our palates were bored with the interminable student meals that consisted of ill-cooked roast beef, beer and bread. My living quarters at Cambridge had a small fireplace, in which we were only supposed to cook toast and boil tea. A way was found to mount a roasting tin within the fireplace, and we cooked whatever we could shoot or snare: partridge, badger, quail, squirrel, owl and mole. We even managed to secure a number of guinea pigs, which were delicious, and I successfully preserved the skeleton of one of these small beasts; it now sits in my father’s study at home in Shrewsbury. Much fun was had after these meals; we played charades and shadow puppets, dealt cards and recited poetry. I dare say we drank a little too expansively, but a lot of merriment and intellectual conversation was gained from those evenings.

A modest cookbook arose out of these dinners. It is entitled Charles Darwin’s Countryside Cookery. I was not inclined to place my name in the title, but my publisher insisted that it would add an element of veracity. The book has had limited success in England, but the French translation has enjoyed a modest demand; it is currently in its third edition.

Now, settled on a broad cliff ledge above Valparaiso Bay on the coast of Chile, I can see below me HMS Beagle’s starboard...
lights reflected upon the calm Pacific waters. I walked around the base of these cliffs this morning and the exposed layers of sediment appear to be caused not by a cataclysmic tectonic eruption, but a depository process that seems to have occurred gradually. The weather being inclement, clouds obscure the stars, but in my imagination I can picture the Southern Cross constellation, forever marking the way for travellers such as I. Underneath me, embedded in the striated deposits of the cliff face, lie fossils that perhaps date back millennia. Indeed, the cave behind me contains a plenitude of fossils that I intend to excavate tomorrow. I have made a decent fire from sticks and palm fronds and cleared the surrounding area for our bivouac. When the fire is brightest, my shadow looms large on the cave walls and while the others have been hunting, I spent some time engaged in shadow puppetry, vainly attempting to mimic the motions of the greater rhea, which is related to the ostrich. The days of the Glutton Club seem a world away.

The business of enacting my duties as ship’s naturalist is tiresome to say the least. I would rather spend my time employed in cooking newly discovered animals and collating the best recipes for them; the working title of my current treatise is New World Cookery. There is a burgeoning market tethered to a voracious demand for cookery books in London, and I intend to make my name, and indeed my fortune, with the successful publication of this cookbook. I will exhibit my collection of exotic specimens in the new museum in Covent Garden, which I have booked in advance. I am sure that the show will be well attended and provide an excellent platform from which to sell my cookbook. Having said this, much work is still to be done.

There is an art to removing flesh from a fresh beast in order to preserve the skeleton. In comparison, unearthing fossils is a relatively easy affair, as all that is usually required to remove the surrounding sedimentary layer is the application of water and a fine brush. As a method for fresh flesh removal, roasting seems the best approach. Of course, one needs to know the art of butchery, but the application of heat is the most important transformative element. During the cooking process, one has to keep in mind that the skeleton must be kept in a condition suitable for reassembly. As such, I prefer to do my own cooking. We have limited provisions and utensils, much like when I cooked in my room at Cambridge: a small fire, a frying pan and possibly a little oil to baste with. However, I have managed to secure the skeletons of a number of new specimens, including a cavy, puma, iguana and greater rhea; all of which I have decided taste delicious when cooked in the correct manner. My collection is almost complete. All I require is the full skeleton of the pygmy rhea – which appears to be almost extinct – and we can then set sail for further recipes. I wonder what my Glutton Club chums would exclaim upon tasting the fired flesh of the cavy or the puma. To compare the flesh to chicken or beef does not do it justice; the flavours are exquisite, especially when the meat is slowly roasted among the glowing coals of an open fire.

I could hear the hunting party returning. I do think that at times I was like the savage returning to his wild and native habits. We would expedition all day, and then hunt for our supper, eating hungrily beside a fire. Since it was the twenty-third anniversary of my birth, and despite my protestations, Mr. Martens had insisted upon cooking. (I was not protesting about making a to-do of my birthday, but because Mr. Martens is more accomplished at art rather than cooking.) I did hope that it was not iguana again, as too much of the flesh of that animal makes one’s stomach very disagreeable. Llama would be sufficient, or perhaps a jaguar, although the latter does take rather a long time to render tender to the bite.

Captain Fitzroy strode into the camp first. “Nice fire, Charles. The others won’t be long. Is that cinnamon wine I can smell?”

“Tis indeed, Robert. It is curing my seasickness remarkably quickly.” I secured a mug and ladled a small amount from the pot beside the fire.

“Medicinal for my frayed mind too, I hope.” Robert drank quickly, wiped his whiskers and then helped himself to more wine. “That Martens is a hopeless case when it comes to marksmanship; he should stick to drawing flora and fauna.”

FIGURE 2: The author imagines that a youthful Darwin engaged in the popular pastime of shadow-play.

“Shadow puppet goat” by Double-M (https://www.flickr.com/photos/double-m/345512464/) is licensed under CC BY2.0.
“He is not the best with a rifle, I have to agree, but the light is very dim in the rainforest. However, he is invaluable in providing detailed records for me.”

“That’s all very well, Charles, but he also does away with a gulper of the ship’s brandy every night. I will have to mention it to him if it continues.”

“Yes, Robert. I know. He proclaims that the brandy steadies his drawing hand.” I did not want to point out to the Captain that he himself appeared well under the weather most mornings.

“So how is the book coming along?” asked Robert.

“It is still very much a fledgling work, although I am confident in its trajectory,” I said.

“I realise that you are passionate about cooking, but I really think that you’re missing an opportunity with this naturalist business,” said Robert.

Mr. Martens and his assistant had returned to the camp site and were busying themselves preparing dinner. I enquired as to what was on the menu.

“Cavy dumplings as entrée, and rhea steak to follow,” said Mr. Martens, seemingly oblivious to the smell of burning already emanating from the frying pan. His shoe buckles gleamed in the firelight as he moved to and fro.

“You do not think the fire is a little too hot?” I asked.

“Can’t you find someone else to annoy, Charles?” Mr. Martens gave me a reproachful look. “I don’t tell you how to cook.”

“Sorry old chap. Cavy is my favourite meat after all, it is just I have not seen it cooked quite this way before. Thank you for getting it, I know how troublesome they are to catch.”

I could barely make out what exactly it was that Mr. Martens was cooking. He had hacked the animals into pieces, and no part was instantly recognisable as belonging to any particular beast. It reminded me of buying a pound of flesh from the butcher in the Shrewsbury high street, when one trusts that the meat is beef, and not a knacker’s yard horse. I never thought I would say this, but I do miss roast beef, especially when it is served with mustard and gravy, and oh, a Yorkshire pudding or two.
Nevertheless, I am at least on terra firma and it is such a pleasure of this moment to not be cursed with retching and nausea, which I find takes one over almost as soon as I step on board the ship. It is perhaps owing to this same reason that my appetite has been suppressed while afloat, yet now, on steady feet, my stomach has the chance to feel hunger again. Indeed, I am much interested to satiate my keen palate, regardless of the quality of the food. I have observed that hunger has the capacity to shed civilisation of all its vestments, and a sharp focus of thought is unattainable on an empty stomach.

"Is it ready yet, Martens? We’re wasting away here," Mr. Fitzroy remarked, with only a hint of jocularity in his tone.

"Yes sir. Two shakes of a lamb’s tail and supper will be served." Mr. Martens wiped his perspiring face with his shirt sleeve. "Shall we dress for dinner?" he asked.

Mr. Fitzroy was in no mood for matters of etiquette.

"Look man, I’m wearing clothes. That’s enough isn’t it? Or do you want me to ring for the butler as well?"

Although Robert and I have shared many meals together, I have always had to bite my tongue about remarking on his table habits. His conversation is generally of interest and with good humour, but the coarse manner he employs with men of the lower ranks, coupled with talking with a mouth full of food, does not endear him completely to me. Nevertheless, he keeps a tight ship, the men respect him, and he allows me my indulgences when exploring ashore.

We were served the first course of our supper promptly. Mr. Martens said that the food could have benefited from a little longer on the fire, but that it should still ‘fill a hole’. Upon eating, there was silence for a time. It is an interesting observation of mine that a group of diners, no matter how many in number and how talkative they might be, upon being served a successful dish, fall into a state of contemplative solitude and silence, as if they for a moment become one with the food. I regretfully realised that on this present occasion, a good quality meal was not why my present company and I remained mute.

"What the devil is this muck, Martens?" Robert exclaimed, reaching for his wine mug.

"It is a bit tough, I have to admit," replied Mr. Martens. "Although if it was cooked a touch longer..."
In an effort to deflate the storm of an argument that I knew would soon blow in, I tried to offer a modicum of support to Mr. Martens. “The broth is quite tasty. It is just that, well, the dumplings might have been better with rhea meat, rather than cavy.”

“I don’t know about you, Charles, but I value my few remaining teeth. I can’t eat it.” Having stated this, Robert arose and threw the contents of his plate over the edge of the cliff.

Mr. Martens vainly attempted to finish his portion, but shortly gave up. “Never mind,” he said. “The rhea is almost ready. We are having it carne con cuero.”

“With the skin on?” I asked.

Robert looked at me blackly.

“It’s how the natives do it,” explained Mr. Martens.

“I would have thought rhea skin was much too thick for such a treatment,” said I.

“If this dish is terrible as well, I will command you to row out to the ship to get some salted beef and brandy,” snarled Robert.

Mr. Martens examined the contents of the frying pan and announced that it would soon be ready. There was nothing else to do but wait. Roasting is a cooking method that, because it takes time and requires patience, gives one space for reflection. I find this phenomenon even more pronounced when cooking is exacted upon an open fire. The flames and embers can bewitch and entrance, as if firelight fairies beckon one’s thoughts to spark and burn.

“It was only last week that I realised the cavy is related to the guinea pig,” I remarked to Robert.

He protested, “But the guinea pig is half the size of the cavy. And one runs around on all fours, the other on its hind legs.”

“I did not notice the similarity either. It was only on eating a cavy that the natives had cooked that I realised the resemblance. Not only do they taste the same, but they share a very distinct skeletal feature, peculiar only to a few local species. As I ate, picking away the delicious flesh with my fingers and teeth, the skeleton gradually became evident, and when I realised the significance of my discovery I almost dropped my food.”

Robert laughed. “You almost ate the evidence.”

“Yes, well it is just my luck that there is an abundance of them, unlike the pygmy rhea.”

“Haven’t had any luck there, have you old man?” said Robert.

“I know that beast is missing from your collection but we need to set sail tomorrow. This trade wind won’t last much longer.”

I was not looking forward to leaving. My desire to elicit more recipes from this land was not yet sated and I knew that the imminent journey would provide me with only nausea. At sea, one cannot manage to hold any morsel down for more than a few moments. On regaining solid ground, it takes more than a day for one to recuperate and feel able to walk.

“Are you ready for the main course, gentlemen?” Mr. Martens was openly sweating, and he took pains to lift the lid from the frying pan.

“It actually smells rather good,” declared Robert. “I hope it tastes as much.”

Mr. Martens served the meal and then sat down beside me. The fire was mellowing and threw a dim light, yet I could still see that the meat was burnt. I looked to Robert; he was already eating hungrily, silently staring into the fire. Mr. Martens was similarly disposed. The firelight softened their countenances, while making their eyes gleam bright, and I wondered what a Londoner might make of us, eating with our fingers and with the stars as our roof and the earth as our table. I hazarded a bite of the least burnt portion of the meat and started to chew. It was quite unlike anything I had tasted before. The flavour was exquisite and revelatory. The crisp skin, juxtaposed with the tender flesh, seemed an alchemical match. Silence reigned. I noted to myself that I must get another rhea in order to correctly notate the cooking process.

“Martens, you’ve outdone yourself!” Robert finally exclaimed.

“Oh, that’s a relief. I wasn’t sure whether the juvenile rheas would be as tasty as the adult ones,” replied Mr. Martens.

“Juvenile?” I asked. “But it is not the time of year for young rheas to be foraging.” My stomach was full, but I felt it turn on itself. I stood up and went over to the remains of the food in the frying pan. In the dim light, I picked through the burnt flesh and butchered bones. Amongst the debris were the charred feet and the crushed skull of the pygmy rhea. Well, that is that, I thought to myself. I could not reassemble the detritus into a skeleton fit for exhibition, nor could I include the remains in my treatise. There was no time to catch another specimen. My only hope was that our next destination – the Galapagos Archipelago – would perhaps embrace one or two new animals to add to my recipe collection.

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