

# Dishes I Have Tasted ONCE

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Always Athirst for Knowledge, I Tackled It.

MY GRANDFATHER was a devoted stamp collector. He told me once that the sight of a blue Mauritius something-or-other stamp in a friend's album made him feel capable of murder. I had an aunt who spent her entire life and an annuity acquiring china plates which nobody was ever allowed to use. My father had so much pewter in his home that the place almost tinkled as you crossed the threshold. My only sister has a unique assortment of samplers to show for a life of industry and vigilance. Is it any wonder that I inherited the collecting habit?

My acquisitive instinct, however, has taken an entirely different turn. I am a collector of tastes. Not tastes in art, mind you. Nothing to do with old masters, prints, books and that sort of thing. When I say I collect tastes, I mean tastes—flavors, savors, and so on. From early childhood the gustatory novelty has possessed an inordinate charm for me. I have a seemingly inexhaustible curiosity where unheard-of edibles are concerned. Oddly enough, I am neither a gourmand nor a gourmet. I have not even a normal sized appetite. With me the novelty's the thing. Needless to say, this rather unusual form of the collecting mania from which I suffer has led me into many queer gastronomic adventures, some of which have proved most amusing as well as highly instructive. The first diversion in digestion which I remember embarking on took place when I was a lad of twelve, and had to do with that ornithological malefactor known as a butcher-bird.

Gentle reader, let me warn you in advance. If any one should place before you a well appearing platter in which alluringly nestles a broiled member of the butcher-bird family, refuse it, I beg. It is not a nice dish. Really, truly, it is not.

As a boy I lived in Australia, and it was there that I handled my first gun. It was presented to me on my twelfth birthday, and with it I was also given most explicit instructions about its use and abuse. Among the ten commandments there was one special warning against ruthless destruction. I was given to understand that killing for the sheer lust of killing was not considered good form. I had to promise to shoot only for educational purposes or to obtain food. At the age of twelve one's knowledge of ornithology and zoology is likely to be somewhat restricted, and it was this ignorance, coupled to my youthful vow to eat what I shot if it did not possess educational value, that led me into the untoward regions of the *Lanius borealis*.

Fifteen miles away from the city of Melbourne is a delightful hilly district known as Diamond Creek, and for some inexplicable reason which I have never been able to fathom I decided that Diamond Creek should be the scene of my first attack on the brute creation. There in its wattle-scented bush I trudged, my heart beating with excitement and my brand new single-barrel breech-loader horribly ready for Heaven knows what. I do not know to this day if any animal more ferocious than a cow has ever disturbed the peaceful serenity of Diamond Creek.

In and out of the gum tree cloisters I scraped and snooped and dodged, aping the heroes of all the hunting stories I had ever read. A frightful impatience to kill something spurred my efforts. I simply had to use my new gun. On and on I panted till at last I saw a strange looking bird alight on top of a blue gum. A joyful tremor went through me. My sporting ethics had not advanced far enough at that time to spurn a "sitting" target. I crept beneath the tree. I poised my gun. I

took aim. I pulled the trigger. Bang! and oh, joy of joys! down fell my first "game."

Let poets poetize if they will about first love and that sort of thing. Tush, pish and likewise bosh! I know something much thriller. There is no sensation in life to compare with one's first kill! To my boy's eyes my bird seemed the largest, wildest and most ferocious thing in the world. In reality, it was a little larger than a robin, light gray on the breast, dark slate on the back. The contour of its beak should have made me suspicious, but joy obscured all critical sense of vision. I looked at the bird. It was quite strange to me. I had never seen its like before. I did not even know its name. There was no one near to inform me. The possibility of getting any educational advantage out of my slaughter seemed remote. I was very much puzzled.

The sun was straight overhead. That meant lunch. The brilliant inspiration came to me that in obedience to my promise I ought to eat my prey. A small creek was at hand. I plucked my bird. I disposed of his superfluous interior as well as I could. I cleaned him in the creek as a boy cleans things. Made an amateur spit. Then a fire. Patiently roasted my quarry. And then I ate him. The flavor seemed a little disappointing. It did not taste anything like the kind of game I got at home. It tasted almost "queer." I attributed this to my inexperience in cooking, lack of proper facilities, absence of salt and other necessary details. Such a blasphemous thought as blaming my bird did not enter my head.

Several days later I again went shooting, this time accompanied by a much older boy, who knew lots and lots about game and bushlore and things. I had tried to tell him all about my bird, but had not succeeded in conveying a picture vivid enough for him to recognize. To my delight, shortly after we had plunged into the bush I brought down another of these gray birds and proudly came running to where my companion was, to show him my prize. To my amazed horror he burst out laughing.

"And is that the kind of bird you ate?" he roared. "Do you know what that is?"

"No."

"That," he answered, "is a butcher-bird! It's carnivorous! Lives on other birds, mice, frogs,



It Was Indeed a Most Curious Looking Dish.

wasps and big insects. Golly! You might as well have eaten crow!"

I did not dare to tell him that at that stage of my ornithological development I would have eaten a crow. How was I to know that certain birds have diets that are not looked upon as respectable? How did I know that what a bird eats makes a difference in what you eat? To me at that time, birds were birds. I discovered later that my butcher-bird belonged to the Shrike family and had really very bad habits. I learned that it was quite as promiscuous in its choice of food as, say, a young sportsman of twelve.

## KAVA THE KINETIC.

I don't suppose many of my readers have ever sipped the delectable thirst destroyer made from the macerated *Rhizome of the Piperaceae*? Probably not. I sincerely hope not. Its native heath is Samoa, where it masquerades under various aliases. Sometimes it is called Kava. Then again Arva, or Ava, or Yawa. It is not by accident, either, that it comes by its spray of titles. You see, if you once drink Kava you cannot be induced to do it twice, if you know it is Kava. But under the sober sounding sobriquet of Ava or Yawa, how are you to know it is the same explosive liquid that as Kava felled you the first time? I had often read of the celestial inspiration to be derived from Hashish, Saké, and other exotic liquors, and before landing in Apia, I used to wonder if Robert Louis Stevenson's affluatus had ever received any assistance from Kava. Today I am firm in the belief that it had not.

It was almost under the shadow of Stevenson's own Vailima that my one brief, never-to-be-forgotten plunge into a bowl of Kava splashed its way indelibly into my personal history. Afflicted with that intense form of molecular curiosity possessed only by tourists and newspaper reporters, I had sneaked off by myself to pay a visit to a native hut. There in a cone-shaped thatched, beehive-like abode of smell I was invited to try the famous Samoan drink. A handsome specimen of the now rare handmade bowls was handed me. It contained a whitey-gray liquid much befrothed, resembling for all the world that which is found in the humble boiler on Mondays after the linen has just been hung out to dry.

Always athirst for knowledge, I tackled it. My first sip tasted all right, and I think it became perhaps a little overconfident and increased the pressure of my intake too speedily. Without going into too many preliminary details, it is enough to say that five minutes after my first sip I was whirling through Elysian fields at one thousand miles an hour, seated in a ruby-studded monoplane made of gold and mother-of-pearl. Twelve blond angels were piloting me and they kept singing my favorite hymns. There was an odor of violets everywhere, and a wondrous sunset.

When I came to I was lying in what would have been a corner of the hut if it had not been built quite round, and a rather copiously built Samoan lady was smiling tolerantly at me while she fanned me with a Tapa cloth. One of the native gentlemen present looked at me with a pained expression, which I did not at first understand, until it was explained that I had indulged in impulsive language directed at his ancestry just before volplaning through the heavens. I have a vague recollection that I apologized or something.

I was also presented with an inventory tabulating various articles of furniture and expensive heirlooms which had somehow or other been utterly destroyed during my Kavagaries. Under ordinary circumstances I consider it rather vulgar to tell people what one pays for things, but I think you will forgive me if I mention that that one bowl of Kava cost me in hard cash \$18.50. It is beyond all question the most expensive drink I have ever indulged in. And I am giving you only its cost in mere dollars and cents. The price I paid in anguish, remorse and remembrance cannot be calculated in coin of any realm.

And now a word or two about the manner of making this Samoan Nut Sundae. Large, copper-colored ladies, whose facilities for mastication are considered perfect, chew the root of the Kava plant until it is time to—er—er—er—you know, into the Kava bowl. Then water and coconut milk are added. The concoction is allowed to ferment. Then it is ready to shoot. Drinking Kava is highly favored as an indoor sport by the natives in many of the islands of the Pacific, but I do not believe that the prospects are good for importing the pastime into America.

A year or two ago a New York hotel had the following announcement glaring proudly in large type on top of its already wondrous Christmas menu:

Special! Haunch of Imported Australian Kangaroo. \$4.00 per person.

As soon as I saw it I had an instant attack of ingrowing laughter. Four dollars for a portion of kangaroo! Real money being asked for eating it, instead of money being offered! And at Christmas! Seeing kangaroo on that

menu recalled a painful experience I once survived.

On a fishing and shooting expedition in a remote corner of New South Wales, meat became rather scarce. The surrounding country not being the kind that rabbits could live in, our menu consisted variously and intermittently of plover, snipe, flock pigeons, fish, vegetables and fruit. The presence of three or four hunting dogs served to make the absence of meat a little more acute, and it was my duty to go off and pot a Wallaby or two now and then in order that the dogs should have fresh food without cutting in on our own larder. A Wallaby, as you may know, is just one of the forty varieties of kangaroo with which Australia is more or less blessed.

One day we found ourselves almost entirely out of supplies. With no immediate opportunity of receiving any, I made up my mind to try an experiment and add roast Wallaby to the bill of fare for supper. Now, the only part of the animal that is considered even edible for human beings is the hindquarters. And thereby hangs this tale. All the kangaroo family, as you know, are singularly gifted in the graceful art of jumping, and an all-bountiful Nature has seen to it that Wallabies are provided with adequate muscular development precisely where it is most needed. I make no pretence at flattery when I pay my honest tribute to the magnificent upholstery possessed by the hindquarters of a Wallaby, alive or roasted. When I attempted to dispose of my portion of the succulent dish that was set before me I found it difficult to believe that my teeth were struggling with something that had once been animate. It seemed as if an automobile tire stricken with wanderlust had strayed into my dish. It possessed a Krupp-like recoil that acted reflexly. And the flavor! Well, the flavor of roast Wallaby is supplied entirely by the imagination.

If a Wallaby's hindquarters are really the result of a vegetarian diet, then we meat-eating creatures are all making a very sad mistake. Anyhow, vivid as my experience was, there was one consolation to it. I did not pay \$4 a portion for it.

## SITTING DOWN TO DIAMOND SNAKE A L'AUSTRALIENNE.

Experienced bushwhackers had often told me that the Australian aboriginals looked upon snakes as more or less of a table delicacy, but having come in actual contact with these smellful black gentlemen from time to time, they had not particularly impressed me with their judgment on gustatorial matters. However, when the prospect of tasting a piece of snake was put before me I put my preconceived notions aside and commenced reasoning the matter out with myself. I felt forced to admit that a great deal of perhaps undeserved prejudice existed against snakes. Their habits might not be really bad, I thought, if we judged them from a reptilian point of view. I succeeded in convincing myself that eating snake would be a perfectly legitimate experiment for me to undertake, provided I chose a non-venomous specimen.

So one day in the bush, on a Wallaby hunt, Fate led me to cross the path of a huge diamond snake, about six feet long and correspondingly wide-girthed. He was sprawling on the trail at full length enjoying a noontday siesta. A tremendous bulge amidships told me that he had just finished lunch, and there he was sleeping his way to perfect assimilation. I interrupted his slumbers rather rudely by blowing his head off. Then I opened him up and extracted a large wombat, which had provided Mr. Snake with his midday meal. I next skinned him and left him to wriggle until the sun went down. When the time arrived to prepare him for dinner I had him coiled up in a ball of clay according to the native method and baked.

In the search for knowledge there must be martyrs, of course, but I will gracefully step aside in future and let who will wrest from me without a struggle the right to inform a waiting world what it feels like to indulge in diamond snake baked a l'australienne. The experience is not easy to describe. The flavor is elusive almost to the point of vanishing. Most of the time you are too busy working your muscles to be able to detect any at all. Can you imagine having a quart of chewing gum suddenly thrust into your unwilling mouth in such a way that you cannot get it out? Well, that's how a mouthful of snake behaves. The first piece I tried to bite seemed to bite back at me. I tried again. Back it sprang. It resisted quite regularly. The combat continued unevenly for about five minutes, when I resolved to throw up the sponge and leave all honors with the snake. I departed from the fray still hungry, but glowing with the feeling of having done something for the world.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica says the bandicoot, when cooked, resembles pork. The native blacks of Australia agree with this dictum. I do not know whether they derived their opinion from the Encyclo-



In a Few Moments He Returned and Handed Me Something Semi-Liquid.

paedia Britannica or the Encyclopaedia Britannica derived its opinion from them. Be it as it may, I beg leave to differ from both.

Seated on the bank of a creek one day in New South Wales, I was busily removing leeches from the inside of my leggings, when a flash of brown fur whipped across my path. I grabbed up my gun and let drive at the curious creature, and when I hopped on one leg to the scene of its demise I picked up what looked like a colossal guinea pig masquerading as a rat. It was a bandicoot. In case you have never met one, I may say that the bandicoot is one of the hundreds of marsupials that seem to have chosen Australia as their sole habitat. My native boy told me excitedly that bandicoot was grand to eat—"all the same them plurry pfeller pig"—and so I had the one I shot taken home and roasted.

I have never seen anything on a dish that had such a far-off, hopeless look as that particular specimen of the *Peramelidae* when it appeared on the table. Its upturned head had a sort of appeal about them which a less abandoned appetite must surely have heeded. The accompanying garland of parsley served only to accentuate the solemnity of the occasion; but I was deaf, dumb and blind to reason. I advanced, knife in hand, with the keen anticipation of the gastronomic explorer.

It took three bites for me to achieve the distinguished honor of being able to differ from the Encyclopaedia Britannica. To me the bandicoot does not taste like roast pork, or pickled pork, or boiled pork, or any pork. I don't care what any book says. Although I have never knowingly tasted roasted house rat, I have a well defined belief that that is what the flavor of bandicoot really resembles. And in any case, if you believe in the infallibility of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and prefer its opinion to mine, all you have to do is to get hold of the first bandicoot you meet, roast it, and taste it yourself.

## A BOUT WITH FRIED OCTOPUS.

Here is a little inside war news. Now that Italy has taken a hand in the struggle, let me prophesy that even if her entire navy be sunk all the blockades in the world will not starve her into submission. I know this for a fact,



The First Piece I Tried to Bite Seemed to Bite Back at Me.

and I don't mind confessing that I have "inside" information. Not before every cobblestone in the city has disappeared will any Italian garrison consider such a thing as surrender. By the time the citizens of any other besieged country in Europe would be dying of famine, the merry sons of Italy will be subsisting blithely on a diet of public buildings, old masters and sea water. The Italians can eat anything.

On a cruise in the Mediterranean some years ago I put in at the delightful island of Ischia, in the Gulf of Naples. It is a beautiful and historic spot, but it is not its scenery I want to talk about just now. In the chief hotel there I had one of my choicest gustatory adventures. I saw a name on the menu that sounded musical to me, so I pointed at it. An obliging waiter brought it.

It was indeed a most curious looking dish. It appeared to be a large, horny tarantula that had committed suicide in a bowl of oil. At first I thought it must be a table decoration or a souvenir of my visit. But, no; I saw the same dish handed to other guests, who began to eat it. It turned out to be that popular Neapolitan delicacy, fried octopus. I thought of American cartoons, the Standard Oil Company and Dante. Then that chronic, inordinate curiosity for new experiences from which I suffer swept over me. I gazed once more at the repulsive looking thing and gulped down a piece. As it forced its way down my oesophagus I had the sensation of a small balloon bursting within me and then inflating again.

Fried octopus is a very satisfying dish. One piece satisfied me. It took several glasses of water to remove the queer feeling I had of having swallowed something alive. I retained a ticklish sensation in the throat for hours. Octopus is hardly the thing one should partake of before going to sea or up in an aeroplane.

Haven't you in your secret stomach dreamed of one day sipping a cup of real, honest-to-goodness Mocha? Haven't you imagined your self in a spice-laden Arabian-Nights setting regaling yourself with the fragrant brew while the dancers tinkled and the Muezzin called, and all those other lovely Eastern things happened?

## TRACKING ARABIAN COFFEE TO ITS NATIVE LAIR.

For years and years I had longed to meet a cup of Mocha in its native lair, far from where slant-eyed suspicion could poison the cup with doubts of its genuineness. So when at last I found myself at Aden, I dashed madly to a coffee-house where the delectable Arabian brew was said to be had. I do not think it could have been a very high-class coffee house the *wahid* led me to. It did not smell aristocratic. But I cared not. Was I not in the sacred land of the original coffee bean? In a fever of anticipation I called for a cup of Mocha. A smiling son of the Prophet salaamed gracefully and withdrew with a confident air. I began to feel just like Haroun al Raschid.

In a few moments he returned and handed me something semi-liquid, of about the same consistency as honey, in a cup that strongly resembled the receptacle an Englishman uses for boiled eggs. I tried it, and instantly found it guilty. I tried it again. I stirred it. That seemed to irritate the thing, and bring out all its worst characteristics. I tried coaxing it. It tasted like Portland cement through which a little—a very little—molasses had been permitted to percolate. It was too thick to drink or inhale, so I attempted to chew it. Evidently I was not educated up to the stuff.

They say that in time one gets to like it. But I hadn't the time. And I met many fellow travellers who expressed themselves in just the same way about it. I have a sneaking suspicion that the Arab who kept the coffee house may have been conducting a little *jihad* of his own against the dog of an unbeliever. At least that is how his coffee tasted.