

Plate Up

15 September – 4 November 2018

Co-curated by Michael Wignall, innovator, well-travelled individual and lauded chef, *Plate Up* shows the skill, individuality and beauty of a selection of handmade work, ranging from plates to furniture, which Michael might choose to use in his restaurants. The exhibition marks a radical departure from the dominance of the plain white plate that has reigned supreme for the past twenty years of fine dining, and celebrates a growing trend for hand-made wares of distinction taking their place at the top table.

Some of the work Michael has chosen for *Plate Up* is not the obvious choice for a busy restaurant kitchen. Many of the pieces are robust but some of the tableware is not the sort of thing you would put into a dishwasher or throw into a sink full of hot water;

delicate, hand carved wooden spoons for example. Michael's view on this is, if the pieces are beautiful, then they will be treated with respect by those who handle and use them. In his words, 'practicality is a consideration but beauty is just as important.'

His collaborations with artists and craftspeople who work on a small scale are an important part of his ethos and partly influenced by his travels in Japan. *Plate Up* has a more than a passing nod to a Japanese aesthetic as Michael is a fan of Japanese cooking and, most importantly, admires the care and attention to detail which is embedded within Japanese cultural life.



Image: David White spoons

Michael also believes that chefs have a responsibility to their customers, not just in the way the food they serve looks and tastes, but in the way it is grown, from farm to plate. He is a firm supporter of ethical husbandry¹, a way of producing food which not only demands the highest standards of animal welfare and is much better for the environment, but also produces better food. In answer to the question ‘What do you cook at home?’ Michael replied that he cooks fairly simple food but believes that cooks should always buy the best ingredients that they can afford. And Michael’s main piece of advice to aspiring chefs? ‘The most important thing is to believe in what you do.’

So what about those Michelin stars? Are they a mark of quality or a straitjacket for chefs? It is difficult to work out exactly what criteria Michelin use to award their stars as the inspectors are anonymous and therefore don’t discuss their work publicly. It’s even difficult to work out if the stars go to the restaurant or to the chef and recently there have been tales of restaurants handing back their stars as apparently the star, or stars, can result in unrealistic expectations of the restaurant. Either way, Michael is comfortable with his stars, and they are his, as it was his cooking that warranted the awards. He believes that any chef who claims not to care about stars is probably not being entirely honest. The Michelin stars are a mark of quality and, as such, raise the standards of the industry overall.

‘Your eyes are bigger than your stomach’, the phrase that so many children are presented with when they fail to finish food, is applicable to all of us. We eat to sustain life but our food, its preparation and consumption, engages all our senses – touch, taste, sound, smell and sight – simultaneously. No wonder we are obsessed by food, from its production through to its appearance on our plates and, increasingly, its relationship



Motocists will be
Overlooking a Good Thing
if they neglect to obtain a copy of the
Michelin Guide to the British Isles.
Everything you want to know about anywhere you want to go is fully set out in this handy volume
Little John Day
Hurt him his way
And didn't know how to find it;
Now he takes on his ride
A new Michelin Guide.
And, like me, he is always behind it.
Note.—In view of the enormous number of roads that exist, I hereby do solemnly declare that the said "JOHN DAY" is no
man in to me as "LITTLE BOPEEP".
The British Guide can be obtained from the Michelin Trading Office on receipt of 6d. in stamps to cover postage, packing, etc.
or a copy can be procured from any Michelin Stockist.
MICHELIN TYRE CO., LTD.,
81, FULHAM ROAD, CHELSEA, LONDON, S.W.
Telephone: 4999 Kensington 44 Bank
Telegrams: "Pneumatic" or
"Michelin", London.

¹ www.ciwf.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2008/e/ethical_approach_to_farm_animal_husbandry.pdf

to our health, its provenance and ethical considerations. Do we have too much of it or not enough of it?

Is it home-grown, factory-farmed, eaten in a fine restaurant or collected from food aid or a food bank? Food is a domestic issue, a world issue and a political issue but that doesn't detract from the human drive to make food as delicious and beautifully presented as we know how.

Cooking and serving food is of course subject to trends, supply chains and social circumstances. In Elizabethan England forks were still a rarity on the table but swan, lark and porpoise were not. In Georgian England, Parson 'James Woodforde sat down to fresh salmon, roast mutton, fricasseed rabbit, roast ducks with peas, currant pie and syllabubs, with a dessert of strawberries, cherries and currants'², while in 1750 poor Londoners, including children, managed to get through 11 million gallons of gin³ but had a very limited diet.

Victorian Britain followed a similar pattern of plenty for the wealthy but not much for the poor, with the saving grace that at the start of the 19th century almost all food was still produced locally, and since four-fifths of the population still lived in the countryside, the less well-off had access to fresh produce.

As more people moved into the cities however, it became imperative to find new ways to transport and store food. The arrival of the railways made it possible to move basic foodstuffs – flour, potatoes, root vegetables and beer – at speed, and over great distances. Other innovations that made distributing food easier included long-life products such as condensed milk, dried eggs and soups, and bottled sauces. Britain's first large-scale meat-canning factory was set up in 1865, and by the 1870s almost every middle-class kitchen had a tin opener. In the 1880s the refrigerated transport of meat became possible, opening up the option of large-scale imports from the Americas. Meat became cheaper, and a regular part of the diet of all classes for the first time.⁴

² www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/georgians/food-and-health

³ www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/georgians/food-and-health

⁴ www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/victorian/food-and-health



In 1861, Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* became a best seller; recipes, with precise instructions on ingredients and cooking times, went mainstream and illustrations of food presentation gave cooks new aspirations.

Image left: Salads from an early edition of *Mrs Beeton*



By 1914, Britain had come to rely heavily on imported food – 80% of wheat, 40% of meat and almost all sugar was imported. Wartime shortages, high prices and inequalities of distribution meant that hardship, hunger and even outbreaks of scurvy were making a comeback. Voluntary restraint was tried for a while but was neither fair nor sufficient. When it was realised, early in 1918, that the country's stocks of food had dwindled to just three or four weeks supply, rationing was introduced in the country for the first time. Lloyd George's message-on-a-butter dish (above): eat less to save the Empire, is part of a small but long tradition of ceramic 'message' wares.

Those of us old enough to have parents who lived through WW2 will remember other post-war household 'norms' which included plain, utilitarian crockery (now looking rather stylish with the passing of time), tinned fruit, dried egg and camp coffee. Post-war rationing



ended at midnight on 4 July, 1954 marking the end of fourteen years of restricted food supplies.

Food was still a dull business in many households but everything was rapidly changing: the influence of other cultures and new ingredients. Once again plentiful supplies, ignited a new age of food appreciation, fine dining and home cooking.



By the time we reach the 1970s, cookery books are everywhere and there really is a recipe book, *Buffets and Receptions* - aimed at chefs - that has a recipe for an asparagus, olive, egg and margarine peacock. The body is sculpted from margarine, the tail is asparagus and the 'eyes' are

slices of egg topped with olive slices – which just goes to show that not all cookery books are useful.

The 1960s and 70s saw a new wave of interest in whole foods, 'growing your own' and eating for health as well as from hunger or for pleasure. This was accompanied by a renaissance for small scale craft producers fed by a trend for handmade products, a position that has continued to grow since then and, happily, shows no sign of slackening off. The twenty-first century now sees chefs moving into the world of environmental hydroponics. An example of this is the Evogro plant system at the entrance of our gallery.

Most of us love food and some of us love cooking, but apparently we British now spend an average of five hours per week consuming 'food media' (TV, social media, websites and blogs) but only four hours per week *actually* cooking.⁵

Where early cookery programmes showed us *how* to cook, they are now more often competitions where contestants are eliminated when their cooking fails to impress the judges. This doesn't give us as much

⁵ Emma Mills, *The Telegraph*, 22/09/16

information about food or its presentation but for some reason has an enormous attraction for viewers.

The twenty-two exhibitors chosen by Michael, are makers of distinction who have produced beautiful work including spoons, individual plates and bowls, elegant glass, surprising chairs, lighting and razor sharp knives. The pieces all have many hours of painstaking work behind them, will age gracefully and, in many cases, will last several lifetimes.

Devon Guild of Craftsmen is very grateful to Michael for giving us his time and his choices for this exhibition and for his support for independent craft makers. We also hope *Plate Up* will ignite or further our exhibition visitors' interest in craft and the art of food presentation.

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Further images and information can be found on the Devon Guild website www.crafts.org.uk

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We encourage visits from schools, colleges and community groups. Let us know in advance and we can arrange an introductory talk & tour of a particular exhibition.

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