

The ultimate literary lunch

Virginia Woolf's clafoutis, Kafka's miso, Austen's eggs – a novel set of recipes is cooking up a storm on stage in Paris. **C J Schüler** gets a taste of the culinary action



On a mild spring evening in Paris, a crowd gathers outside the pretty, early 19th-century Théâtre de l'Atelier in a quiet square near where the funicular railway leads to Montmartre. The fashionable and the bookish, the young and the elderly, they mill around beneath the trees and spill out from the brasserie opposite. Soon, the lobby of the theatre is packed, and a crush for tickets ensues.

They have come to hear some of France's most popular and distinguished actors reading from one of the most curious literary phenomena of recent years. *Kafka's Soup*, written and illustrated by Mark Crick, is "a history of world literature in 14 recipes", from fenkata à la Homer to rich chocolate cake à la Irvine Welsh.

A little gem of literary impersonation, it was first published just over a year ago by a small British press, quickly gathered a cult following, and now has such a worldwide following that it can draw actors of the calibre of Irène Jacob, so memorable in the Kieslowski films *The Double Life of Véronique* and *Three Colours: Red*, Isabelle Carré, most recently seen in Alain Resnais' *Coeurs*, Denis

Podalydès, one of France's most respected classical actors, and Jérôme Kircher, Antonio Interlandi and Joakim Latzko.

What we get is no straightforward reading, but a graceful *mise-en-scène* by the film director Brice Cauvin. The cast take the stage in their own clothes and lounge on assorted chairs, sofas and the floor like a group of friends settling down for a chat or a round of party games. "It was a very spontaneous reading, a creative and amusing thing to do," Jacob says afterwards. "I like the easiness of the book – it's not very pretentious. It's just offering the glimpse of a smile. I love the illustrations – the line of the eggs is the profile of Virginia Woolf. I'm sure it required a lot of work, but it doesn't feel like it."

At the Paris reading, some of the recipes are presented as dialogues, and others as narratives within the narrative. Denis Podalydès reads the part of the Marquis de Sade, before introducing his heroine Justine, played by Jacob, who recalls how she watched through the keyhole as her captor, Judge Hugon, stuffed a brace of poussins: "I had no idea that a small bird could take so much stuffing, but he carried on, using language that my ears could barely suffer, until the poor bird could take no more."

A piece of playful cross-casting has Carré as an ageing, aristocratic German gourmand lusting after a young Polish boy in the Thomas Mann parody, while Podalydès and Kircher are a pair of laconic Pinter protagonists, rustling up cheese on toast in a seedy kitchen. And Marcel Proust's account of how the scent of amaretto revives the elusive memory of a long-forgotten recipe for tiramisu is greeted by amused and delighted recognition.

By way of a finale, one of the actors picks up a guitar while Carré and Jacob sing Chaucer's recipe for onion tart, before the cast are joined on stage by the tall, bohemian figure of the author to enthusiastic and prolonged applause.

It was over dinner with friends, appropriately enough, that Mark Crick, a London-based photographer, conceived the idea of writing a series of recipes in the style of the great writers. "The treatment of the recipes," Crick recalls, "inevitably overflowed the confines of the kitchen as the book became a series of short stories."

Sophisticated and playful, these are affectionate parodies of great writers. Kafka has friends to dinner, but there's nothing in the fridge, and his guests have metamorphosed into an inquisitorial panel. Guilt and

shame overwhelm him as they sit in judgement on his culinary inadequacy.

Jane Austen's tarragon eggs go forth into the world in search of a socially advantageous match. Graham Greene, who is preparing Vietnamese chicken for an unnamed woman visitor, dabs glumly at a spreading stain on his white shirt-front as the twilight congeals. And for the woman preparing mushroom risotto à la John Steinbeck, "It wasn't meat and potatoes, but at least her family would eat tonight."

Virginia Woolf's Clafoutis Grandmère – a French cherry tart – is a beautifully sustained stream of consciousness that spirals away from the bowl of unpitted cherries – "so bright and jolly, their little core of hardness invisible" – to meditate on demons, angels and the inexorable passing of time.

At the time, Crick was doing a photoshoot in Qatar for the small independent publisher Libri, which specialised in Islamic art and Egyptology. He persuaded its editorial director, Anna Lethbridge, to take on the book.

Crick illustrated the book in the style of artists such as De Chirico, Egon Schiele, Hogarth and Henry Moore, and the Warhol soup can that illustrates the Kafka pastiche provides a striking cover image.

After garnering a handful of good reviews in the UK press, the book was picked up by Waterstone's and, over the following year, acquired a cult following by word of mouth.

A small theatre company in the West Country even began using the recipes as audition pieces. Then, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, foreign publishers began bidding briskly for the rights. Since then, it has been published in 23 countries and translated into 18 languages. When the book was published in Croatia, it knocked *The Da Vinci Code* off the No 1 spot in the bestseller lists.

Harcourt snapped up the US rights, and on its appearance there before Christmas the *New York Observer's* books editor left Thomas Pynchon's indigestible *Against the Day* on the side of his plate and turned with relief to this "scrumptious pastiche of the well-read cook". *The New York Times* reprinted the Raymond Chandler recipe, while the Detroit Free Press bizarrely named it one of its "10 best spiritual books of 2006".

In the course of its travels, *Kafka's Soup* has gained two more recipes: Röstli à la Thomas Mann for the German edition, and Moules Marinières à la Italo Calvino for the Italian. Both are included in the French edition. They will be also appear in the UK pa-

perback, which will be published by Granta Books in November, along with a new recipe à la Charles Dickens.

It may seem strange that a book whose appeal rests so heavily on the accurate mimicry of style should do so well in translation. But the concept seems to have an international appeal, and Crick has been served well by his translators. And, as he points out, the reverential literary culture of many continental European nations means that they turn to the English "as a force of eccentricity and creativity".

The German edition, *Die Suppe des Herrn K*, was translated by Jim Crace's regular German translator, Walter Ahlers. It was launched with a formal dinner at the restored Alte Kommandatur on Unter den Linden (now the headquarters of the publisher Bertelsmann), at which some of the recipes were served, and between courses readings were given in English by the author and in German by the actress Anna Thalbach, best known for her roles in *Heimat* and *Downfall*.

The French publisher Flammarion hit on a more radical plan: each recipe was rendered into French by a different translator, specialising in the author being parodied, to ensure that the parodies were as accurate

as possible. The initial French print run of 15,000 sold out before Christmas, and the book has been twice reprinted.

Part of the book's appeal lies in the fact that the recipes – all trusty staples, each preceded by a list of ingredients – actually work. The evening at the Théâtre de l'Atelier grew out of a private dinner in an apartment over the Gare St-Lazare, at which selections from the book were read.

Crick seems unfazed by the success of *Kafka's Soup*. It was "much more encouraging than I'd hoped," he says calmly. He still works as a photographer, despite the launches, signings and festivals, although his first book has encouraged him to set aside more time for writing. He is currently working on a historical novel, and a follow-up to *Kafka's Soup*, which will have a further selection of writers, from Julius Caesar to Milan Kundera, dispensing culinary tips.

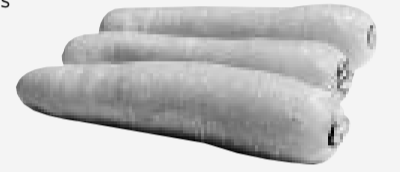
"It's an opportunity to rectify some omissions," Crick says. "I really wanted to do Dickens, and Dostoyevsky, and Jean-Paul Sartre. I could have him unblocking a sink – always a nauseous job."

Kafka's Soup by Mark Crick is published by Libri, priced £9.99

DOMESTIC GODS AND GODDESSES

LAMB WITH DILL SAUCE A LA RAYMOND CHANDLER

1kg lean leg of lamb, cut into large chunks
1 onion, sliced
1 carrot, cut into sticks
1 tablespoon crushed dill seeds, or 3-4 sprigs fresh dill
1 bay leaf, 12 peppercorns
1/2 teaspoon salt
850ml chicken stock
50g butter
1 tablespoon plain flour
1 egg yolk
3 tablespoons cream
2 teaspoons lemon juice
Freshly ground black pepper



I took hold of the joint. It felt cold and damp, like a coroner's handshake. I took out a knife and cut the lamb into pieces. Feeling the blade in my hand I sliced an onion, and before I knew what I was doing a carrot lay in pieces on the slab. None of them moved... They had it coming to them.

TARRAGON EGGS A LA JANE AUSTEN

40g butter
4 eggs
Ground pepper
Pinch of salt
2 teaspoons tarragon (fresh or dried)



Mrs B – was not used to disagreeing with the better informed mind of Lady Cumberland, and now, her every cherished opinion of parsley's worth overthrown, she turned her eye to rarer visitors, including the tarragon. She had always thought tarragon a difficult herb and hard to please. "It refuses to grow here, it refuses to grow there, but fancies itself so very great, disappearing every winter I know not where. I quite detest the plant."

CLAFOUTIS GRANDMÈRE A LA VIRGINIA WOOLF

500g cherries, 3 eggs
150g flour, 150g sugar
10g yeast, prepared in warm water if necessary
100g butter, 1 cup of milk



When the flour came it was a delight, a touch left on her cheek as she brushed aside a wisp of hair, as if her beauty bored her and she wanted to be like other people, insignificant, sitting in a widow's house with her pen and paper...

QUICK MISO SOUP A LA FRANZ KAFKA

3 dessertspoons fermented miso
150g silken tofu
4-5 small mushrooms
A few leaves of dried wakame

He placed three spoonfuls of the miso into a saucepan and poured on two pints of hot water, shielding the process from the panel as he did so. He became angry with himself for thinking of the new arrivals as a panel; they had not announced their purpose in calling on him and as yet he did not know what position each of them held.

MUSHROOM RISOTTO A LA JOHN STEINBECK

Extra virgin olive oil
25g porcini mushrooms
1 onion, 2 cloves garlic
200g risotto rice
500ml vegetable stock
Salt and pepper, 60g parmesan
1 glass white wine



The parmesan cheese was hard and dry. The cook grated what little she had. The cheese grated coarsely, like maize from the thresher; the cheese grated finely, like the first powder snow; the cheese grated in shavings, like the wood thrown up from her husband's plane.