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Report on the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2018

Anke Klitzing

The **Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery**, the annual international conference for scholars, chefs and amateurs with an interest in food, focused in 2018 on the topic of “Seeds”. More than half of the 230 participants that congregated at St. Catherine’s College in Oxford (UK) this year came from the UK or US, but there were also 25 other nations present from all corners of the globe: Canada, Brazil, Iceland, Denmark,



Germany, Romania, Turkey, Russia, Japan, Taiwan, India, Australia and South Africa among them. The seven participants from Ireland were all lecturers, graduate students or alumni of the DIT School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology or our affiliated institution, IT Tallaght. Moreover, two of the Irish graduate students were awarded prizes at this year’s event: Maria Nehme of the MA Gastronomy and Food Studies at DIT received a Oxford Symposium Young Chefs Grant, while Susan Boyle of IT Tallaght took home the well-deserved prize for the Best Student Presentation for her paper “Curious Coriander: The Long History of Coriander Seeds as an Adjunct in Beer”.

As usual, the papers and lectures presented during the July weekend offered a stimulating variety of approaches to the conference theme. Seed banks, plant breeding, hybrid and traditional seeds were topics that took a literal, empirical look at the theme, while others explored more abstract, and at times metaphorical meanings of “seeds”. Like all foods, seeds and foods made from them can have strong link to personal and group identity and belief systems. This was explained in presentations on such topics as the link between sesame and Japaneseness, the religious significance of wheatberries in Naples, buckwheat in Brittany, mustard in Talmudic literature or wheat bread in Romania. We heard that wholegrain bread has a near-religious significance in the German alternative food movement, while amaranth and maize, as well as chocolate and vanilla, were food for and of the gods in the lore of pre-Columbian America. The cultivation and consumption of seeds may also have metaphorical meaning, such as the kitchen garden in the Sardinian author Deledda’s novels, or the eclectic food culture of Hong Kong as it prepares for the looming full integration into China.



The meals during the 2 ½ days of the event added, as usual, a further dimension to the conference theme, as well as offering plenty opportunities for getting to know fellow conference participants. The “Wild East Feast” of the first evening took us to Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, offering a Eurasian flavour profile of pickles, rye, caraway, dill, and buckwheat, as well as an icebreaker as table mates were discussing how to best tackle the fish head served in each bowl of fish and millet broth. Other meals took us to the caravanserais of the Central Asian steppes and Biblical Israel as well as closer to home, London’s Borough Market and its fresh vegetables.



Meeting and interacting with people is, of course, a fundamental part of conferences. Partially, this year's symposium was a reunion of friends, as I was able to catch up with people I had met before, at previous Oxford Symposia, at this year's Dublin Gastronomy Symposium, and at other occasions - for example Dan Saladino, the producer and presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Food Programme*, with whom I had worked in a previous role and who was recording at the event for his radio programme. But it was also exciting to make new acquaintances, for example Canadian chef and activist Joshna Maharaj, who works in the area of food education and promotes "Good Food Citizenry". Maharaj is planning to attend the *Food on the Edge* conference in Galway this coming October and would like to combine this with a visit to Dublin and DIT, which would be a fantastic opportunity to have her speak at the School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology about her work and the important role of chefs in promoting food literacy. In terms of my own teaching and research interests, I was delighted to be able to talk at length with Dr Mark McWilliams, editor of the Oxford Symposium Proceedings and chair of the English department at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD/USA. Dr McWilliams' research interests as a professor of literature are American literature and culture as well as food studies, and we had a stimulating discussion about American food writing and its likely literary context and pedigree.

Apart from the rich details and insights gained at this year's event, which I hope to weave into my lectures in food history (Gastronomy 1) and food sociology (Gastronomy 2) in the future, this year's conference also provided input in a different, more process-oriented area, that of **Digital Scholarship (or Digital Humanities)**. Digital scholarship has two sides to it: it can be research and scholarship in the humanities (or another field not fundamentally related to information technology) through digital tools, means and methods, or it can be the application of humanities techniques, such as archival research or textual criticism, to digital tools, concepts, or intrinsically digital data (see for example Battershill and Ross, 2018). The Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery is deeply rooted in the humanities tradition, yet is equally committed to exploring new and exciting avenues of thought and study. In my view, it will be fruitful and beneficial for the DIT School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology to learn from such a model of approach as well as adopting certain tools and processes, and not least exploring possibilities of getting involved or integrating them into our work and research.

There are four instances of Digital Scholarship from this year's Symposium that I want to mention.

1) *The Sifter*: This project was launched at, if I am not mistaken, the 2017 Oxford Symposium, and we received an update this summer. It is basically a digital archive/repository of cookbooks and recipes, with the important characteristic that it is searchable. While it is still in its beta-phase, i.e. not fully launched yet and being tested as well as filled up with content, the repository will eventually allow users to search the content by ingredient, technique, as well as location, date etc. The project was inspired by the work of food historian Barbara Ketcham Wheaton, who developed a research process for studying cookery writing. A large amount of content in the database will come from the culinary collection at the Harvard Radcliffe College Schlesinger library, where Wheaton is honorary curator. A long-term participant at the Oxford Symposium, Wheaton was also present this year and involved in promoting the digital project with the symposiasts. *The Sifter* is promising to be an exciting resource for scholars of cookbooks and recipes as well as specific topics in history, sociology, publishing, gender studies and other areas. Once it is publicly available, it may be highlighted to our staff and students to facilitate research here at DIT. Moreover, collaboration with the project itself, as an assignment, assessment or part of coursework, could possibly be integrated in some courses at the School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology, for example to digitise Irish cookery books or manuscripts. This will not only contribute to the scholarship around Irish food, but also help our students to hone their digital skills and literacy.



2) *The Oxtales* podcast: The Oxford Symposium has begun to produce a podcast, produced by Anna Sigrithur. The first six episodes ([available here](#)), conversations with participants from the 2017 Symposium on their work around last year's topic of "Offal", were published in April 2018. The next set of episodes, again roughly 20 minutes in length, is scheduled for publication in October of this year. The episodes of the podcast can be listened to for free through the symposium website, or also via the platforms of *iTunes* and *Stitcher* (www.stitcher.com). The latter is an "on-demand radio service", which basically means a podcast provider, as podcasts are basically pre-recorded radio segments that can be accessed or downloaded on demand, via the internet, using either a computer/laptop or a smartphone/tablet app. Again, this may serve as both a resource and an inspiration for food research and teaching at the School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology. For one, it may provide lecturers and students with a different source of information on such diverse topics as slurping noodle soups in Japan, barbecuing bulls in 19th-century Los Angeles, or foods rooted in colonialism in Brexit-era Britain. The difference is not only the content, but also the form of delivery, in this case via listening. On the other hand, this project may serve as a model for generating similar publications. Not only can students and lecturers take these podcasts as a blueprint and inspiration, there is also the possibility to link up with the producer for sharing of best practices, or similar. I had the possibility to speak to Sigrithur during one of the pre-dinner receptions, and she already suggested some resources to get started, such as the website www.transom.org, a "showcase and workshop for New Public Radio" (Transom.org, 2018). While the actual workshops run by the organisation administering Transom (Atlantic Public Media, based in Massachusetts, USA) are held in the United States, the website freely

provides a wealth of information in the categories “Tools, “Techniques” and “Ideas” to inspire and inform anyone interested in creating their own radio segments. The access to podcasting has a low bar: as the website notes, “[i]f you can record an audio file, and upload it to the internet, you can make a podcast” (Transom.org, 2018). Of course, a laptop microphone or smartphone will provide only basic quality, but it may allow first acquaintance with the process and add to the possibilities of food scholarship here in Ireland.

- 3) The Wikipedia edit-a-thon: The *Wikipedia edit-a-thon* was a pre-symposium event, taking place in the early afternoon before the official start of the event at 4pm. This initiative has been running for a couple of years already. It was started by Symposium trustee and British Library curator Polly Russell and Wiki-editor Barbara Wedge, who led what was in many ways an introductory workshop into editing Wikipedia and other WikiMedia platforms. The event has a further angle to it: the Wiki edit-a-thon at the Oxford Symposium aims to address the gender imbalance on Wikipedia and in Food Studies. For one, Wikipedia (the organisation) has discovered that 90% of its contributors are white men (see email by Symposium organisers to participants, 27 June 2018). As Wedge noted at the workshop, the heavy demographic slant of the all-voluntary contributors and editors of the platform results in a preponderance of topics that “white men” with a penchant for computers and lots of spare time may be also interested in, such as the wealth of highly detailed articles on military history. The Oxford *Wiki edit-a-thon* wants to address this imbalance, if ever so slightly, by encouraging people of other demographics to get involved, as well as by emphasising a specific topic area that is underserved on the platform: food (studies)-related topics and especially those concerning women - women chefs, scholars, writers, or areas of practice generally undertaken by women.



Interested Symposiasts had been invited prior to the date to participate and bring their own laptops. I decided to do so, not least because in my own teaching on research, referencing and ICT tools to both undergraduate and graduate students, I have often been required to address the question of the value, usefulness, and reliability of Wikipedia, and I saw this workshop as an opportunity to learn more about what happens behind the scenes, which would help me to answer such student questions better informed. Also, I thought that this is an area where I have both the skills and the knowledge to contribute, and therefore the opportunity to “give something back to the community”.

Indeed, the workshop provided me with good insights, as well as inspiration on how to integrate this quite frankly astonishing¹ phenomenon of our times in the classroom. First of all, I got a glimpse into the contributing and editing process behind the online encyclopedia. I discovered that the crowd-

¹ Astonishing, because so universally adopted. It seems impossible to imagine the internet - the world - without Google and Wikipedia nowadays, because they address quite fundamental human needs, of orientation (in the new quasi-space of the internet) and information. Corporate strategies (in the case of Google) notwithstanding, these services did not have to create a need first, as other new products/services may have to do in the marketplace. Innovators and entrepreneurs, in the tech field but also in others, create many products and services, but in my opinion, the really successful ones are the ones that change our lives by not changing them at all.

sourced process is indeed so detail-oriented as well as fast and thorough - owing to the hundreds of thousands of dedicated volunteers, some of which committed specifically to uphold standards of language, referencing and ethics - that Wikipedia withstands the comparison to many traditionally published publications. It is, of course, a *tertiary* source, as any printed and published encyclopedia would be, and has therefore a limited role to play in scholarly inquiry. A printed booklet (published by WikiMedia UK) that was handed out at the workshop underlines that it is a resource with a neutral point of view, and no original research (WikiMedia, n.d., p.8). That said, I feel confident now to recommend the use of Wikipedia as a basic information platform and starting point for research to my students - or rather, sanction it, as I suspect most of them already use it that way - and use this as a teachable moment to discuss reliability, conflicts of interest, and the principles of original research. Additionally, I will consider whether or how engagement with Wikipedia - to the point of perhaps editing it - may provide opportunities for activities or assignments in my lectures.

- 4) The Bloomsbury Food Library: As usual, a room at the Symposium was provided for several publishing houses (such as Bloomsbury and Reaktion Books) who carry a number of food/food studies books in their catalogue, to sell books to the always eager Symposiasts. Bloomsbury Books highlighted a specific service of their company at their stall, the *Bloomsbury Food Library* (www.bloomsburyfoodlibrary.com), a password-protected part of their website that serves as a “digital resource for all tastes serving essential and dynamic food studies content”. Symposiasts were gifted a 30-Day free trial with a special password, so that I could enter this resource, which will normally cost an unspecified amount of money (I could not find that information) to access. The *Bloomsbury Food Library* provides a number of Bloomsbury-published food studies titles as e-books, readable online as well as downloadable as PDF, in parts by chapter. They also claim to offer lesson plans, images, reference works, and digital tools such as world maps, timelines etc. Of course, all information is searchable to the newest, most user-friendly standards. I enjoyed the look around and I was able to download some book chapters relevant to my teaching and research. As a single user, I would probably not pay myself to use this resource, as many if not all of the titles available here are also available at the DIT SCAFT library, and I am unclear on how I could use this research in the classroom, or recommend it to students, if it is tied to payment. However, this is something that might be of interest to the Library, if there is the possibility, for example, to obtain a licence that serves the entire School.

I did, however, also enjoy the physical books that Bloomsbury had to offer, among them the book by Claire Battershill and Shawna Ross *Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom: A Practical Introduction for Teachers, Lecturers, and Students* (Battershill and Ross, 2018). Battershill and Ross discuss a broad range of topics, from integrating digital activities in the classroom, designing syllabi and assessing students, to integrating activities with colleagues, other researchers, and other possibly interested parties such as the Library or the IT department. Reading the book in the weeks since the Symposium has given me a range of ideas that I hope to realise in the future. A first (small) step will be to encourage our MA students to use Twitter during my upcoming Food Writing



and Media module, in the same way that Twitter is commonly being used by academics during conferences and otherwise to network, share thoughts, and hone their scholarly profile. Other ideas are more applicable for my ICT workshops (Culinary Information Systems etc). The book, and accompanying website www.teachdh.com, provided plenty of useful material and information, from assessment rubrics and sample lesson plans to the ORCID profile for researcher. ORCID means Open Researcher and Contributor ID and is a unique identifier by which a researcher can be identified on publications, websites etc. This may be particularly interesting for people with common names. The process of getting such an identifier - similar to a website URL or the DOI of a scholarly article - is simple and quick, and can be done on the ORCID.org website <https://orcid.org/>.

In conclusion, attending the **Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2018** has been edifying in many ways, and I am looking forward to bringing the fruits of this experience forward into my work and research at the DIT School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology.

Dublin, 30 August 2018

Anke Klitzing

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