



AA GILL
TABLE TALK



There are those of us who were not very successful as children. I don't mean that we didn't start internet businesses or appear on Top of the Form (although, if you're old enough to remember Top of the Form, you're going to have the theme tune in your head for the next week, bringing back all those childish feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth; your mother coming in with the beans on toast and gently chiding: "Oh, come along, dear, you can spell 'oedipal' just as fast as that tall, blond, Aryan child with the beautiful rounded vowels and the ready smile"). No, what I mean is those of us who weren't much good at being children — those of us who spent our growing years feeling "less than".

For us, a reference book was a life raft. It was where we went to escape, to strive and excel. The most exciting and important discovery of my pre-earrings life was how to use an index — and I'm not just saying that because there are children listening: the Dewey Decimal System is where I found true happiness. A reference book is like a safari. It's a journey, one entry leading to the next. You have to be a pathfinder to pick your way through the

italics, the bold and the brackets and that marvellous imperative "see also". The paths are infinite. You could start from the same point a thousand times but always reach a new destination. One of the reasons I took to food and cooking was the pleasure of looking things up, following a scent through books, down time, across continents. Simple dishes and ingredients, a pot, a name can entrance and lead you, like a will-o'-the-wisp, a jack-o'-lantern. It's a beguiling pleasure, the cerebral consumption of victuals.

All of which is a very convoluted way of saying that I've just spent three hours I can't really spare in Alan Davidson's epic Oxford Companion to Food. It's pretty much a perfect example of a reference book, plainly exhaustive, obviously deep but, beneath the scholarship, capricious, prejudiced, amused and eccentric. One of the pleasures of a reference safari is to track the secret trails of the author and compilers.

I was looking for "soul food" and came across "son-of-a-bitch stew", a cowboy dish made from a freshly killed calf, including all the offal and something called marrowgut, which turns out to be the intestinal connection between tripes, which is stuffed with rennet-curdled milk. Apparently, it gives the stew its particular

Ashbells ★★★★★

29 All Saints Road, W11 (020 7221 8585)
Tue-Sat, dinner, 6.30-11.30pm; lunch, Sun, 12-4pm (opening for lunch Tue-Sat from September)
★★★★★ Soul shakedown party ★★★★★ The life and soul ★★★ I know you got soul ★★ Soulless ★ Soul-destroying

WHERE TO EAT AMERICAN

flavour. It's also sometimes called Cleveland stew, after President Grover Cleveland, whom the cowboys, for some reason, took agin. I could have found out why, but then I came across "sin eating". In the 16th-century West Country, a sin-eater could be hired for a funeral. A poor person would be given a coin and would undertake to eat the sins of the departed by consuming a loaf of bread and a jug of ale. That would stop the deceased's soul from being disturbed by spectral indigestion and guilt and so having to haunt. What it did for the sin-eater isn't recorded.

I was looking up "soul food" because I'd been to Ashbells, a new restaurant on the All Saints Road. I'd been told it specialised in the cooking of the southern states of America and that the chef had fed various worthies. What nobody had bothered, or dared, to say was that he was black, and that this, for the most part, was black southern food, served by black people.

You may not have noticed, but relatively few black people run or staff restaurants, apart from West Indian cafes. They're about the only immigrant group that hasn't gone into first-generation catering. You may or may not also have noticed that there are disproportionately few black people eating in restaurants. This gastro-culture of ours is based on an embarrassing anomaly: it serves up a multicoloured world, but is consumed by us white folk.

Davidson's definition of soul food is a masterpiece of elegant simplicity, with just a barding of sphinx-faced disdain. "Soul food — a phrase which came into use in the 1960s, expressing the idea that the soul of African Americans could be fortified by the preparation and consumption of the food stuffs and dishes which belong to their culture and traditions." Marvellous. But that's the definition of a vegetarian describing a pork pie. Soul food is much more than that. It's a texture and a smell that you can't buy, a flavour you can't mass-produce. You know that porridge is soul food, and Pizza Hut isn't. It's why food is more than fuel; it's why it's Communion and wedding cake and eggy soldiers.

Ashbells sits in a small shop front and has been designed with a barely restrained exuberance that might have looked contrived if it weren't such a relief from every other doppelgänger restaurant in London. The menu is also wonderfully, unfashionably fresh. Maryland crab cakes were an excellent and huge improvement on the ubiquitous Thai version. Black-eyed-pea soup was surprisingly subtle and delicately made. The Blonde had Charleston seafood gumbo, which she kept forking into my mouth, saying: "Do you really understand how good this is?" with an emphasis bordering on aggression. Yes, yes, dear, I'm already a food critic. My Carolina-style pulled-pork barbecue was a revelation of big flavour and serious gospel heat. There were grits and collard greens and all that stuff you've heard about in civil war movies.

This is very, very good food, made with a control and care and an aesthetic judgment that you rarely get when eating it in America. It's not just a welcome restaurant; it's a very accomplished and tasty one. The service was particularly charming in an unmetropolitan way. Prices are about £5 for a starter and £14 for a main course. Pudding was a pound cake, a genre of baking I'm partial to — and this one was first-rate.

Perhaps it was serendipitous that I chanced on "sin eater" while searching for "soul food". We postcolonial first-world folk graze the developing globe, sucking and savouring other people's souls. But don't for a moment imagine that we're not also eating sins — the sins of our fathers. We accumulate them and we pass them on. I don't want to ladle on the guilt or the liberal angst, or make dinner a political and moral seminar. Just be aware that what you taste is more complicated than what the cook put in. Don't ever dismiss this as po' food: it cost somebody — many bodies — far more than most of us will ever have to pay for our supper.

Gospel heat:
Ashbells is soul
food at its best

BRITTA JASCHERDA

"This is very, very good food made with control and care"



Momma Cherri's Soul Food Shack, 11 Little East Street, Brighton; 01273 774545

The singer Momma Cherri came to these shores from Philadelphia 24 years ago, armed with her musical talent and her downhome recipes. The Shack serves up classic American grub such as Aunt Mae's southern-style meat loaf, succotash, okra, Reverend Daisy's southern-fried chicken, peach cobbler — all mouthwatering and redolent of the bayou. Portions are embarrassingly large and as comforting as being clasped to the bosom of Momma Cherri herself. The two-room restaurant is charmingly small — it's like sitting in Aunt Mae's front room — so book ahead.

Christopher's, 18 Wellington Street, WC2; 020 7240 4222

Despite recent changes (including the addition of a downstairs bar), Christopher's remains a favourite with tourists and Waspy Londoners. Modelled on the steak-and-lobster houses of New England, the menu includes the likes of Maryland crab cakes, pork belly, clam bake and a great New York cheesecake. The food is generally dependable (and brunch is excellent), though you can't help feeling that some of the types who eat here had a southern momma for a nanny.

Joe Allen, 13 Exeter Street, WC2; 020 7836 0651

Opinions are fiercely divided about JA's. Some claim it's marvellous in every way and must never be changed; others see it as a glorified TGI Friday's, with tacky 1980s decor and revolting, overpriced food. Both views are right. The menu, which started out as classic Americana, has gradually mutated to include more international dishes, done badly. Steaks and barbecue ribs remain, as do brownies and pecan pie, but it's a mistake that burgers are no longer (officially) on the menu. Still, it's perennially popular with local luvvies — even if most aren't above D-list.

Monsieur Mangetout

E-mail recommendations to: mangetout@sunday-times.co.uk