

## Of shoes and ships and sealing wax, and cookery books and things

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In the vibrant Notting Hill area of London, food for the soul vies for precedence over food for the body. There is, of course, the famous Portobello Road antiques market every Saturday - riddled with endless warrens of indoor and outdoor stalls, and shops – where the extravagant is juxtaposed with the refined, precious jewels rub shoulders with outrageous fakes, and ancient machines pull rank on even more ancient hand implements. A little further along, the scenery changes abruptly, and the senses are assailed with the smells, sights and sounds of the fruit and vegetable market, where cockney and oriental accents live in noisy harmony. Here, cast iron digestive systems cope with solid English pork pies, accompanied by Asian street food or a reasonable-looking curry, all washed down with a good pint of British beer. The prices seem to decrease in proportion to the distance walked from the bus stop, but the freshness of the produce is never at issue.

If you ask the helpful man sitting on a chair under the makeshift “Information” sign, he’ll direct you to Blenheim Crescent (“You looking for Books for Cooks then Darlin’?”), tucked away off Portobello Road. The little parade is colourful and well kept, but its modest façade belies the riches that lie within the different shops. Caveat bookworms: this is definitely *not* a place to visit when you’re skint or in a hurry.

There are three specialist bookshops within a few footsteps of each other: Garden Books, The Travel Bookshop, and Books for Cooks. Garden Books is delightful, although by far the most modest of the three. The Travel Bookshop, to quote an information leaflet, is “a travellers’ treasure chest of maps, guides, phrase books and all manner of travel literature...” For once the hype is entirely accurate. This bookstore is the perfect place to go when autumn has settled in and your wanderlust is awakening from its summer torpor.

The first thing that hits you as you walk in through the door, apart from the incredible number of browsers (the kind that existed before the Internet!), is the enveloping, inviting, comforting smell of books. The staff is discreet and perfectly willing to let you spend as long as you like “just looking”. The nooks and crannies of the shop lend themselves to natural divisions of subjects, and The Travel Bookshop prides itself on its collection of old and out of print books. As for the number of countries covered in one way or another, I defy anyone to show me where even three-quarters of them are situated on the map.

The choice of phrase books is impressive, although “Lonely Planet” seems to be the most predominant editor. While being able to find one’s way around in the native lingo can save a lot of time and effort, a minimum knowledge of acceptable behaviour in some of the more remote corners of the world can make the difference between an enjoyable trip and a night in the local jail. Books on the customs of individual countries (I couldn’t resist the XENOPHOBES’ GUIDE TO THE SWISS), etiquette and history rub shoulders with biographical works and even fiction in this “travellers’ treasure chest”.

Anyone who’s serious about food and drink sooner or later ends up at Books for Cooks. It’s really a matter of an “all roads lead to Rome”, since, as often as not, it is recommended by a local bookstore unable to satisfy a customer’s requirement for a specialised or out of print book. Situated just across the road from Garden Books and The Travel Bookshop, Books for Cooks probably has the richest collection of food and drink books this side of the Atlantic, if not in the world. Its floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall bookshelves are crammed with every conceivable aspect of eating and drinking. From the usual beginner’s guides, cookery “bibles” and BBC “celebrity cook” publications, through to the lesser-known areas of gastronomy and oenology, Books for Cooks is a foodie’s heaven.

Founded in 1983, the shop is, to quote the same information leaflet, “the most delicious bookshop in the world, the smallest restaurant in London, and the best cup of coffee in Notting Hill”. Restaurant? Well not actually a restaurant, more a “test kitchen” as it is aptly called. Each day it tests recipes from the 8,000 plus books on the shelves, and feeds the results to aficionados of good and often outlandish cuisines (“we do not counsel the test kitchen for the culinary timid!”). The test kitchen took root in 1988, and from relatively unpretentious beginnings, it has now become somewhat of a Mecca for the initiated, with both chefs and recipes changing daily, moving as much with the seasons at the Portobello Road fruit and vegetable market, as the chosen book. Sadly, the number of tables is very limited, but then big has never been associated with good food.

The very diversity of its stock has led Books for cooks to become a source of reference to people working in the restaurant trade. Although its clientele is primarily resident in the UK, Books for Cooks has become known as a prime source of reference for culinary and oenological information from all over the world. The type of information sought varies considerably, from ideas for menus to understanding terminology. Many of the shop’s customers have to work with foreign ingredients, in every sense of the term: “Can you tell me the difference between rice flour and chickpea flour? Are *dhal* ordinary lentils? I work in France and can’t seem to find self-raising flour, would you happen to know the word in French?” Inquiries from abroad are mostly dealt with in English, but the French-born owner is happy to reply in his native tongue.

The shop’s main vocation, nevertheless, is books – of virtually every ilk provided they are in some way connected with food or drink. There is even a children’s section, strategically placed knee-high, so that future toques can browse comfortably without having to resort to adults or other minor inconveniences.

Foreign language books only account for around two percent of the stock and these are imported primarily from France, Italy and Spain. However, the number of books devoted to foreign cuisines is really impressive. There is a very rich collection of country- and region-specific cuisines and beverages. The bigger countries, such as China, France, Germany or the United States are covered both generally and by region. Almost twenty-five percent of the stock is imported from foreign publishers, and most of these are translations of the originals. There are even a few bilingual ones: the Chinese are past masters in this field, since it saves having to publish books in separate languages.

By no means a competitor of The Travel Bookshop, Books for Cooks does also stock books on foreign travel and culture (never take the road to Mandalay without *CULTURE SHOCK! A GUIDE TO CUSTOMS AND ETIQUETTE – MYANMAR*). Other specific areas include an historical section (*MEDIEVAL ARAB COOKERY* might take your fancy), and various types of dictionaries. This, not surprisingly, is where I got lost ...

The dictionary collection is not large, at least not by comparison to some of the other sections, but fascinating. Where else in the world would you find *THE INTERNATIONAL MENU SPELLER*, with its 7500 entries, complete with accents and word divisions, designed for foodservice professionals and others menu creators? This is not the usual kind of dictionary; it gives no explanations as to what the names actually mean, it just tells you how to spell and pronounce them. Presumably the people who use it already know what the ingredients and dishes are, and just want to keep up appearances with their clientele. If you’re on the other side of the dining table, so to speak, you’ll be more interested in *THE NON-CONNOISSEUR’S MENU GUIDE TO ORDERING AND ENJOYING FRENCH, ITALIAN AND SPANISH/LATIN AMERICAN CUISINE*. This will inform you, for example, that *cappelli con salsa verde* is pronounced “kah-peh-LEE-nee Kohn SAHL-sah

VEHR-deh”, and consists of cappellini pasta with a green sauce of basil, parsley, garlic parmesan and olive oil. Most reassuring if your waiter is the imposing, supercilious type.

Conventional dictionaries are disappointingly few but that, no doubt, is because there are not very many available from the usual publishers. Books for Cooks does not actively seek out specialised dictionaries and either waits for publishers to approach them, or will purchase a title in response to a customer inquiry. English only dictionaries tend to be useful, but unexciting: THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF FOOD AND NUTRITION, and the DICTIONARY OF CULINARY TERMS, for example. The bilingual and multilingual assortment, on the other hand, is much more “browseworthy”, with such titles as the DICTIONNAIRE GASTRONOMIQUE - FRANÇAIS-ANGLAIS/DICTIONARY OF GASTRONOMY – ENGLISH-FRENCH, which is a thesaurus, glossary and explanatory dictionary all in one, or FOOD IN 5 LANGUAGES: AN INTERNATIONAL MENU GUIDE, a handy little glossary that was originally published in German.

As I reluctantly decided to either pitch a tent for the night or return to my hotel, one final book tickled my fancy: THE ONLINE EPICURE. Forget about feeding Google the right search words, this book has done the work for you, listing just about every conceivable food and drink sector from cooking sites to kitchen equipment and chefs’ addresses.

On my last visit, Books for Cooks was being totally refurbished and restocked, and their new website with a searchable database and online shopping is still under construction. It is scheduled to go online some time in January 2002.

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[www.booksforcooks.com](http://www.booksforcooks.com)  
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