

# A Charcuterie Diary by P J Booth

Reviewed by Assistant Editor Dave Rose

This hefty tome is not your normal, everyday recipe cookbook. From the outset, Peter John Booth, the creator of *A Charcuterie Diary*, makes that fact abundantly clear. His opening words of the book's Prologue could not be more precise. "I am not a chef, either by training or inclination," proclaims Booth. In fact, he is a lawyer by profession, but that has not stopped him constructing a telling case for meat preservation from his base in Melbourne.

This blunt confession immediately puts the reader on alert. Mmm, if the writer is not a chef, why has he set out a hard-cover volume extending more than 350 pages, spanning about 75,000 words in coffee-table format exploring such a niche slice of cooking topography? But have no fear... it is soon abundantly evident that we are off on a helter-skelter ride through the intricacies and oddities of the author's gastronomic passion.

Booth's style of writing is highly opinionated, unashamedly tinged with irreverence and he seemingly has no scruples about causing offence as he weaves together strands from his diary of recipes, reflections and results amassed over a period of four years.

Booth kicks off his epic journey with thoughts from pioneering British cookery writer Elizabeth David about the merits of charcuterie as she observed when perusing a French market stall way back in 1960. David is one of the recurring references who pop up throughout the book.

The author frequently tries to clarify charcuterie via all manner of eclectic sources such as Michael Ruhlman, Jane Grigson and Emile Zola as well as rather more mainstream cohorts that include Isabella 'Mrs' Beeton, household matriarch of Victorian Britain.

After the essence of charcuterie is laid bare, he delves into the essentials and history before arriving at the ingredients. It is obvious that Booth is highly enamoured of the pig on any menu. He brings in no less a political heavyweight than Winston Churchill to put things in perspective. The towering British Parliamentarian is quoted as saying: "I am fond of pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals." This view gains a loud "hear, hear" from Booth.

As Booth plots his path, not everything is initially hunky-dory. A withering rebuke of vegans is followed by a brief diversion to divulge his dislike of all things offal and banish such meaty offshoots well away from the artform that he

reveres as charcuterie. To cement his cause, he also draws on a plentiful cast-list of literary greats from all eras Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and even maverick journalist Hunter S. Thompson. Booth is quick to point out that the contents and manner of the bountiful bacon breakfast, as outlined by the outlandish Thompson, should perhaps not be followed to the letter.

Booth name-checks Joyce to take umbrage at his character Leopold Bloom, who exhibits an insatiable liking for offal as he winds his way through Dublin in the novel *Ulysses*.

Hemingway is brought on board with his celebration of oysters. After which, Booth simply takes the polar opposite stance. At one stage, Booth digresses to declare war on capitals as he sketches out his writing methodology for the book. Again he turns to Churchill as an ally for his argument, highlighting the simplistic style of the politician's "blood, toil, tears and sweat" speech of 1940.

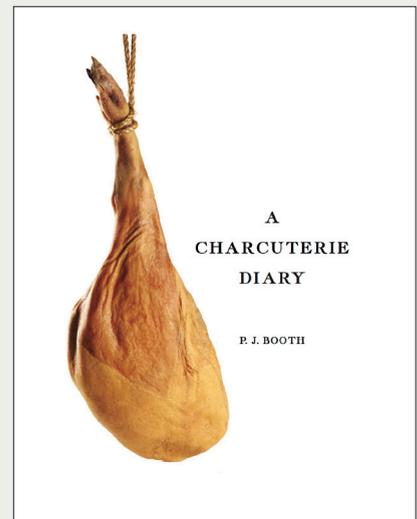
Once Booth is started, there is no stopping him. Having run through the equipment and techniques of charcuterie, there is time to sample some mischievous stories and opinions before the pig takes centre stage on the cooking agenda. Pork offerings come as varied as the forms of loin in Italy, Spain and England through to the classic whole-leg prosciutto. If that doesn't have meat lovers salivating, there is Buendnerschinken, which is German air-dried ham, to ponder. Smoked charcuterie keeps the taste buds tingling before poaching sausages and classic recipes vie for your attention.

The section dubbed 'Recipes for the brave' is just that. Pig and potato pie seems an instant 'dare you' dish while blutwurst (German blood sausage) sounds not for the faint-hearted.

Beef, lamb and goat then duck are next in line with cuts from Turkey and South Africa briefly having a look in as the European influence takes time out. But it's back to the norm with a glut of sausages. These are cured and air dried. Once more, Booth explains the process meticulously.

Along the way are full-page color pictures of the meats and animals involved. The lack of captions proffer generic guidance, which does not demean the effect.

Nothing is left to chance with accoutrements, sauces and pickles each put under the microscope. Booth laments the demise of the traditional butcher's shop when searching out ingredients but takes solace by listing fresh produce markets that can be savoured for the task.



Big-name back-up for this adventure comes from the late, great flamboyant British chef Keith Floyd. An ample ultimate bibliography substantiates Booth's well-read meanderings around his cherished obsession.

As a parting shot, Booth enthuses in his Epilogue that he has enjoyed this enthralling trawl through his favourite meats almost as much as hopes the reader has. "The science and history of this culinary backwater have become something of a fascination for me. You are now a custodian of culinary practices which are in danger of extinction. Use your knowledge for good, not evil."

Some words from Elizabeth David offer the closing conclusions to round out where we all came in. It is a fitting end to a volume that succeeds in championing a branch of cooking that even some meat lovers may at first find rather daunting. This bold, no holds barred crusade deserves much credit for that and for providing plenty of chuckles along the way. ■

## Specifications

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Inside book images can be found via this link: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ci06mj4fr1poi6o/AABzIA-uVLnQntwztgICM35Va?dl=0>