

Food in *A Glass of Blessings*

Laura Shapiro

Sandra Goldstein and I met last year right here in Cambridge, and discovered within about a minute that we were each drawn to a particular passion of Barbara Pym's – in Sandra's case the detailed attention to clothes that runs straight through Pym's work, and in my case her fascination with food. And about one minute after that, we decided to work up a joint presentation for an upcoming conference where we could not only discuss food and fashion per se in Pym's work, but together make an argument for the power of these themes, and how strikingly they capture the social and emotional substance of a moment, a person, a past, a relationship.

Nothing irritates me more than the use of the word "trivial" to describe all those elements of daily life that enthralled Barbara Pym, that she observed and jotted down in her journals and wove into her fiction. I'm thinking not just of the critics who use this term, but of her good friend Robert Smith, who says in his essay "How Pleasant to Know Miss Pym" that her work "demonstrates again and again the happiness and merriment which can be found in the trivia of the daily round." Yes, it can be funny. But funny is only where it starts. When Barbara Pym puts a pair of shoes on the page, or a piece of cake, it's not just because they amuse her, it's because they inspire her. She's looking at them and seeing entire personalities captured in their precise time and place; she's seeing the delineation of a social class; she's seeing complicated emotional interactions that other novelists take pages to capture. These elements of the daily round – what people wear, what people eat – are the reason she's a writer in the first place. They're the fuel that keeps her imagination pumping, they're the ground she covers, and in a sense they're also the reward. She was constantly jotting observations in her notebook, and to move them from the notebook to the novel – to bring them to life, give them a local habitation and a name – that's what she couldn't stop doing, even when she thought she would never be published again. "Mr. C in the Library," she scribbled once in her notebook, eight years into the long stretch where she couldn't get published. "He is having his lunch, eating a sandwich with a knife and fork, a glass of milk near at hand. Oh *why* can't I write about things like that any more....?" But she couldn't quit, either. Thank goodness.

Barbara Pym's intense and abiding interest in food shows up everywhere in her journals, and the journals of course are where the novels take shape. She was hard-wired to notice food, especially in public places where people were always eating and she could quietly watch, write it down, and absorb it into her imagination. In Lyons Corner House, her favorite place to eat and observe, a young man sits down on a hot day with three sausage rolls, a roll, baked beans and chips; she writes it down. A nun, standing in front of her in the queue, has two rolls, a pat of butter, a little dish of honey and a glass of milk; she write it down. In a fast-food chicken place: "Everybody eating broiled chicken off too-small plates – chips flying all over the place." At Covent Garden with a friend – "He crunches ice as we drink orangeade in the crush bar." Interestingly, she does relatively little food notating when she's travelling abroad. In Europe she



Lyons Corner House, London, 1941 (Wolf Suschitzky photo)

mostly writes about the churches, the scenery, the famous places. At home, in her own world, she does her sightseeing from the table.

And what does she do with it all? Here's one example. One of the earliest food notations in her little "idea" notebooks appears in 1948, when she scribbles: "Food – a fresh salad" – then she crosses out the word "salad" and puts "lettuce" instead. So it goes "Food – a fresh lettuce dressed with oil and salt, gruyere cheese and greengages – crusty bread." If it hadn't been for that editing – "lettuce" instead of "salad" – I'd have thought

this was a meal she ate herself, or noticed someone else eating. And she may well have, but the very precise editing makes me think that this particular note applies to a potential character. Sure enough, versions of that very meal show up later in two different novels. Mildred prepares it for Rocky Napier in *Excellent Women*, in 1952; and then in 1961 Dulcie Mainwaring makes it for her own little supper in *No Fond Return of Love*. These are two heroines who greatly resemble Barbara Pym herself, and in both cases they regard at their culinary handiwork with a Pym-tuned sense of irony. "It seemed an idyllic sort of meal that ought to have been eaten in the open air, with a bottle of wine and what is known as 'good conversation,'" Mildred reflects. Yes, it's an idyllic meal – but the wine is missing, and so is the open air and alas, so is the romance. This meal will never reach truly idyllic status – just like Rocky himself, who's immensely appealing but quite out of reach, an exotic foreigner who casually steps in and out of Mildred's humble domestic environment. A Pym heroine like Mildred is never going to share a textbook idyllic meal with a lover – she's going to have dinner with Everard Bone and his ferocious mother, and the conversation will be about wormwood.

By contrast, this same meal when Dulcie Mainwaring prepares it is a contented, solitary supper – as she describes it, "the sort that French peasants are said to eat and that enlightened English people sometimes enjoy rather self-consciously." Instead of the de rigueur wine and the "lovingly prepared dressing", however, she's going to have orange squash and bottled mayonnaise. Now, the spectre hovering over both these meals is Elizabeth David, whom I'll talk about later; but her books about Mediterranean, French and Italian cooking put European peasant food at the top of the culinary hierarchy in England in the 1950s and '60s. Dulcie is acknowledging this hierarchy, but she's not eating in homage to it. This is one of the most Pym-like of all Dulcie's characteristics – I mean the Pym of the journals, the Pym who makes all those notes about food, the Pym who records what she ate while she finished typing *Less Than Angels* – "a cup of milky Nescafe, a gin and french, cold beef, baked potato, tomato-grated cheese, rice pudding and plums." Dulcie eats what she likes. The bottled mayonnaise and the orange squash tell us that there is nothing aspirational about Dulcie, at table or anywhere else. She's fundamentally

at peace with herself. She observes, she notices, she sees around and between things – she sees that there should have been wine, there should have been olive oil – but she doesn't have the slightest need to chase down those good things and apply them to her supper.

The culinary opposite of an idyllic meal is, of course, a frozen dinner – bleakest of all solitary meals – and sure enough, a frozen dinner appears prominently in one of the saddest scenes of that bittersweet novel, *The Sweet Dove Died*. Leonora, the aging, faded beauty who is helplessly in love with James – who's gay and much younger and is involved with Ned – is walking through Keats's house in Hampstead with James and Ned. It's raining, she's depressed, and she sees another middle-aged woman looking at the exhibits, a woman carrying a bag of books and a frozen dinner. “Leonora could see the artistically delineated slices of beef with dark brown gravy, a little round Yorkshire pudding, two mounds of mashed potato and brilliantly green peas. Her first feeling was her usual one of contempt for anybody who could live in this way, then, perhaps because growing unhappiness had made her more sensitive, she saw the woman going home to a cosy solitude, her dinner heated up in twenty-five minutes with no bother of preparation, books to read while she ate it, and the memory of a visit to Keats's house to cherish.”

In 1978, when this book came out, frozen meals were widespread in England, but they had an image problem. According to a journalist in the *New Statesman* who was looking back at the early years of frozen meals, the freezer section in British supermarkets has not been particularly glamorous, and he pointed out, “...frozen dinners are meant for poorer shoppers looking for special offers, such as the unfortunately named bogofs (buy one, get one free), which make up half their sales.” The chic, more desirable British convenience product has been the chilled meal, which Marks & Spencer introduced in 1979. So Leonora, who is intensely aware of her genteel background and identifies wholly with the upper classes – her clothes, her furniture, the dainty little *objets* around her house – naturally looks down on the very idea of having a frozen dinner. But then something happens. That class identity that is so powerful seems to crack a little, under the pressure of Leonora's misery. She can visualize a scene at home around that frozen dinner that is happier and more comforting than anything that's awaiting her at the end of the day, in her perfect kitchen.

If there were a standard text called *The Illustrated History of Modern British Cooking*, one of its most famous scenes would show Elizabeth David writing her first book. It's the last few years of the 1940s, rationing is still in place, and David is writing about the food she remembers longingly from France and Egypt – “the oil, the saffron, the garlic, the pungent local wines; the aromatic perfume of rosemary, wild marjoram and basil...pimentos, aubergines, tomatoes, olives, melons...” *A Book of Mediterranean Food* came out in 1950 and instantly became an icon, celebrated to this day as the book that liberated a nation from soggy Brussels sprouts, tinned spaghetti and rivers of white sauce. Years later, David recalled, “It was a time really when they didn't have cookery articles. Why should they? They didn't have food.”

“They didn’t have food.” It’s a view of British culinary history that won’t die, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Of course wartime rationing put a huge burden on British cooking for years, but there was food before and there was food after. We know this from cook-books and restaurants guides and memoirs; and we know it beyond all doubt from Barbara Pym, who was working on her first book at the very same time Elizabeth David was writing hers. In fact *Some Tame Gazelle* came out the same year as *Mediterranean Food*, in 1950. *Some Tame Gazelle* is set in 1935, and it gives us a pageant of traditional, familiar British food as it was known in ordinary homes and ordinary villages before the war. It’s the kind of food Pym understood perfectly. And by and large it is delicious. Belinda and Harriet invite guests to a Sunday night supper of “cold chickens with ham and tongue...trifles, jellies, fruit and Stilton cheese”. Or the curate comes over for roast duck and an orange salad. Or they butter hot scones at teatime. Or Belinda tries her hand at homemade ravioli.

Of course there’s a deeply dreary vicarage meal, too, with everything boiled or tinned. The point is, Belinda knows the difference. Most of the heroines know the difference – Jane, in *Jane and Prudence*, is one of the few negligible cooks at the center of a Pym novel, and she’s balanced by Prudence, who has quite a sophisticated approach to the kitchen. They all encounter hideous food here and there, but it never dominates a whole novel, as it would have to if Pym were writing according to the clichés about British cooking.

What was truly notable about British food, straight through all the years that Pym was writing, was the way it swerved between extremes. Soggy Brussels sprouts, yes. But trips to France and recipes for *coq au vin*, also yes. Packaged biscuits and tasteless blancmange, of course. But homemade trifle and summer pudding show up, too. These are the contrasts that make up the culinary landscape even in the ‘50s, when the food in Pym’s novels ranged from sausage toad to *boeuf à la mode*. To be sure, the ‘50s are not remembered in Britain as a complete laughingstock of a decade, the way they are in the US. In the early years of the ‘50s, rationing was still on – that’s why Mildred and Dora, gazing at the menu in the teashop, are faced with powdered eggs and curried whale meat. But then came a welcome return to well-stocked grocery stores, butcher shops and restaurants. In 1953 Prudence can take herself out to a nice restaurant for a comfort-food lunch of smoked salmon, a little chicken and a fresh peach, and two years later Catherine in *Less Than Angels* cooks herself “an oily dish full of garlic” and buys a bottle of red wine to go with it. By 1958, when Wilmet sits down to a birthday dinner of roast duck and gooseberry pie, the abundance and quality of the food around her is striking, and far from what conventional wisdom associates with the British at midcentury. This novel is packed with perfect cheese soufflés, great joints of roast beef, sole Veronique and scampi.

That said, the important culinary theme of *A Glass of Blessings* is precisely the difference between lovely, upper-class food and peculiar, off-putting lower-class food. We see it elsewhere in Pym’s work; but in this book in particular, everywhere that food goes, intimations of social class go too. Wilmet rarely eats a meal that is not exquisite. But Wilmet – a character who resembles Pym not at all, except for the sense of humor and the habit of observing – lives in a

kind of bubble, protected by her class and sensibility from much of the stress and irritation of the real world. When she does encounter questionable food, it's always when she makes a foray beyond the bubble and into the larger, sometimes threatening world. In a dingy cafeteria with Sybil, she's sure she's going to get sick from the food and nervously chooses "the dishes that seemed most harmless – a cheese salad with a roll and butter, some stewed apple, and a cup of black coffee." On the evening she's supposed to attend a party at the parish hall to meet Father Ransome, the problem arises of how she's going to eat at all, under such strange circumstances. The party is at 8:00 p.m., when people like the Forsyths would normally be having dinner, not standing around holding cups of tea. "It does seem that the Church is out of touch with life," says Sybil. And sure enough, though Wilmet prides herself on being socially at ease everywhere, she has a hard time at the party latching on to any of the conversations underway. She is not in her natural environment. A bit earlier she'd been thinking how groups of people could be classified according to drink, for instance martini-drinkers – clearly they would be sophisticated, ironic, and charmingly dressed, like Wilmet – and tea-drinkers, who spent a lot of time at church functions and probably ran the jumble sale. She decides that she herself belongs in both groups – "though I was only just beginning to be initiated into the latter." But when the tea arrives she takes one taste and quickly puts the cup down. "...it was not at all to *my* liking, nor did I feel I could tackle one of the large brightly iced cakes which were offered."

Another newcomer who doesn't fit in very naturally at St. Luke's is Mr. Bason, whose social pretensions are a kind of upside-down and opposite version of Wilmet's social poise. She's exploring below her level; he's trying to clamber up, using food as a signalling device. Scampi, escargots, *coq au vin* – he wants to transform the clergy cuisine and leave "poor Mrs. Greenhill," with her boiled cod and baked beans, in the dust. When he makes tea for Wilmet and Rodney, he bakes the lightest possible sponge, the airest possible meringues – the ultimate cakes for a lady, bearing no resemblance to the garish iced cakes she had disdained at the parish party. But, poor soul, he's a pretender. He can cook the food, but he can't talk the talk, certainly not in the right accent. He will never successfully change his class. The last we see of him, he's serving dowdy teas with tinned fruit in an antique shop, and Wilmet and Rodney order a meal from him just to be polite.

The most dramatic challenge to Wilmet's sense of class, to the bubble she lives in, comes in the form of Keith. It's fascinating that she's less put off by his sexual orientation than by his accent and his staunchly middle-class tastes. Nobody from such a world has ever treated her as an equal, but Keith does – not socially, perhaps, because he's so conscious of her wealth, but morally. They're both housewives, as he sees it; they're both intimately involved with detergents. This is an entirely new kind of relationship for Wilmet, and hardly welcome; but she can't retreat from it because Keith is attached to Piers, who's her best friend's brother. In other words, their class worlds have been yoked together and there's no possibility of undoing them. Barbara Pym sets this up first in a grocery story – very deliberately, I believe, because the three of them

will have to make their first connections through food. Sure enough, they all stand there silently, watching a machine slice bacon. Then Keith brings up an embarrassing subject.

‘I think we need custard powder,’ said Keith.

‘Custard powder?’ exclaimed Piers in horror. ‘Good God, whatever do we want custard powder for?’

‘To make custard,’ said Keith flatly.

‘You mean *you* want to make custard with it. Well, all right then, as long as you don’t expect *me* to eat it.’

‘He’ll eat anything, really,’ said Keith to me in a confidential tone, gathering his purchases together in a canvas bag not unlike Mr Bason’s. ‘I always think custard is nice with stewed fruit, don’t you, Mrs Forsyth?’

Custard made from a powder – Bird’s Custard Powder – had been a British staple for nearly a century by the 1950s. Wilmet had certainly eaten it, although probably not at her own table. But it’s clear she had never given Bird’s Custard Powder the privilege of shelf space in her consciousness. Did she even know whether or not she approved of stewed fruit and custard? Her answer isn’t exactly a ringing affirmation. “‘Yes,’ I said inadequately. ‘I do.’”

Finally, we come to the tea table, with its doilies, and the paper napkins set across the plates, and the generic party food – sandwiches, biscuits and a pink-and-white gâteau, as unappetizing to Wilmet as the overly bright iced cakes she had rejected at the parish hall. Nothing could be less like the chic little sandwiches and the light, refined cakes Wilf Bason had turned out. At that party she had tasted everything, appreciated everything and praised it. Here she’s hungry for nothing; but out of politeness and awkwardness she feels bound to eat. Eating is inescapable; accepting Keith into her life is inescapable. “It was quite obvious that I was going to find it impossible to dislike Keith,” she reflects; and then, almost as if she’s following a script, she finds that she’s inviting him to tea. After that invitation, their relationship is a settled thing. He takes up lodging in her world, like some odd but unthreatening visitor -- “at once comic, boring and cosy,” she describes him, and adds, “I had really grown quite fond of him.” She’s become a bit more of a tea-drinker, that is, though whether she ever develops a fondness for garish, pink-and-white iced cakes is left entirely to our imagination.

Laura Shapiro is a writer and culinary historian. Her books include Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century; Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America, and Julia Child. This year she is a Fellow at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. She started reading Barbara Pym more than thirty years ago and just never stopped.

