



THE SILENCE OF THE KIPPERS

By Al Campbell

For years Campbell's Sunday morning breakfast treat had been an old-school kipper, bones-in, head and tail attached. Ever the iconoclast, he turned his back on the varying perceived cooking wisdoms of juggling or grilling, preferring to oven roast it for exactly seven minutes and thirty seconds at 180° centigrade. Kipper in the oven, he would slice a piece of brown bread as thinly as possible and smear it with a scrape of butter. Then, bisecting a lemon, he would squeeze half into a mug of hot water before stirring in a soupcon of honey. The other lemon half was reserved to anoint the succulent smoky flesh.

His father had been a keen man for a kipper. Being brought up in poverty in a small fishing village on England's south coast, where herrings were plentiful and cheap, learning to debone the fish on your plate before one's siblings moved in was the quintessence of survival. Further, having spent time living with his elder sister in Norfolk during the war, he had even developed a partiality for a bloater—a cold smoked herring that hadn't been gutted. The resulting gamey taste was a tang too tart for Campbell, although he had happily inherited the familial filleting finesse.

Cooking prep was a ritual. With the kipper laid out on a chopping board, looking up at him with opaque eyes, Campbell would take his largest, sharpest, Sabatier knife, and position the blade between the gills and the body.

You don't need to do this, the kipper seemed to say to him.

Sorry, Campbell would mentally reply. *If I don't you won't fit the pan*. Then he would decapitate the fish with the panache of Madame Guillotine, mentally reciting *if you want to get ahead, get a kipper*, bringing the heel of his right hand sharply down on the knife in time with the comma. Rotating the board, he repeated the process with the tail. *That's a fishy tale to be sure*, he said telepathically to the dog, who was patiently wagging hers in appreciation of the pun, waiting for the detritus to land in her bowl.

Having in turn passed the paternal predilections to his own son, some Sundays they were two for breakfast—necessitating double kipperage and a concomitant change of recitation. At one end, *they do say two heads are better than one*. At the other, *a tail of two kippers—that's the Dickens of a thought*.



Then came Covid-19 and the government-induced coma called 'lockdown', ushering in the law of unintended consequences, the most painful of which Campbell thought of as 'the Covid Kipper Conundrum'. The supply of fresh kippers—if any smoked food could ever be called fresh—evaporated.

There were three fishmongers in town, one at each of the main supermarkets. Two shut immediately after lockdown was announced, causing Campbell to traipse to the third and most expensive. Much to his chagrin, whilst the cornucopia of crustacea and fish on the counter was admirable and elegant in its artistry, there wasn't a kipper to be seen. He enquired of the jolly chap in the striped apron and straw boater with regard to the availability of their normal kiln-smoked delights, to be told 'simply can't get them sir. The supply has dried up'.

Campbell imagined that the seas would dry up first, but he followed the man's direction to the prepared fish section and availed himself of a vacuum pack of kipper fillets.

The fillets, tiny and paling in comparison to the real thing, luckily came in pairs, as working to his normal timings, he totally overcooked the first. Not that the dog minded. Dialling down his expectation to six minutes, the next effort was at least palatable.

He stared down at the tiny insipid yellow thing sitting silently on his plate. It didn't even say anything when he doused it with lemon juice and started eating. It was thoroughly uninspiring. With the force of a claw hammer striking a crab, Campbell was hit by the realisation that his habitual Sunday morning enjoyment was not just about taste.

Where was the fun? Where was the challenge? Where was the skill? Where was the banter? Covid-19 had caused the appetite-whetting pleasure of ritual and anticipation to tiptoe out of his life.

He looked at the dog, gently shaking his head. 'That was absolutely spineless,' he told her. 'And a man can't have a spineless breakfast, especially on a Sunday.'

He could hear an egg calling to him from the corner. *Boil me, boil me*, it purred seductively.

That's a cracking idea, mused Campbell, picking up the as yet untouched slice of wholemeal bread. He smiled at it enquiringly. *Shall we soldier on?*



He paused to look at the dog. 'Do you think lockdown is getting to me?' he asked out loud.

The dog cocked her head to one side and considered for a moment.

'Nah,' she said. 'Everybody knows that eggs are dreadful flirts—they'll talk to anybody.'

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