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Interview with William Sitwell- *Spotlight*, 12/21

The timing was ironic. For when restaurant critic William Sitwell unveiled his new book on the history of eating out, every fine dining establishment in the world had closed.

Eating out? In the midst of the modern-day version of the plague? Face masks and fine dining do not together go. But, Sitwell, who writes with the raffish wit of the old school toff, is accustomed to being out of step with the zeitgeist.

A couple of years ago, the writer had a run-in with angry vegans, intent on tearing him down from his position as editor of a popular food magazine, after he'd scorned a freelance pitch on plant-based food. "The main thing is not to look at Twitter," he says, wryly.

He lost that job. But, a couple of months later, he was back, having landed himself a plum role as restaurant critic for *The Telegraph* – posing waspishly with a carrot in his publicity shot. Sitwell is not a man you should read if you don't want any buttons pressed.

If you were to judge the book by its cover, *The Restaurant: A History of Eating Out* resembles the door of a posh restaurant – understated in a way that reeks of exclusivity. Knowing that the author hails from a family of aristocratic scribes – great-aunt Edith was a famously eccentric avant-garde poet – heightens that impression.

So, it comes as a surprise to discover in the book's pages a decidedly unclubby atmosphere. Wielding his "storyteller's privilege", Sitwell leads us through his unapologetically populist take on culinary history, introducing us to a colourful cast, ranging from the raucous Romans of eat-drink-and-be-merry Pompei to the crazy diamond chefs who have revolutionised global gastronomy.

It reads like it was fun to write, the author taking an almost earnest delight in throwing open his larder of fun facts. But, ensconced in the family mansion in Northamptonshire, sitting at the same desk where his grandfather penned 137 books, he confesses to having gone through "months of panic, stress and anxiety".

"Good luck with that one," said fellow critic Jay Rayner, of *the Observer*, when Sitwell floated the idea of his "nightmare project". He opted to start in Pompei, hours before it was buried under rivers of lava. Here lie the origins of organised hospitality, the town's legacy preserved in pumice for eighteen centuries.

Excavations reveal flashes of life lived large - a price list for fine local wines, and hilariously lewd graffiti in the bars and brothels. But the writer's magpie eye alights on the real gold: the 2000-year-old poo that shows us what was on the menu. Pompeians had a varied diet, with some items that wouldn't look out of place in your local trattoria.

The joy of the book lies in such rich details. The 18,000 eggs included in the shopping list for a mid-sixteenth century Ottoman feast, thrown to celebrate the circumcision of a prince. Or the eyewitness accounts of fourteenth-century culinary explorer Ibn Battuta, who describes the distressing fate of some famished sods in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), who ate a small elephant, only to be killed after the herd detected the smell from their sated, sleeping bodies.

Fast-forwarding to the Industrial Revolution, we meet John MacCulloch, dressed by Sitwell as the world's first critic. A geologist by profession, he travels to the remotest corners of Scotland, enduring the indignities of troglodyte inns and dwellings. "You must not prepare to be impatient," he notes, while waiting for a dinner that will inevitably arrive cold in the filthy inn of Mrs Maclarty. With only one wet and dirty towel to hand, he resorts to drying his face on the curtains.

The funniest passage in the book is studded with priceless observations. "You couldn't make it up," says Sitwell. "[MacCulloch] wrote in a way that was so vivid. I thought he was so funny, so brilliant."

Sitwell says he derived the greatest pleasure from writing about Britain's relatively recent dining revolution, led by the Roux brothers in the late sixties, their high-stakes bid to shake up the rather beige restaurant scene inspired by a painting of a plucky street urchin – the original *Gavroche*, namesake of their first restaurant.

Along the way, we encounter a Byronesque Marco Pierre White, who came knocking for a job with little more than £7.36 in his pocket and a cigarette hanging from lips. This real life *Gavroche* was the first of many supernova talents to emerge from the Gallic duo's mafia-like kitchens, blazing a dazzling trail through the London scene.

"Food is truly the greatest subject," says Sitwell, currently sitting pretty in Somerset, where he dines on pulses, shellfish, salmon and "the occasional meat-fest" featuring wild venison. He's "keeping it real", as he works on his entrepreneurial ventures, which include William's House Wines - the smallest wine shop in the world, with only eight bottles on offer at a time - and a podcast called Biting Talk.

The podcast has kept him connected to big names and new talent during lockdown, which has only just been lifted at the time of our chat. Restaurants around the world have been hit especially hard. "There are a lot of stresses and huge difficulties," he says. "But, also a lot of creative energy and innovation. Chefs and restaurateurs are some of the most creative, versatile people there are."

In many ways, *The Restaurant* has arrived at the perfect time. In the style of the best food writing, it tells a much bigger story, one fizzing with human ingenuity and sheer, bloody-minded, relentless drive. This book contains a little bit of what we most need right now: the perfect antidote to joyless hand gel.