

The second annual short story competition -
in association with Oxford Gastronomica

The Mogford Prize for Food & Drink Writing 2014

‘Carnivores’

by Guy Carter

...a huge success! Over 400 entries
were received for the 2014 prize...



old parsonage



Carnivores

You've probably never heard of Carnivores. It's not in the Michelin Guide, though many Michelin judges have dined there. There are versions of it in several cities. The one in Paris is called Carnassiers. The one in Berlin is called Fleischfressers. A few MacCarnivores have sprung up in the States. And one recently opened its doors in Shanghai. But you'll never find it unless you have a stack of offshore accounts, an eight page spread in Hello! magazine or you're something big in daytime TV. It does not advertise. It has no website and no email address. In fact it has no fixed address at all; it keeps changing them. And, above all, it has the most exclusive set of diners in the world.

Julian Asprith, on the other hand, had heard about it. He ran a popular blog called Dining Out Tonight. He was acerbic and witty. His readers loved him; over-priced and slapdash restaurateurs less so. He'd dined at the best London had to offer and had skewered a few reputations. So when he heard via a friend of a friend of a billionaire that there was, lurking in the depths of London, a mysterious restaurant, patronised by

the super-rich, that only served up the most exotic of meats, he made it his business to breach its secret portals and review it.

And, after much pestering, the friend of the friend introduced him to the friend of the billionaire, who in turn arranged a meeting with the billionaire himself. And thus it was, one cool evening late in the year and much to his surprise, Julian Asprith found himself in the billionaire's limousine, purring its way to Carnivores.

They arrived at a private address in an expensive mews in Mayfair. Hanging baskets filled the air with their delicate perfumes. A discreet opulence saturated the place. The billionaire ushered Julian down some steps. He knocked at the door. A solemn, thoughtful man opened it. He nodded at the billionaire then glanced at Julian with obvious suspicion.

"It's all right," the billionaire said. "I'm vouching for this gentleman."

The doorman didn't look convinced.

"You can rely on his absolute discretion."

Those two words did the trick. The man nodded his acceptance. His eyes registered something else now. Approval. Amusement? They were into the hallway and checking in their coats before Julian could follow the thought through. The maître d' greeted them and led them to their table. The cutlery glittered and the napkins looked as soft as snow drifts. The lighting was subdued. A quartet of music college beauties worked their way through Pachelbel's Canon. A large painting hung on the wall to their right. It showed a gentleman in a pith helmet. He was striking an heroic pose with a rifle. He had a foot placed firmly on the throat of a very dead-looking tiger.

"That's our founder", said the billionaire. "Quite a character,

he was."

Asprith gazed round him at the other diners. There were over a dozen tables and at each one sat someone from the small screen, the broadsheets or the lifestyle magazines.

"Try not to gawp, dear boy", the billionaire said. "They all come here not to be stared at."

"I'm sorry, but do you see who that is?"

The billionaire looked.

"Even those who govern our country need to eat from time to time."

"And over there?"

The billionaire looked again.

"Ah, yes. He's here promoting some film or other. The summer blockbuster, I believe it's called. Don't get him on to Scientology."

A waiter came over and presented the menu. The magnate waved it away.

"We'll have the house special", he said, in a voice just loud enough to travel to the edges of the room. A dozen conversations briefly ebbed. A few heads turned.

"An excellent choice, sir. Today it's Requin de Bolinas Plage. And for hors d'oeuvres?"

"I think we'll stick to my usual. A selection of especes disparues."

"Very good, sir! And something to drink?"

The magnate mentioned an obscure Chateau in the Loire valley and named a year in the late twentieth century. Then he frowned, shook his head briefly and picked a date some years earlier than that one.

The waiter left.

Julian leaned forward.

“The house speciality, what was it?”

“Requin de Bolinas. It’s why we’re all here. When word gets round that the speciality has arrived, a suitable venue is chosen, the chef alerted and a date fixed. We never dine in the same place twice. Security. A truly moveable feast!” He chuckled at his own joke.

The wine arrived. The cork was removed and examined and sniffed. The proffered splash of red was sampled and approved. The two glasses were filled halfway.

“To our founder.”

They raised their glasses to the portrait.

“Homo manducabis hominis comedenti!”

The billionaire paused.

“That’s his motto. Loved his Latin, he did”, he said and gazed up at the portrait.

“An interesting man. Staunch Victorian. Ex-Lancer. Superb shot. He tracked man-eaters in Bengal. Got a reputation as the best.” He pointed at the tiger in the painting. “That one was different. Hunted down in 1907. It had gone lame and couldn’t chase deer any more and so had been obliged to broaden its diet, so to speak. By the time it was shot it had killed and eaten about two hundred people.”

The billionaire inhaled the fumes of his wine and sighed.

“It was after shooting her that he had his epicurean epiphany.”

He took a sip.

“Man is the greatest predator in the world, he decided. From time to time, he declared, he must reassert his place at the top of the food chain. He must kill and eat those that would kill

and eat him. So he did just that. He hacked off a joint from the tigress, carried it out of deference to the continent’s cuisine, and swilled it down with half a bottle of Johnny Walkers out of deference to his wrecked liver. Quite the talk of the village, he was. Then he came back and opened the first Carnivores in London. Only meat was to be served. And the main dish was always to be the prime cut of an apex predator. Because of its unique, pungent taste the best chefs were hired to make it palatable. It soon became the place to be seen. The wealthy and powerful flocked there. Each dish was a visible assertion of the diner’s absolute dominance. Over nature. Over the herd. They were mostly titled folk and industrialists early on. These days media and sports prevail.”

The hors d’oeuvres appeared.

“What’s this?”

“This is a selection of especes disparues.”

Especes disparues?”

“Literally ‘extinct species’. When our agents get wind that a line of animal life is about to peter out, they secure as many fresh specimens as they can.” He chuckled. “No doubt speeding them on their way to oblivion, but adding enormously to their value at the table. Some have been in the deep freeze for decades.”

Asprith cut a slice of raw fish. He added a squeeze of lemon.

“Delicious. Freshwater?”

“Yes. That’s a Clear Lake spittail. Once plentiful in Clear Lake California. Now, alas, no more. Human interference, of course. Our agents managed to acquire a fair few before they entered the roll call of the extinct.”

“And this? A bit like venison.”

“Ah, that’s Yangtze River dolphin. It flourished for twenty million years until it met us and our polluting ways and vanished. I believe we procured five fresh carcasses before that unhappy event. Probably the very last.”

Asprith consumed the medallion of Pyrenean ibex appreciatively.

“You said you needed my help?”

“Let’s just say your reviews have caught the eyes of some of our top chefs. And there is indeed a great service you could provide for us.”

“Go on.”

“It’s like this. Unofficial versions of ourselves have been springing up around the world. Given the legal grey area we inhabit - eating endangered and extinct species is frowned on by the bewigged lawmakers of today - we can hardly sue them and close them down. So we live with them. Our problem is this. Demand is now outstripping supply. Our entrees are especially hard to come by. And our entrees are the *raison d’être* of the restaurant; man must eat that which would eat him. Ah, here it is!”

The waiter flowed around them and deposited the plates with a fluid expertise. He withdrew with a curt bow and a “*bon appétit!*”

There was a large white steak on Asprith’s plate with pale striations running through it like tree rings through a bleached log. He cut a triangle from the corner and put it in his mouth.

“Mmm. That is extraordinary. What did you call it again?”

“*Requin de Bolinas Plage*. Bolinas Beach shark.”

Bolinas? The name niggled at Asprith. Where had he heard it? The billionaire was watching him, carefully, as if reading

his mind.

“If the name sounds a little familiar it’s because it was in the news about a month ago. It’s a Californian beach. There was a spate of fatal shark attacks on swimmers off there.”

“I remember now.”

“There was a hunt for the shark responsible. A great white. It had killed and partially eaten at least three swimmers. One was a minor TV star. Snorkelling.”

“They caught it, didn’t they?”

The magnate indicated the plates with a flourish.

“We did indeed!”

Asprith turned a little pale.

“Is this...?”

“*Homo manducabis hominis comedenti.*”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Man is obliged to eat that which eats man. Man must eat the man-eater.”

Asprith removed the forkful from his mouth, looked at it then, aware that his companion was watching him keenly, he thought about the soap star. He’d never liked his series especially. He returned the fork to his mouth and chewed appreciatively. He was aware of having passed some test. He looked around him at the remarkable gathering of A-listers tucking into their specialities. He now belonged here. He, Julian Asprith, lowly food critic of a popular blog, sat shoulder to shoulder with the highest in the land. It felt good.

“I think you’ll agree”, the billionaire said “that knowledge gives the dish an extraordinary - what shall we say - transgressive piquancy you’d be hard put to find elsewhere?”

“It certainly is without parallel”, Asprith said, choosing his

words carefully. “And you said I might be of help?”

“Quite!”

A waiter came over and the magnate waited until he had refilled both their glasses before continuing.

“Our problem is one of success. The idea has spread as a good idea. But sourcing the food is now becoming a problem, given our precise specifications.”

“I understand.”

“We have agents all over the world, and look around you, money is never going to be a problem when it comes to acquiring a carcass. It’s just we’re now in serious competition with other branches. And we now suspect the competition of cutting corners, of charging their clientele for predatory meat that, in the scheme of things, is quite innocent of any anthropophagus activity.” He wiped his mouth with the pristine napkin. “They’re cheating, in other words, and our patrons are beginning to suspect. There are murmurs. Even here. Some are wondering if the exorbitant membership fees they pay are for an inferior product.”

“And where do I come in?”

“You’re a trusted food critic. We want you to check our sources. Make sure, at least, that we are on the level. The carnivore must match the headline.”

“I could certainly do that.”

“A review of our service, disseminated discreetly amongst selected diners, would reassure the London base that we at least are true to the founder’s code.” He smiled. “We’d out-Carnivore the other Carnivores.”

He sipped at his wine.

“For this you’ll get life membership to Carnivores and

introductions to the wealthiest and most powerful in the land. What do you say?”

“I’d be honoured.”

“Good.”

The magnate glanced over to his left and caught the eye of one of the other diners and gave discreet nod.

“There’s someone I want you to meet. He’s quite a character and quite a fierce conservationist. He runs that stately home. You know, the one with the game park.”

“The other Lengloa! The one with tigers.”

“That’s the one. You’ll need to speak with him. He deals with all our overseas transactions. Oh, and while you’re here, you may as well meet the chef. He’s an avid reader of your blog.” He mentioned the name of the most talked-about TV chef at the time. Asprith blanched.

“Do you know, I visited his restaurant recently. I may have been a little harsh in my review of it.”

“Oh, that’s water under the bridge, I assure you. Or aqua sub ponte as I’m sure they say here!”

A month passed. The magnate was entertaining a friend at another, equally discreet, location. They were just finishing off a medley of Liverpool pigeon, Japanese River otter and Alaotran grebe, lightly roasted in corn oil and served on a skewer. His friend caught sight of the stately home owner three tables away.

“Do you know, I don’t know how he gets away with it. That’s the third time a tourist has been attacked by one of his cats. And this one was killed! You must have read about it, it was in all the papers.”

A waiter cleared their plates away.

“Oh, yes. I read about it. The poor fellow wasn’t found for a day or so. He’d been dragged under a tree. I hear…” He lowered his voice. “I hear there wasn’t much left of him when they did discover him. It took a while to identify him and work out how he’d managed to get into the enclosure without being detected.”

“Who was it?”

“Some food critic. He’d actually given poor old chef quite a pasting in one of his reviews, so chef wasn’t sad to see him go.”

“Good lord. They had to shoot the animal that killed him, I imagine.”

“Naturally.”

The entree arrived. The waiter swept the dish cover off with an expert flourish.

“Here it is gentlemen. Filet de tigre parc! Enjoy your meal.”