

M. VERSFELD

*Food for thought. A philosopher's cookbook* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)

Cape Town: Double Storey Books. 2004.

Versfeld (1909-1995) had a loyal, primarily South African readership with his philosophical works on everyday life, such as, in Afrikaans, *Klip en klei*, and in English, *Pots and poetry*. In his books, as is again the case with this republication (previous editions have been unavailable from books shops for some time), Versfeld offers a richly flavoured broth of far-flung thoughts and, suddenly, the utterly ordinary. Here, Socrates and soup are soul mates.

Versfeld was a University of Cape Town philosopher of the sort hardly encountered anymore: with graying goatee and black beret, his mind would be dwelling on Jesus and Tao as his hands busied themselves with the preparation of a meal. He lived different to the usual urbanite, at times picking his soup greens from the suburban roadside where others would have applied pesticide.

## Resensies/Reviews

As is clear from this book, Versfeld *lived* his food, just as food gave him and those around him life. And people there *has* to be, he writes: a good meal is initiated by extending an invitation ... Food is hospitable. Which explains one of his many aphorisms: never trust a family that owns only small cooking pots. Equally, invitations to corporate do's should be declined, if need be even with lies about piles or one's own death, he writes. "Corporations and institutions cannot give. They can only dole out, and this is part of the mutual cannibalism of metropolitan life."

Because food is about life, and life cannot be prescribed, recipes for dishes should be undetailed, giving only broad indications. In cooking as in life, what is at hand should be utilised. Cooking, like life, is therefore personal, and should usually be local, that is, related to the immediate surroundings. Slow cooking is always to be preferred, and even when preparing a three-minute egg, he argues, those three minutes should not be hurried, but should be enjoyed as an eternity.

Drawing on his (critical) Catholic background, Western philosophy and Eastern religions, Versfeld combines the culinary, humanity and Divinity into one experience, to be savoured *here*. Meals are not to be rushed, because they constitute communion with the communities of the earth. The humble potato is the most universal of fare (this, I would surmise, could constitute a devastating critique of modern commercialism). Within a huge planet a small life can be meaningful by drawing on it in one's own way. In this manner, the individual may revolt against global massification: "The true anarchist is the cook allowing the ingredients in his soup pot to be." The abundance of our planet is most properly recognised by the simplicity of a meal.

Though dated — the 1983 edition has hardly been edited (unneeded repetitions could well have been edited out, and some older food terminology modernised for the sake of a new readership) — *Food for thought* still manages to entice one to think, and feel, deeply: about God and soup, lamb and sacraments, the problems with and virtues of vegetarianism, and why poets and God are induplicable ... The loose narrative structure of the book, almost irreverently combining thoughts on groceries, society and religion with recipes, personal experiences, and all the while spicing it with existentialism, reminds one a little of the biblical book of Proverbs: were these different ingredients edited together just a tad too late at night ...?

Versfeld's book deserves a new generation of readers. Only those who are holy may cook, Versfeld believes. To taste of this book, then, may constitute both a salutary and a salivatory part of one's journey of salvation.

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