
Patience
Gray
&
Irving
Davis

Adam Federman

In his posthumously published memoirs, bookseller and bibliophile Irving Davis remarked that it is far more amusing to read about the pleasures of the table than those of the bed. If ever there was someone qualified to make such a claim, it was Davis. One of the great (and perhaps one of the last) antiquarian book collectors of the 20th century, Davis frequently smuggled erotic literature out of Paris and into England. He once acquired some of what he called the ‘prettiest books of the eighteenth century with illustrations by Borel... first editions of de Sade, the original edition of *Gamiani ou deux nuits d’excès*, said to have been written by Alfred de Musset after he broke with George Sand, illustrated by Daumier, and many more, all in sumptuous bindings.’

These he sold in Paris, but there remained the matter of a collection of erotic engravings. To get these across the channel he enlisted the help of his wife, Ivy Elstob, who stuffed them in her clothes and ‘looked as though she was just on the point of giving birth to triplets.’ On another occasion he smuggled out the first two volumes of *My Secret Life*, a rare, eleven-volume work of which there were said to be only twenty copies (of which only one was privately held). ‘I had always been curious about this book,’ Davis writes, ‘because of its extreme rarity and because the authorship had been attributed to a very distinguished Victorian statesman.’ But beyond its novelty as an artifact, Davis found the book tiresome and lacking atmosphere. It was, he said, little more than an account of the author’s copulations from the age of puberty through adulthood.

‘Reflecting on this theme,’ he continues, ‘I returned to my flat in London with a basket of *morilles*... I opened that gastronomic bible *Ali-Bab* to find how they should be cooked – *à la crème, au citron, au jus, en croustade, poulet aux morilles*, etc, etc. Tired as I was and heavy as the 1,280 page quarto volume of *Ali-Bab* is to hold, I read on until the early morning.’

We owe much of what we know about Davis, including the appearance of his memoirs, to Patience Gray, author of *Plats du Jour* and *Honey From a Weed*. It was Gray who edited and, along with several of Davis’s friends, published his Catalan cookbook in 1969, two years after his death (reprinted by Prospect Books in 2000). Gray herself used many of Davis’s recipes in *Honey From a Weed*, including the feast of the three fishermen, and devoted an entire chapter to him (‘Homage to a Classic Cook’). She said that Davis taught her everything she knew about cooking, and was shocked to learn, when they met in 1957, that she had had the temerity to write a cookbook before knowing him (Gray’s first book, *Plats du Jour*, had just been published). As the story goes, he was so impressed with her knowledge of fungi that he invited her to dinner at his apartment in Brunswick Square.

These were legendary affairs. Those who knew Davis recall his fine Venetian wine glasses, ‘pale parchment yellow with emerald green rims,’ according to the poet Oliver Bernard, from which the best wines of France were sipped (‘sparkling Vouvray and smoky Clos de Vougeot,’ Gray writes),

and his mastery of classical cooking. ‘His meals were extraordinary,’ the 86 year old Bernard told me when I met him last summer at his home in Kenninghall. ‘Really extraordinary. I don’t really know what it was, to be honest. I mean... I’m not a sophisticated diner. But it was as much his own kind of hospitality and personality and so on, it seemed to me, as it was the food. They were always marvellous occasions. In fact he was like my brother, who used to sort of plunk something on the table and say, “Yeah, I’m afraid it’s not much good.” And it turned out to be just much better than anything you’d ever had.’

He also seemed to understand the value of being hungry. According to Patience’s daughter, Miranda Amour-Brown, there was often a long delay before the meal was served. ‘You were absolutely famished at the start of the meal,’ she says. ‘And then it was the best thing you’d ever tried.’ In *Honey From a Weed* Gray recalls some of the dishes she had at Brunswick Square: sorrel soup, marinated anchovies, fresh asparagus, leeks *à la grecque*, or a salad of fennel followed by a matelote of eels, turbot *à la crème*, lobster, a sequence of roast birds, grouse, braised partridges, boiled *zampone*, and *cotechini* served with *pommes à l’huile*.

Davis was also known for being a perfectionist. Gray tells the story of how he threw a roast duck, which he considered less than perfect, out of the window of his apartment in front of expectant guests. It lodged on a drainpipe and, being mid-summer, had to be removed by the local fire

department. He could also be impetuous and given to a kind of melancholy self-deprecation. He once stormed out of a restaurant in Agropoli after waiting for over an hour, because a freshly-caught conger eel was served to someone else. He stood up, tore out the napkin tucked expectantly in his collar, threw it on the floor and strode out.

In his delightful memoir, *Getting Over It*, Bernard, who met Davis through his first wife, the dancer Beryl Kaye, described him as ‘looking gnomelike, hook nosed and cheerfully gloomy.’ He was never more cheerful, it seems, than when searching for forgotten manuscripts. For Davis the book trade and gastronomy were inseparable. He planned his book buying trips to Florence to coincide with the season’s first asparagus and new peas; the acquisition of rare manuscripts often included casks of wine, cases of extra virgin olive oil, or aged wine vinegar; and meetings with other collectors almost always involved some sort of elaborate meal.

‘A wonderful gastronomic day in Naples yesterday,’ Davis wrote in a letter to Gray in 1959. ‘Casella bookseller, a gastronome, invited us to lunch at his club, facing the restaurant where we ourselves ate. We had a salad of *fruits de mers*, mussels, tiny octopus with thin strips of celery, oil and a *soupeçon* of garlic, a wonderful *pasticcio* of *maccheroni* with aubergines, basil of course and tomato, a mixed fry of marrows, mozzarella and small fish, and a melon ice and real Ischian wine, the sort Douglas must have drunk 40 years ago.’

He was of course referring to Norman Douglas, exiled author of *South Wind* and *Old Calabria*, who had been a decisive influence on England's best-known post war food writer, Elizabeth David.

Indeed, the parallels between the two relationships – that of mentor and disciple – are striking. Both women were considerably younger than the men they befriended; the relationships were of short duration but intense and formative; and each seemed to have a profound influence on their future careers as food writers. Elizabeth David would also attribute much of her knowledge of food and cooking to Douglas, whom she met in 1939 (she was 26 and he was 72) while stranded in Antibes before the war. They often dined together or took long walks in the hills near Vence. She dedicated her first book, *Mediterranean Food*, to him and wrote several essays about their encounters.

According to David's biographer, 'Norman Douglas... laid the foundations of the way she thought not only about food, but about history, the Mediterranean world and the way life should be lived.' Food mattered fiercely to Douglas, and in his work it was discussed alongside natural history, religion and political economy. He even wrote a cookbook of sorts – a collection of aphrodisiac recipes titled *Venus In The Kitchen; or Love's Cookery Book*, published after his death in 1952. Perhaps more than anything else it was Norman and Davis's approach to life, informed by their Mediterranean past, that so fascinated David and Gray – fiercely independent, intellectually rigorous women.

Davis's connection to that lost world of writers, artists, and intellectuals also appealed to Gray. Not only did he introduce her to some of the well-known figures of the rare book circuit: Tammaro De Marinis, Lucien Scheler (publisher of *Eluard*), and Blasio Galanti, whom Gray described as a 'wonderful emaciated figure, whose sad face reminded me of Italy's early 19th century revolutionaries,' but he was also a link to that 'lost Bohemia' of wayward Englishmen, mostly writers, including Norman Douglas, DH Lawrence, Ronald Firbank, Max Beerbohm and others.

Indeed Davis had moved among the very same circle; his first partner in the book business was Giuseppe ('Pino') Orioli, a close friend and lover of Douglas's. They were so inseparable that they referred to themselves as 'Pinorman'. Orioli was also being courted by the novelist Reggie Turner, however, who promised to include him in his will, to Norman's never-ending consternation. Davis is rarely mentioned alongside them, but he was certainly part of the picture. He and Orioli opened a bookshop in Florence in 1911 and they were the first to publish *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Davis said that Orioli introduced him to the pleasures of the table. He wrote, 'Food became an interest for me and cooking, I gradually realized, the sixth art.'

In 1936, at the height of the Abyssinian war, Davis managed to sell a rare Tasso manuscript to the Italian National Library in Rome. 'They paid not a little,' according to his step daughter Ianthe Carswell. But because of wartime restrictions, he

was unable to bring the money back to England, and instead spent half of it on a lavish cross-country tour of Italy and the other half on books. 'Davis and Orioli and Douglas spent a lot of the day drinking and eating,' Carswell noted in a letter to Gray describing the trip and their stay in Florence. 'It was unquestionably the most wonderful exciting holiday of my life.'

It wasn't long after they met that Gray and Davis set off on one of their own expeditions. 'Prompted by nostalgia for Italy and his distant past,' Gray writes, they drove from Naples to Lecce, following in the footsteps of Douglas and Orioli, in search of Magna Graecia. They traveled on primitive roads in a tiny Fiat, Davis puffing away at his Tuscan cigars ('our route is strewn with hundreds of unsmokeable cigars'), with copies of George Gissing's *By the Ionian Sea* and Lenormant's *La Grande Grèce* and *Voyage à travers l'Apulie et la Lucanie* by their side. In a letter to an editor at the New York Times in 1990, Gray explained that, 'He [Davis] always told me that Douglas had never set foot in the Salento. When Irving and I in 1958 made a journey into Calabria, Basilicata and Apulia, in the steps of Douglas and Pino Orioli, nothing would induce him to explore the Salento south of Lecce... As far as Irving was concerned, he only wished to go where Douglas had also been.' At the time, Gray never would have imagined that she too might settle south of Lecce.

They spent nearly three weeks on the road, traversing Calabria, Basilicata and Puglia. Gray kept a fragmentary account of that trip, and was taken

by the austerity of the landscape, the crumbling architecture, and the wild beauty of the sea. They passed through Bisignano, where Orioli said Greek pots were made; Taranto, because Douglas claimed it was where the cat was first introduced to Europe from Egypt; and Frederick II's castle in Trani, a seaport on the Adriatic. Meals were simple, often nothing more than bread, cheese, and wine. Like the hotels – 'depressing' and 'tomblike' – they were also sometimes disappointing. Provisions were scarce. 'If you see a bar, however primitive, stop at it, there won't be another for 40 miles!'

But there were treasures, too: a truck stop in Trebisacce on the Ionian where they ate olives, artichokes, *prosciutto*, and *maccheroni al forno* ('Giant petrol trailers drawn up, lively lorrymen, oleanders in pots on the roadway, rustic hors d'oeuvres,' Gray wrote); along the quay in Taranto where, they had *cozze al forno* – mussels opened over a very hot fire and filled with a mixture of their own juices, breadcrumbs, garlic, parsley, and parmesan, sprinkled with olive oil and browned in a hot oven – 'perhaps the most perfect dish we ate' (a recipe included in *Honey From a Weed*); the strong, lightly sparkling wines of Sava; and the decorative pastries of Lecce.

The approach to that baroque city, and the 'miraculous lucidity of the Apulian sky' left a deep impression on Gray. 'One could see a long way,' she wrote, 'the brilliant little white cubes, peasant huts, leading the eye into the farthest distance. Beautiful white castellated farms appeared, enclosed in bastion walls, with square towers, crenellated. Then

the delight of the town-villages, long long streets of dazzling white terraced houses (occasionally pale blue, pale chrome, or washed with pink), vistas of rectilinear whiteness punctuated with black garbed peasants at their doorways, sitting on the street.'

Though Davis kept to his word and they didn't venture south of Lecce, it was Gray's first taste of the Salento, that foreign landscape that would eventually become her home. In a letter to her mother in 1968, one year after Davis's death and just before she and her partner, the Belgian sculptor Norman Mommens, made their first trip to Puglia in search of a place to live and work, Gray wrote, 'Funny I should have explored that region with Davis. And one or two places have indelibly fixed themselves in my memory.'

Davis would also introduce Gray to El Vendrell in Catalonia, where he spent summers with the sculptor Apel-les-Fenosa and his wife Nicole. It was here, toward the end of his life, that Davis's interest in rare books and food seemed to converge. Davis became acquainted with the Fenosas through his friend the poet and publisher Lucien Scheler. He would see them on his trips to Paris, where he often purchased Fenosa's sculptures, including *La Tempête pourchassée par le Beau Temps*, which he gave to Gray. It can still be found on the mantelpiece over the dining room table at Spigolizzi, Gray and Mommens farmhouse in Puglia.

Fenosa liked to return the favor by purchasing Davis's books. On one occasion, in London, he asked Davis if he had a copy of Dante's *Vita Nuova*.

"If you see a bar, however primitive, stop at it, there won't be another for 40 miles"

Davis opened one of his bookcases and produced a first edition copy. Fenosa was spellbound. 'What's it worth?' he asked. According to Nicole, who told me the story in her Montmartre apartment, crowded with Fenosa's sculptures, 'Irving opened the book, read a mysterious sign on the title page and mentioned a sum. Apel-les paid, of course. That same night, at supper, Irving said, "If you want to sell me the book back, I'll pay you double."'

Davis delighted in fuelling others' passions. He would, over the years, contribute a 16th century Petrarch, Luis de Gongora's *Soledades*, and *Las tres musas ultimas castellanas* by Francisco de Quevedo,

published in 1772, to Fenosa's personal library. In a similar way, Gray acquired *Les Secrets de la Cuisine Comtoise* by Pierre Dupin, a 1927 classic of French cooking.

It was in El Vendrell that Davis began collecting recipes, usually relayed to Nicole by their cook and housekeeper Anita, in a small black notebook, eventually edited by Gray and published after his death under the title *A Catalan Cookery Book: A Collection of Impossible Recipes*. Many of the recipes appear in *Honey From a Weed* and much of the book's spirit is evident in Gray's work. Davis had the same devotion to local ingredients and methods, an uncompromising attitude toward his home audience (recipes are not adapted for the British kitchen, which explains the book's subtitle), and a concern that the recipes he was recording and the way of life that sustained them was fast disappearing.

'You have no idea of how elaborate these dishes are but I think it is [sic] good idea to write them down before they are lost or submerged in the international tide,' wrote Davis in a 1963 letter to Gray. It includes recipes for snails, calf's head, rabbit with snails and chocolate sauce, tripe, partridge, and many variations of salt cod. In his recipe for paella he writes, 'It is most improbable that you will find either an *olla* or any of the fish which I have mentioned, so perhaps you had just better read about this dish and wait till you come to Catalonia to eat it.' On procuring a rabbit he advises thus: 'Either breed rabbits yourself or try to shoot one of the few which have escaped the plague.'

The book was first published in a limited edition of 165 copies with a series of engravings by Nicole (and has since been republished by Prospect Books with Davis's memoirs in a more user friendly paperback edition). 'This little book,' Gray wrote in the introduction, 'is not so much a collection of culinary admonitions as the distilled essence of a fast vanishing way of life.' It is also a marvel to look at. In keeping with Davis's spirit it has become a collector's item; a single copy of the original is available from a bookshop in the Loire Valley for just under \$1,000.

A similar impulse – an almost anthropological approach – animated Gray's own recipe collecting throughout the Mediterranean. American writer and gourmand Jim Harrison has described Gray as 'a wandering Bruce Chatwin of food.' In the introduction to *Honey From a Weed* she writes, 'It sometimes seems as if I have been rescuing a few strands from a former and more diligent way of life, now being fatally eroded by an entirely new set of values. As with students of music who record old songs which are no longer sung, soon some of the things I record will also have vanished.' It is perhaps interesting that Gray chose the analogy of old songs, because it was roughly during the same period that she and Davis took their trip to Lecce that American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax and the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino were travelling through the south of Italy, including Puglia, recording folk music.

In 1970 Gray and Mommens settled in the far

south of Puglia, about 60 kilometers from Lecce, near what is known as *Finibus Terrae* or Land's End. Their friends considered it a 'descent into Africa'. Gray described the landscape – dominated by olive trees and the wild plants and herbs of the *macchia* – as an 'image of wilderness'. The Catalan cookbook had just been published, and Gray had largely completed the first draft of her magnum opus, *Honey From a Weed*. Indeed, by 1970 she was already looking for a publisher, though everyone she approached considered the book far too unconventional. It would take her close to 15 years to find a publisher.

In her chapter on Davis, she writes, of his cooking (which she attributed to his Mediterranean past), that it struck a balance between 'liberality and frugality'. Gray considered this to be 'the master-key to the art of cooking.' It was an idea that would permeate her work (*Honey From a Weed* was originally titled *Fasting and Feasting*), a polarity that she came to see as the foundation of Mediterranean cuisine. For Gray, fasting and hunger – whether a function of poverty, ritual, or season – were no less important than the particularities of slaughtering a pig or making paella. In her work, she shows that these two seemingly polar opposites are in fact intimately connected, that the pleasure of feasting is derived in part from the reality and memory of hunger, of privation, of poverty.

In her introduction to *A Catalan Cookery Book* she writes, 'There is an extremity in the climate there reflected in violent physical transitions,

where fasting – actual physical privation arising from exposure to the hallucinatory effects of heat, dust, light – gives place not to just eating, but to feasting.' But a feast could be as simple as a handful of tomatoes, a plate of grilled sardines, bread and wine.

Honey From a Weed bears Davis's imprint not only in its approach to food and cooking, but in the craftsmanship of the book itself, elegantly illustrated by Corinna Sargood. Gray even reproduces the title page of a 16th century text (*Question de Amor de dos enamorados*, author unknown) from Davis's library.

After the publication of *Honey From a Weed* Elizabeth David sent a letter to Gray congratulating her on the book's success. 'I think often of Irving Davis and miss his unrivalled knowledge of Italian cookery books,' she wrote. It is the only known letter from David to Gray, though it is believed that the two women met at a dinner at Davis's in 1961. If they did, neither left an account of it.

In March of that year Davis began sending Ms David some of his catalogues, and in one of his letters wrote, 'I wonder whether by any chance you would care to have dinner with me here on Friday next and to meet a great friend of mine, Patience Gray, who would very much like to make your acquaintance? The dinner, if you can come, will be most simple.'

In his typically unassuming way, he added, 'I should not attempt any recipe from your cookery books.' **F&K**