

Fergus And The Beast

By Tara FitzGerald

If Harry Potter were to give up his career in magic some 20 years from now and become an offal-loving chef with a penchant for burgundy and an ever-present cigarette, he might look a lot like Fergus Henderson.

This is my first impression of the British chef and proponent of 'nose to tail eating' at 6am in the lobby of a Mexico City hotel one summer's day. It is not only his round glasses and rosy cheeks that remind me of the boy wizard, but also his wide-eyed air of childlike enthusiasm, compounded by the slightly breathless way his words tumble over one another in their rush to be heard.

But Fergus Henderson is no fresh-faced ingénue. His first London restaurant – St. John Bar and Restaurant – opened its doors in 1994 and was awarded its first Michelin star last year (2009). He opened St. John Bread and Wine in 2003, and will launch a small hotel and restaurant in London's Chinatown later in 2010. But for now he's visiting Mexico and planning a dinner for 150 guests, and we – Fergus, a handful of photographers, and I -- are on our way to the vast, sprawling food hub that is Mexico City's *Central de Abastos* in search of inspiration.

As feeble fingers of reddish dawn steal across the cloudy sky, our sleepy convoy arrives at the buzzing food market that supplies almost all of this city's restaurants with their stock ingredients. A city within a city, it is said that in the busy early morning hours of trade here more money changes hands on a daily basis than in the Mexican stock exchange. Even though we arrive after peak hours, the hustle and bustle of the market goes on, and Fergus continually has to dodge speeding trolleys as we wander through streets upon streets of fruit, vegetables, meats, fish, herbs and spices. "Do you ever get the feeling we may never get out of here?" he jokes as we turn into yet another alley lined with plump papayas, lush mangos and rosy strawberries. "I'm slightly reeling from this whole experience."

Fergus is looking for some local inspiration, a way to add a "Mexican twang" to the dinner he will be serving up later in the week. He fingers shiny, bright red chillis, stops to examine delicate squash blossoms and dried hibiscus flowers, and asks the names of unfamiliar herbs as he sniffs them. I ask him if it's very different from other wholesale food markets he has visited. "It's big, really, really big, and the produce looks incredibly healthy." Did he find the Mexican touch for his dinner menu? "Well I thought the *epazote* was intriguing, and an intriguing leaf is always a good thing. And the black bean is a wonderful thing with its smoky flavour. So we'll see how it shapes up in the kitchen."

Born in 1963 to architect parents, Henderson's initial instinct on leaving school was to study architecture, but he soon found himself fantasising more about the fabulous feasts that would take place inside the buildings rather than the structures themselves. And that was when "the fickle finger of fate" took over. He got involved in what he calls a pop-up restaurant – a sort of casual arrangement whereby himself and a couple of friends would cook for 200 people on Sundays. "I always thought I would go back to architecture, but I got happily distracted by kitchens." Then there was a "dodgy nightclub" in Notting Hill in West London, followed by the French House in Soho where he cooked with his now-wife Margot, also a chef. "After that my now-partner in St. John found a building and approached me and said what about doing a restaurant. One look at it and I was in love with it. It's an amazing building, an old smokehouse," he explains, his love for the quirky evident even in building choice. The opening of St. John's near London's Smithfield Market with partners Trevor Gulliver and Jon Spiteri followed, and he has never looked back.

But his route has not been a traditional one – he never went to culinary school and never trained under a master chef. "I think it's polite to eat the whole beast if you are going to kill it," he says of his use of offal, off-cuts and other pieces of the beast previously shunned in upscale eateries. In the mouth of anyone else that might come off as glib, but from Fergus it somehow rings honest and true. Thus was born his philosophy of nose to tail eating, and he has published several books on the subject. He also believes in sticking to seasonal, local ingredients, so that your menu is provided by nature at any given time. "It has come to be perceived as my 'philosophy,' but that was never deliberate, it is just the way I cook," he shrugs self-effacingly. "My mum was from Lancashire and it helps when you are brought up on tripe and onions. It's a good beginning in life I think."

"And it's all delicious -- tripe is wonderful, brain is lovely, trotters are unbelievable, kidneys are my birthday breakfast every year," he adds. St. John's success proves he is not the only one who thinks this way. The restaurant became a gathering place for East London's hip, artsy crowd early on, and Fergus's gastronomy is lauded by fellow chefs such as Anthony Bourdain. The eatery has frequently been listed in Restaurant magazine's annual tally of the top 50 restaurants in the world. In addition, he published his seminal cookbook 'Nose to Tail Eating: A Kind of British Cooking' in 1999 [published as 'The Whole Beast' in the United States] and was awarded an MBE in 2005 for services to gastronomy.

KNIFE SKILLS/LIFE SKILLS

Fergus is amiable and easy to chat to. He has a friendly demeanour and none of the self-importance that seems to follow a lot of celebrity chefs around. He likes to talk about food and tell stories, although sometimes his sentences tail off into dead ends or ramble off into different terrains altogether. But the full extent of his

cheery nature and humility come into full force when you realise just how much it has not all been plain sailing for him.

In the late 1990s he was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease – a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system that can affect motor skills, speech and other functions – and it forced him out of his own kitchen. "I eventually had to hand over the head chef role to someone else and step out of the kitchen," he says, his characteristic chirpiness slipping for just a moment. "But in the end I now go in there in the morning and look at the menu and then have lunch, so it's not too bad really!" All those lunches have left him with a robust form, and he absent-mindedly rubs his belly on occasion when talking about food. I find this reassuring as I am of the opinion that a good chef should maintain somewhat of an ample girth. You'd be suspicious if he didn't enjoy food (and the occasional bottle of burgundy as well).

A few years ago he underwent a revolutionary new surgery known as deep brain stimulation that cannot cure the disease, but can help control the symptoms significantly. "It's a touch of vanity I must admit that keeps me out of the kitchen now, because I'm much slower than the rest of the chefs. I suppose I shouldn't admit to that really!" he chuckles. "So now I'm a kind of "all-seeing chef" (he balks at the term executive chef) and I love it. It's obscene how much I enjoy it."

"Sixteen years on and every day I find it thrilling to go in and see what's happening, look over the menu etc," he says. "It's like having another huge family that's full of emotions and you're making sure they behave and everything's OK." Fergus says the endorphin rush of service is hard to beat, especially when it's going well.

Later in the kitchen at Naos – Monica Patiño's restaurant that is hosting Fergus's dinner – I get to see him in action for myself, as preparations for the meal begin days in advance. Fergus and his sous chef Dan install themselves in a small room off the main kitchen and get started on the preparations for the pigs' head salad starter. Dressed in a white chef's jacket with his name embroidered over the chest and his head swathed in a bright red bandana, there is no doubt about Fergus's hands-on skills this morning. He plunges his hand inside a whole (marinated, I think) pig's head and starts to pull out the meat, shred it and toss it in a metal vat behind him. He then uses a razor-sharp knife to separate the flesh of the cheek from the rest of the skull.

It resembles nothing so much as the scene of a pig-related massacre (which some might say it in fact is) as the two men work away intently, occasionally exchanging brief words or a joke, surrounded by pigs' heads in various states of disrepair. Fergus applies himself to the task of shredding the pig's head with great gusto, the now-familiar grin spread wide across his face. He stops once only briefly to demonstrate to one of the Mexican chefs how he wants the strawberries -- destined for dessert -- to be de-stalked and sliced in half

lengthways. He may say he is not as fast as he used to be with a knife, but from where I'm standing he still looks pretty nimble. He's one of those people that's slightly awkward without a knife in hand, but remarkably graceful when wielding the sharp-edged implement. Lucky that, really. Meanwhile the kitchen is not the only place that is a hive of activity, out in the dining area flowers are being artfully wrapped around pillars and tablecloths are being ironed in anticipation of tonight's guests – a gathering of Mexico's "jet-set" I am told.

"The challenge in cooking for 150 people is that the fuckupability factor gets much higher," Fergus laughs. "Cooking somewhere else is always trickier as you are not in your own kitchen, but everyone has been unbelievably friendly and welcoming, which is nice."

He apologises for rambling halfway through an anecdote about his bank manager. But it is rambling of the most endearing kind. And despite his tendency towards formless chattering, he expresses a preference for menus that are succinct and leave something to the imagination. "Also, I'm a big believer in taking inspiration from the world around you, that we need to get out in the fresh air, go see a loved one, go to the movies, read James Bond books, travel, eat other people's food... all those things have inspired me." He does not believe being shut up in a kitchen 24/7 is healthy for a chef seeking inspiration, and he also says nature will provide an ever-changing menu if we just care to pay attention to our seasons and ingredients.

HOME IS WHERE THE ITALIAN IS

I ask him whether nose to tail follows him home at night. And who does the cooking in a household of two chefs? Apparently it's pretty evenly shared between the two of them. "At home we mainly cook Italian food," he says, explaining that there is a genuine Italian deli nearby. He hates supermarkets and calls them an "evil necessity" of modern life, useful only for buying toilet rolls and cleaning products.

"I love Italian food and [renowned cookery book writer] Marcella Hazan [The Classic Italian Cookbook] has probably been the hugest influence on me," he reflects. "And I love French food as well. But I also couldn't be happier being on a Hebridean island and grilling something on a driftwood fire. I'm fairly open to all sorts really."

And his visit to Mexico City has awakened a nascent interest in Mexican food. "I love the whole notion of tacos, wrapping everything in corn or a bready sort of thing is right up my street, as well as the amazing use of pork," he enthuses. "And the difference in fruit that is ripened by the sun and then harvested, rather than that which is harvested and sent in a boat from here to England ripening, rotting almost, by some weird process... It makes me very sad. No more fruit for me (in England)."

As the glitterati gather for dinner on a balmy Mexico City evening I sip a silky-smooth tequila and ask a fellow guest what she thinks of the menu (I'm a vegetarian and so will not be partaking of a large part of the banquet). She shrewdly remarks that perhaps this type of food is not so much of a challenge to Mexicans as it might be to other nationalities, as they are used to eating pork regularly and in such offal-like incarnations as tacos de cabeza. With that a snack of crisp, salted pig ear bits arrives at our table and she tells me, approvingly, that they taste a little like crispy bacon bits, but with a honeyed, sweet edge to them. The heads Fergus was tearing apart earlier appear in the form of a warm and damp pig's head salad – though it would be almost impossible to know where the meat came from if you did not have a description in front of you. It's a far cry from the massacre in the kitchen earlier the same morning. A gently-flavoured devilled crab salad is followed by a pork loin dish – two thin slices of tender, melt-in-the-mouth (or so I'm told) meat accompanied by black beans (the "Mexican twang" perhaps?) and onions. All this is accompanied by a suave and full-bodied Mexican red from Baja California. The dessert is simple but perfect -- fresh strawberries bathed in tequila.

Now I start to understand the comment Fergus made earlier about the amount of work that goes into creating such deceptively simple-looking dishes. There is nothing to hide behind, so everything must be done just right. Judging by the clean plates and an almost-full dining room still drinking wine at nearly 2am, the meal has been a resounding success.

Fergus can relax and kick back with a glass of wine and a cigarette of his own. But before I go there is one more thing I want to ask him. Who would be his dream lunch guests? "Audrey Hepburn, although she probably wouldn't eat very much, would she? And Isambard Kingdom-Brunel [a civil engineer best known for his construction of the first major British railway], because he's my hero. Anyone who is going to have a happy lunch and enjoy it really," he says.

"I'm a big believer in the power of lunch. Lunch is full of potential and you never know what might happen the afternoon," he says. "It's a springboard of joy rather than a punctuation mark at the end of the day. It also has a power to sort things out."

"The day I was diagnosed with Parkinson's I went and had good lunch and everything seemed much better afterwards. Lunch puts things right," he says. "What would I drink? A red burgundy with anything and everything, and then maybe a little l'eau de vie to aid digestion. Sounds good to me," he says, lighting another cigarette. And that, it seems, is Fergus Henderson all over.

Fergus's Mexican Menu

Warm & Damp Pig's Head Salad
Devilled Crab (served family style)
Pork Loin Cooked in Trotter Gear
Seasonal Fruits in Tequila (served very cold)

Where To Find Fergus's Food In London

St. John Bar & Restaurant
26 St. John Street,
London
EC1M 4AY
Tel: +44 20 7251 0848

St. John Bread and Wine
94-96 Commercial Street
London E1 6LZ
Tel: +44 20 7251 0848

Coming soon: St. John's Hotel (and restaurant) in London's Chinatown district

www.stjohnrestaurant.co.uk

How to Cook Like Fergus

If you want to try out nose to tail eating, Fergus has published several cookbooks on this theme, including:

Nose to Tail Eating – A Kind of British Cooking
Don't Try This at Home
How I Learnt to Cook
Beyond Nose to Tail Eating