

Mangiare a mente aperta: intervista a Fuchsia Dunlop

Episodio di Incontri ravvicinati, Radio Ca' Foscari

Fuchsia Dunlop è una scrittrice e cuoca inglese, divenuta famosa grazie alla sua attività di divulgazione della cucina cinese - in particolare delle specialità del Sichuan



Trascrizione episodio

Nicolò: Fuchsia Dunlop, welcome to Radio Ca' Foscari, thank you for being here.

Fuchsia Dunlop: Thank you for having me.

N.: First of all, a very simple, maybe a bit foolish question: what does food mean to you?

F.D.: Well, it's one of the necessities of life and also one of its greatest pleasures. We have to eat and yet humans are so incredibly creative and resourceful. And yeah, I think that the creativity of food in different countries, in different societies is simply astounding. And also, it's a fantastic way into understanding culture and society and art and literature and everything. And then fundamentally, it's what connects people with each other.

N.: You became famous for your relationship with Chinese food. What is your approach to new food? Is there anything you ever refuse to eat? How do you approach new things, the things you don't know?

F.D.: Well, I always try to be very open-minded and open-mouthed. And I think as everyone knows, the Chinese are extremely adventurous in their approach to ingredients. There's an old stereotype about the Chinese eating everything. And in some respects, it's true. China is a huge country. It's more of a continent than a country, really, with all these different terroirs, different geographical environments and an astonishing range of produce. And also, the Chinese are very uninhibited in their delightful food. And they really enjoy texture, which is something that I think Westerners don't really understand - or at least not to the extent that Chinese do. And once you appreciate texture, the possibilities of ingredients expand because you can eat things that are more complicated in the mouth, like a chicken's foot, or which have no flavor, like jellyfish. This is a real cultural difference and something that's very interesting. And when I first went to China, I was amazed by the deliciousness of the food and also its diversity. And so I was curious. I'd always loved cooking. I wanted to learn how to cook and to eat Chinese food. And to do that, I felt I had to get rid of all my European inhibitions and really try to understand food from a Chinese point of view and eat as people eat in China. And of course, I had many moments when I was confronted with ingredients that I found disconcerting, even revolting, or incomprehensible. And I suppose that I was always willing to try anything. And I also feel, I mean, China is a real gastronomic culture. And I was inclined to think if Chinese people enjoy eating something, then I'm interested in learning about it too. And the thing that happens is if you have that moment of disgust and then you eat something and then you grow to like it, then you no longer take seriously the moment of disgust. So I know I can see that it's all culturally relative. Chinese people find, for example, European blue cheese, quite repulsive at first. So yeah, I would say I don't really have any inhibitions except these days, I think we all need to try and take more responsibility for what we eat. And so consider ethical issues. Like things like shark fin or eel in European cooking, these ingredients that are becoming

endangered. So that's the only thing that is sort of will stop me trying something new.

N.: A lot of things to discuss. I want to start talking about texture. You mentioned texture. Is this somehow related to what you call "the grapple factor", isn't it?

F.D.: Yes.

N.: Can you explain this "grapple factor" to us?

F.D.: Yeah, well the grapple factor is a word that my father invented to describe foods that are really complicated. So something like a duck's tongue or a chicken's wing. And these foods, you can't really eat them with a knife and fork. There's often no meat on them. So like a duck's tongue, my father would say has a high grapple factor. There's no meat. It's just a few little bits of bone and cartilage and some slightly rubbery skin. Completely pointless from a European point of view. In China, I would say that people generally experience eating as a really fully multi-sensory experience. And if you talk to someone Chinese about the pleasures of food, they almost always mention not only the flavour and the smell, but also the mouthfeel *kǒu gǎn*, the texture of the food. And that's an absolutely integral part of the quality of a dish and the enjoyment of food. And so I think in China, there's, you know, in England, people are very self-conscious about eating, relatively speaking. You know, you're not supposed to make any noise. You're meant to be a very quiet and polite and use knife and fork. But in China, it's much more, I think, a much more sensual engagement with food. You know, you can make little noises, you can spit out bones using chopsticks. It's very gentle and tactile. It's like an extension of the hand. And so people, I would say, you know, you can eat something like a duck tongue and it's not about the destination, the meat, it's about the journey, it's about the playful interaction of the food with your teeth and your tongue. And that's part of the fun of eating. So that's what I mean by the grapple factor. So that means that ingredients that a Westerner would simply throw in the bin become potentially exciting and interesting delicacies in China. And I would say that Europeans, historically, have looked down on Chinese people and have this idea that only desperate, you know, poor people would eat something like a chicken's fur. But this is simply not true because you have ingredients like this, like, you know, ducks, feet, duck tongues, imperial delicacies. You know, it's throughout society, people enjoy eating ingredients that are very puzzling for Europeans.

N.: Okay, we focused on a lot of differences between cultures, but are there any point of contact too?

F.D.: Oh, absolutely. And I think that, I mean, I'm always say to people, you don't have to enjoy texture. You don't have to enjoy eating unusual ingredients and unfamiliar ingredients to love Chinese food. I mean, Chinese food is popular all over the world. And there are absolutely countless delicacies that anyone can eat from any background, you know. So, you know, roast duck, char siu pork, fantastic vegetarian cooking. There's something for everyone. So I think that, yeah, there are many all kinds of, I mean, in Italy, you have fantastic pasta. In Northern China, they have so many different kinds of noodle and that's a real point of contact. So I think there's plenty to share and plenty in common, but just if you want to fully experience Chinese food, which I highly recommend, it's worth considering texture differently and just trying to understand that it can be delightful in itself. And I find often with foreigners, you know, non-Chinese people that once they start thinking about this, it's like opening a door in the mind. And then, I mean, when I first went to China, I could not understand why anyone would bother eating a duck intestine, right? Slithery, no flavour. It's just, I thought it was like eating rubber bands. But after some time of eating them in China with friends who hugely enjoyed them. Now, I really enjoy this ingredient because of the lovely, slightly contradictory, slithery, crunchy mouthfeel. So I think it's a very interesting way of unlocking greater

pleasure in food.

N.: We understood that you love China and Chinese food, but apart from that, let's forget China for a while. What are the cuisines or the dishes that fascinate you most?

F.D.: Well, I think I just enjoy eating generally. So wherever I go, I'm interested to see what the local food is. So here in Venezuela, I have been eagerly eating bacalà and all your wonderful seafood and cicheti and lovely pastries and so on. I think I love Turkish food. I spent some time in Turkey when I was very young. Japan, Japanese food, I don't know very much because I've only briefly been to Japan, but I would love to explore that more. But really, there's no cuisine that I would not find interesting and be curious to try.

N.: And what are your criteria for grocery shopping?

F.D.: Well, I suppose freshness. But just I suppose I like not very processed ingredients. So I prefer to go to a farmer's market or your lovely greengrocers here in Venezuela and get very fresh produce. And I also enjoy going to a butcher and a fishmonger instead of the supermarket. So of course, you know, we all of us get busy and sometimes go to supermarkets, but my preference is to buy food from people who really understand it and who take care about where it comes from.

N.: This can also be related with sustainability. Can we say that?

F.D.: Yes, well, I think, I mean, there are all kinds of reasons why the supermarket system is very problematic. So I don't know what the case in Italy, but in Britain, there are great concerns that supermarkets don't pay producers properly. So it's not really economical for farmers to produce food. Also, there's lots of plastic packaging and food miles. So you have crazy things where carrots are grown in one place and then someone takes them in a truck for hundreds of miles to be washed and put in a packet and then taken back to the original place. So I think by buying local, you are cutting out some of that and by buying in markets also, if you take your own bag, there's no packaging. But I think, you know, I, but I'm also certainly, I use Chinese ingredients and they're imported. So I think we're all used now to having quite cosmopolitan lives and having a mixture of local and imported, but I think certainly it's important to take these things into consideration.

N.: Earlier this year, you wrote something about your five staple ingredients. Is there anything that cannot absolutely miss in your kitchen?

F.D.: Well, if you're talking about Chinese food, then there's Doubanjiang, which is Sichuanese chili bean paste and it's an ingredient that's very particular to Sichuanese cooking and you sizzle it in oil and it makes the oil go a beautiful deep red color and have a fantastic savory taste from the fermented beans, fermented fava beans, and a bit of spice from chili. And that is the base of a lot of classic Sichuan dishes like mapo, tofu and twice cooked pork, but it also works really well in European style stews and pies and things. So that's one of my favorite Chinese ingredients. And in terms of Western ingredients, I really can't live without a good olive oil.

N.: Besides food, are there any other ways which you try to please your neighbor to discover new things, your passion for discovering?

F.D.: Yeah, I mean, I think that food is one facet of culture and I think if you're interested in food culture, then it's much broader than just being about food. So for example, in China, I'm very interested in art, literature, sort of architecture and the kind of physical history of places. Yeah, I think I would say art is a particular interest and it's been wonderful coming to Venice this time and going to some of your museums and galleries. Yeah, I don't only think about food.

N.: And what is more challenging: cooking or writing? To prepare a recipe or to explain how to prepare a good recipe?

F.D.: Well, it's very interesting because I've done now five cookbooks and two books that are mainly about the writing. And the thing about testing recipes is that you have no idea how long it will take. So it's very, if you're going to do a good recipe, you have to write down everything you do, every spoonful of ingredient, every gram of ingredients. So it's very tedious. And sometimes the recipe will be perfect the first time easy. You just write down, you know, from the notes, but sometimes it doesn't work the first time and then what I go on and on until I'm happy with it. So recipe testing can take up a lot of time, a lot of shopping, cooking and washing up. So it's quite unpredictable and time consuming. And writing, I think anyone who writes will say that sometimes it comes very easily and sometimes it's a complete nightmare. And in my last book, *Invitational to a banquet*. So I wanted to write a big book all about Chinese food. I mean, trying to look at many different aspects of it. And so the big challenge was, well, there's so much to say. And it can be anything. I mean, a recipe has a fairly obvious basic structure. But with a narrative book, what do you want it to be? How do you want to structure it? The possibilities? Infinite! So that was more difficult to work out actually how to write this book.

N.: Mrs. Dunlop, thank you very much. And I hope to see you again soon here in Venice.

F.D.: Thank you very much.