

30 August 2011

After another sluggish session digesting rice and beans I remarked how much better I'd felt on holiday, and noted in turn that it probably wasn't the holiday itself, in that I'm actually still on holiday. I came to a conclusion of sorts, well, you know, people can get bored, our minds can tire of routine, we can begin to resent things we have been through many times. I decided that it's largely the same for our bodies, the same meal every day for 15 years, good though it may be, has tired my guts out in the same way that watching the same film every day for the same period would tire our brains out. Note that it could be a great film, and we may fundamentally really like it.

The holiday was a chance for a bit of diversity inside and outside, and sensing the increased energy that it gave me, it seemed sensible that said dietary reasons may be behind it, and I surfed the net a moment to find some ideas for some different varieties of fodder. I found this site



Here

and have not looked back, since cooking up curries etc of the finest quality. I even chanced a few recipes of my own and am taken (aback or afront, you choose) by how easy it is to prepare decent fodder. It's also quite easy to find most of the ingredients, although some of the more complex recipes throw up challenges, not to mention finding TVP that I trust, so it can stay simple for the time being, partially because there's no need to complicate cooking for one, partly because I already have stacks of new things to make.

Top of the simplicity list though has to be scrambled tofu, soooo easy to make and if delicately spiced, really rather good too. See the site.

But I bought a load of spices and got them home, poured them out of the bags into cups, and for three of them now can only guess what they were. That's OK if you are just whacking it into a pan based on smell and cooking by guesswork, but if you're following a recipe then it helps to know.

I haven't been totally on holiday though, taking a course to become a teacher trainer which although results are not yet in, was actually easier than I expected. I was pleased that I had so much to say, when I had wondered if I had the knowledge of the mainstream methodology that many trainers swear by. I call them pretentious TEFL theories, you know, the ones that say a teacher should not provide more than 10% of the speaking done in the classroom, the likes of which have been proven to help students but have never been proven to be the ONLY way to help students.

It led me to reconsider something I decided a while back, not to take the ultimate ELT qualification, the DELTA, which is one of those things that everybody wants to have but nobody wants to take. It seemed to me that it was just an extended exercise in trainers showing off and extolling the virtues of their pretentious theories making sure that nobody had their own ideas whatsoever. Well, I was told that by a DELTA trainer, so retract your impending accusations of paranoia!

The DELTA is a very long or very very intensive course taken by teachers on about an average of 5 years after becoming teachers, and has been known to send people nuts. They responded to that very real situation by making it modular and now, over a longer period a teacher can take three modules for the same qualification and retain their sanity. It might be time I did it. There never seemed any point, but more and more staff with a lot less experience are taking it and its absence on my CV is becoming more difficult to justify.

It was fun, oh yes, I worked out my budget on holiday based on starting work on 5th September. So I had X amount, it seemed fine, and although we're only talking a few hundred dollars in two weeks, I did spend according to my projection. Then I remembered two things, oops, one, I may start work on 5th September but don't get paid until the 5th October!!! And two, I have to pay my rent on 5th September!!!

Luckily I had enough to pay my rent so did that three weeks in advance to be sure, but the other shortfall could only be made up by working, and fortunately the exams centre were able to provide quite a lot of it, which not only fixes the problem but with rent paid leaves me feeling actually quite flush.

It means I will be able to replace my favourite top which, as you can see here



I fell foul of a stick of burning incense (fortunately not with anything too orange dancing round the flat) and decided to render itself unwearable. Well, not totally, I ironed patches onto the inside to prevent the holes getting bigger and will wear it under things, but the patch lining is much lighter in colour and the damage is very distinct. It wasn't the epitome of style but it was worthy of more dignity, so it finds itself replaced to the undergarment pile.

The last few weekends have been taken up going on tripettes organised by our fine colleague Antonio who seems a dab hand at rousing interest in days away from the city. These pics are of a lake called Kapchagai about an hour and a half north of Almaty. Not the prettiest beach but on a nice day the fresh air makes it worthwhile.



I'm sure any trips I tried to organise would end up as one man excursions so I leave the social side to him and limit myself to suggestions, including today's which worked out fine in that nine or so of us dined in natural surroundings not too far from the city in a place called Butakovka. When I say dined, it was just a picnic really, although I HATE the word picnic and would prefer to use a more elegant expression like 'open air consumption of fodder' But what is this, did we dine? Well, I did, having prepared a simple vegan recipe that morning, an Italian kinda thing.

Frying before boiling was never something I had considered before, but it really works, although the potatoes were still a little undercooked this time round. Anyway, for effect, here is the recipe. The title of the dish is simply, fodder, and it goes like this:

Two or three medium sized potatoes, peeled

One small broccoli
1 tsp thyme
1tsp pepper
1 tsp coriander
1 tsp oregano
Olive oil
Six or seven cherry tomatoes
250g pasta spirals
One red pepper
One clove of garlic
A pinch of salt

You will need about a litre of boiled water ready, so put the kettle on now.

The vegetables should be chopped, not too small
Humanely crush the garlic and fry in a generous amount of olive oil for two to three minutes
Add all the herbs and spices and mix well into the oil
Immediately add the potatoes and fry for a further 5 minutes, stirring regularly
Immediately add the broccoli, cherry tomatoes and red pepper and fry for 5 minutes, stirring regularly

Humanely add the pasta and salt to the mix and cover with boiling water
Bring to maximum boil and simmer for about 10 minutes or until the ingredients are cooked to your liking
Drain and humanely serve

Serves – people.



Speaking of fodder, have you tried KOSHARY yet?

14 August 2011

Like the England performance against Germany in the World Cup, disasters, on whatever scale, tend to send people scurrying either for excuses or places to lay the blame. Then nothing really changes because it just becomes a 'for-show' argument in which nobody has the guts to admit they were wrong. Rioting is more serious than losing a football match, that goes without saying, but is a different symptom of largely the same disease... people not being brave enough to face up to what they have to do.

Short termism is one of the downsides of so-called parliamentary democracy, because put simply, governments elected for four or five years spend most of that time trying to persuade the electorate to vote them in again while simultaneously trying to look better than those who might upseat them. It's all rhetoric and very little in the way of trousers. Endemic social problems have roots which pre-date any recent election victory and will not be solved by a further change of legislative.

Please don't get me wrong, I am not advocating the abolition of elections or even extended terms of office for incumbent Prime Ministers, but somewhere and somehow they have to get round this limiting desire to win more elections at whatever cost and do something serious, not just cosmetic and voter friendly.

Traditionally, the two party system in England has resulted in alternating governments either of the Labour or Conservative persuasion. There are reasonable and intelligent people casting votes for either party, and they are pretty much as good and bad (and useless) as each other. Labour are widely considered to be left of centre and until about 1995, had a clear socialist agenda. They abolished capital punishment and gave Britain its welfare state which we are enormously proud of, despite its shortcomings.

The Conservative party are pretty much right wing and tend to favour business and the middle classes, again, nothing sinister about it in itself because we need each of those things to be healthy for those not playing a direct part in them to gain in any way from what they give the nation.

The trouble is, the Conservative party attracts an enormous amount of people who need there to be a British underclass simply so they can feel they're doing well in life. The those-slobs-from-the-council-estates-oooh-Cynthia-aren't-we glad-we're-not-like-them types have sustained a political force strong enough to systematically obstruct masses of people from achieving anything worthwhile. Their contribution to inner city welfare and employment opportunities for those very 'slobs' is nothing more than tokenistic and the fuss they make when people have the temerity to complain just accentuates their prejudicial ignorance even more.

Ah but who can blame them? I mean, we need bin men don't we?

Well, I guess we do, and there will always be underachievers who can get by on the modest salary of a refuse collection attendant. But that has to be their choice, not some choice dumped on them by some snob who can't bear seeing some chav driving a Rover.

People are right to be shocked when thugs turn to the streets and trash as much as they can. They are right to say that there is no excuse, that not all poor people are violent maniacs so why should any of them be? It is right that these criminals are arrested and punished. It would be right to give the police more powers to stop things like this surfacing again. But without offering some meaningful alternative to people whose next chapter in life may well include setting fire to a building when people are inside it, without any compunction whatsoever FFS, it's going to be another Thatcherite paper-over-the-cracks suck it and see.

Your average hoody is as intelligent as the average lawyer. They simply don't use it, never saw the point. The culture at many schools makes it very hard for people, especially boys, to want to do well. But people need to do well at something, people need to be seen to be successful. But how can you show yourself in this light when you were deprived (or self-deprived) of a good education and have no chance of a decent job (or any job)? Simple, you choose something else to be good at, something which, to all intents and purposes, might not be very nice.

So do I seem like an apologist for these people? I am sure I do, public feeling is simply too strong for anybody to dare veering from the national chorus right now. But what's this, am I singing with them? Yes, of course I am, those thug bastards are evil. It matters not one jot why they did what they did because they did it, it's done, and it now they have to pay for it (although I imagine very few of them will)!

But for those on the fringes, those who could be next, those who so far have NOT smashed up the High Street, what of them?

13 August 2011

So nearly didn't make it.

I mean, there wasn't much to do, how much does one person going on holiday really need to take? And everything was ready, I even went to the trouble of sewing zips onto the pockets of two pairs of jeans, a feat inducing such pride I feel compelled to share it



And it was ready for the off. Until I went to take the rubbish out and locked myself out of my flat. At 1230 am with the taxi pretty much on its way. I don't need to share photos of this, that's for sure. I could handle being locked out of my flat normally because I have spare keys stored somewhere secret, but there was no access to that place this time, my only hope was that the neighbours had a key, which given that they are Lord and Lady Land did seem likely. After trying a box full of random keys in increasing states of panic, I finally found it, and got back into my flat in time to get out for the taxi.

I believe in synchronicity, although I won't discuss it here, and a freak event like this would be precisely the sort of thing sent to get in the way of something that was not meant to happen. Somehow, for some reason, maybe I was not meant to be going away at that time, I told myself. In the end, it didn't matter, but it was a pretty intense experience for whatever reason.

Zips on jeans, well, let me explain. I needed to be sure that I was comfortable carrying my passport round, even though in the end it stayed in the hotel safe. For most tourists, losing a passport is an inconvenience but they get given a temporary passport for travel back to their country of origin and then most probably have a year before they need a new passport. For me, well, I'd get the same ticket but it'd cover me for travel back to the UK (where somebody would probably set fire to my bags) which is completely impractical, seeing as I don't

live there. Then I'd need a new passport and a new visa which would take weeks, in which time I'd have nowhere to live, would not be able to pay my rent in Kazakhstan and would probably not get back in time to start my new contract. And as I can sew, it made sense.

I won't say too much about my holiday here as I am setting up pages elsewhere, but I'll certainly say that I've been to few nicer places. However it's not the sort of place you go alone with little spare money, and having done this took the shine off things. It wasn't that I had no money, but I start work again later on and assumed my money would have to last until that date, when in fact pay day will fall a month later, stretching my funds out another four weeks. Bit of a bummer that.

A few of the last days of my holiday were taken up on excursions but also in the evening watching the riots in England. Oh how I could go on about this, but won't bother right now. Just let's say it doesn't surprise me, when you live in England as a rule, fine, you tend to see the positive, but when you move away, and go back, you tend to get dragged down by its burdensome negativity and notice that it is a place inhabited by many people who've got nothing better to do than hate, in a minority though they may be.

The police had a hard job, if they act they are called brutal, if they don't act they are called ineffective. But if the police are going to be bothered to exist, they have to exist to protect the public and not their public image. Laws were being broken, quite obscenely, and all the world was watching. The way they stood back and watched a few dozen yobs ransack small areas of a huge city with all their resources was IMHO almost as shocking as the crimes themselves.

There was a footballer once called Gus Caesar who made it from schoolboy level to play for a top English side, Arsenal. This might prove that he was one of the best of a handful of good players playing at county or lower division level, and the fact he played for one of the top sides of his day does tend to suggest he could play a bit. But the problem is, he was responsible for what people claim to be some of the most shocking performances in professional football history.

The excellent writer Nick Hornby (well, Fever Pitch was excellent) detailed this in his best book but stopped short of applying it to life in a wider context. We assume that the people playing for our top teams, or those organising our country are the best people for the job. But are they? If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, then surely the state of the British economy, the nation's health, law and order and education (lots of English kids leaving school at 16 are virtually illiterate) reminds us that these people are not the experts we take them for.

Politics right now, in this world in these troubled but perhaps also exciting times, is precisely the same startled rabbit caught in headlights that Gus Caesar was when he saw the Luton Town striker bearing down on him. Put simply, they haven't a clue what to do.

If there was anything good about the rioting in England last week, it was that politicians might now realise how bad things really are there.