

Lunch with

PETER Doherty

Nobel Prize winner. Climate crusader. National Living Treasure. Who needs finicky food? BY JEWEL TOPSFIELD

*Figure Nobel Prize-winning scientist Peter Doherty is probably not much of a foodie by the time I get to page 108 of his latest book, *The Incidental Tourist*.*

In his typical understated style, Doherty describes eating at the Lyon restaurant of the "pope of French cuisine", Paul Bocuse, who was named "chef of the century" by the Culinary Institute of America in 2011.

Doherty had one of the chef's signature dishes - a chicken stuffed with pate de foie gras and truffles poached inside a pig's bladder - which is so famous it was described in detail in the fifth paragraph of Bocuse's obituary in *The New York Times*.

"His signature dishes not only pleased the palate; they also seduced the eye and piqued the imagination," *The New York Times* gushed.

Doherty describes the "chicken... cooked in a pig's bladder" somewhat differently.

"What landed on my plate was a rather scrawny chicken leg and, being both a culinary barbarian and rather hungry, I failed to detect the subtle flavours," Doherty writes in *The Incidental Tourist*.

I am sheepish about asking a man of Doherty's gravitas about foodie-ism; a profile I read while preparing for our interview describes him as "an out-and-proud curmudgeon when it comes to celebrity culture and selfies".

But he laughs, an infectious, hoarse laugh that punctuates our meal, when I remind him of this "gastronomic highpoint" of his incidental travels.

"My European director was a typical upper European bourgeoisie with all the bullshit that goes with it. He was ecstatic about the meal and all I could see was a goddamn scrawny chicken leg and I wanted something to eat. I am not a foodie really."

There is no bourgeois bullshit about the cosy pizzeria in Carlton, Kaprica, where we lunch (Doherty's publicist's choice), with its graffitied shopfront, exposed brick walls, shabby menus and rustic fare.

We have a modest meal befitting the



"(mostly) trim and impecunious veterinary researchers" Doherty describes in *The Incidental Tourist*, his sixth book. (Although they are wont to indulge in "major calorie blowouts" at the fully catered Association of Veterinary Teachers and Research Workers events.)

Doherty is worried not so much about his own health (although he says he can't drink much wine these days) but the fiscal health of *The Age*, which is picking up the bill. I feel profligate ordering sparkling water to his tap water.

I order the spaghetti with peas and Doherty the spaghetti with clams; he charms the waitress, who laughs uproariously, by asking in his gravelly voice for his meal to be served with a bib.

But then Doherty is without pretension: "I grew up in Queensland in a lower-middle-class family, I never really had much expectation or sense of entitlement about anything."

Unusually for a scientist, Doherty's best subjects at school were English and French. He toyed with the idea of becoming a journalist with the *Brisbane Courier Mail* ("By this time I would either be dead or a cynical alcoholic working for Murdoch").

But fate famously intervened in the form of a "rather scatty, sexy, chain-smoking young laboratory technician" who looked after the displays at an open day at the University of Queensland school of veterinary science. (Doherty tells this anecdote in the introduction of his first book, *The Beginner's Guide to Winning the Nobel Prize*.)

"She was pretty cute. I mean she was an old woman, she must have been at least 22 and I was 16 so there was no chance."

Chance or no chance, his lifelong fascination for biology was piqued. "Boys weren't taught biology - in state schools at least - I think they thought we would become sexually inflamed by the information or something."

Doherty enjoyed the frisson of danger of wrestling cows and horses in vet school, but his intention was to research how to increase food production. "I was still in my Methodist phase, wanting to do good and save the world and I got the idea that food was going to be a big problem."

He became interested in infectious disease in animals and after 10 years of research on everything from chickens to cows and sheep switched to immunology,

From main: Peter Doherty says he is not really a foodie; spaghetti with clams at Kaprica. PHOTOS: LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI



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studying the response of mice to viruses. It was at the John Curtin School of Medical Research in Canberra in the early to mid-1970s that Doherty and Swiss research fellow Rolf Zinkernagel made the discovery that would win them the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine more than two decades later.

Simply put, they discovered how the immune system recognises virus-infected cells, which paved the way for modern treatment strategies for cancer and the design of vaccines.

"Once you win a Nobel Prize you achieve a level of fame that is about the equivalent of a minor figure in a coffee commercial that hasn't run for three years," Doherty deadpans. "In Australia, particularly, you can walk down the street and no one knows who the hell you are."

But life did change in a big way after Doherty won the 1996 Nobel Prize. On Christmas Eve he received a phone call informing him he was the 1997 Australian of the Year. "I was living in Memphis. I said: 'Can I put it off for a year? I am kind of busy,' and they said: 'No way'."

For the first time Doherty really found himself in the public sphere. "I screwed up a bit, I got things wrong, I learnt a lot of stuff very quickly," he says. "You never, never disparage anybody in an audience, even if they are nuts, you lose the whole audience if you put them down."

Doherty still uses his reputation (he is also a National Trust National Living Treasure) to champion science. He believes the lack of action on climate change is a disaster. The 78-year-old is prolific on Twitter. "It's incredible that these people are intent on doing even more damage before their inevitable exit," he tweets, linking to a story



about the Morrison government not ruling out financial support for coal-fired power stations.

"The publishers got me on Twitter but I think it has probably done me more harm than good because I absolutely despise the hard right of politics, especially this present government. I don't despise conservatives, but I don't think this lot are conservatives, I think they are reactionaries."

Doherty believes the reluctance to act on climate change has its genesis in free-market think-tanks such as The Heartland Institute in the US, which champions "unfettered capitalism" and for whom "regulation is anathema".

"They have combined that in a weird way with evangelical Christianity and say 'God put everything on earth for our use'. So you have this weird mix and I think [Scott] Morrison is part of it."

Mind you, Doherty believes capitalism could be put to use to help tackle global warming. "What you need really is to price carbon. We price landfill, we can't dump things in rivers but when we are asked to price what we put in the atmosphere - which is infinitely more fragile than either land or

water - they find it total anathema."

The Incidental Tourist is a departure from Doherty's five previous books, all of which had science themes.

The book is a collection of anecdotes and observations accumulated during a lifetime of travel to international scientific conferences at locations off the tourism beaten track.

Doherty may be no foodie but his book is peppered with references to food. Some are whimsical. (It's said, he writes in a chapter about Scarborough, that one reason why Sir George Sitwell was "so bonkers" was that a Japanese chef misheard him and served him a fricassee of his favourite kitten, instead of chicken, although Doherty says it is likely there were "more substantial causes".)

Others are fascinating tidbits of food history. The breakthrough moment for Albert Szent-Gyorgi, who won the 1937 Nobel Prize for his "discoveries in connection with the biological combustion process with special reference to vitamin C", came when his wife Nelly served red peppers for dinner. Szent-Gyorgi took them to his laboratory and discovered they were loaded with vitamin C.

Doherty wrote *The Incidental Tourist* "to make sense of things".

He says he is happiest when writing. "I feel like most scientists I have some degree of obsessive compulsive disorder and when I am writing and it is going well I am very pleased with life. I thought about trying to write a novel but I have got no talent for fiction. Maybe there is space for a Jane Austen climate-change murder mystery but not one that I wrote."

The Incidental Tourist is published by Melbourne University Press.



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