Lunch with

PETER Doherty


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 pleased 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 scruffy 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 skeptical about asking a man of Doherty’s greatness 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 highlight" of his incidental travels.

"My European director was a typical upper-European bourgeoise 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 wasted something to eat. I am not a foodie really."

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

We have a modest meal befitting the "(mostly) trim and insipid 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 prodigiously 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 scary, 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 trission 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 chicken to cows and sheep switched to immunology.

But from main: Peter Doherty says he is not really a foodie; spaghetti with clams at Kaprica. PHOTO: ELIAS ENRIQUE ASCUN

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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 1960s 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.

Doherty was 26 years old and had just completed his Ph.D. in immunology. He had moved to Canberra from Melbourne to work with Zinkernagel on a project investigating the role of viruses in the immune system. The two scientists spent months working on their research, often working long hours and eating at the same fast-food restaurant near the lab to save money.

The discovery they made was that the immune system recognizes virus-infected cells, and this recognition triggers an immune response that eliminates the virus. This discovery was a major breakthrough in the field of immunology and led to the development of new treatments for viral infections.

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 says. “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 in Memphis, I said, ‘Can I just have a year?’ I was kind of busy,” he says, 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 nobs, 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 crisis. 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 politicians, 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 totally anathema.”

The Incidental Tourist is a departure from Doherty’s five previous books, all of which had scientific 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 Stiwell was “no bon viveur” was that a Japanese chef mishandled him and served him a piece 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 Stint-Cogyri, 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. Stint-Cogyri 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.