A cool smoke

J K RUSSELL

In June 1948—and for several years afterwards—you still had to search carefully for any relief from the austerities of the war. That was the summer we made our pilgrimage to Glen Lyon, to Fortingall, where the chef and "patron de maison" William Heptinstall cooked to a standard that we were not to enjoy again until we took to exploring France many years later. It was my wife who noticed the smoke-stained brick outhouse at the back of the hotel and the master himself who explained that this was his smoke house where he prepared some of the delicacies for his table. As a boy in Aberdeen I had seen the huge kilns in Torry where yellow haddocks and kippers were smoked in their thousands but never had I seen small, personal smoke houses such as this. I was impressed. Here was something worth trying. But the opportunity to do anything about it did not arise until we moved from the city to the country in 1972. At about that time it was fashionable for magazines and Sunday newspaper supplements to feature articles on "home smoking," and here we were surrounded by woods with a plentiful supply of oak, beech, chestnut, ash, and other hardwoods and far enough away from the neighbours not to be a nuisance. It seemed that all we needed was a barrel, a few bricks, hardwood chippings, and plenty of salt.

Aunt Gert's barrel

Aunt Gert up in Aberdeenshire had an old oak barrel that had stood neglected for years in her woodshed and it soon came down to Northumberland in the boot of my car. Set up on bricks with two steel rods across the top to hang things on it exactly fitted the description given by the enthusiastic "expert" writing in one of our better newspapers. Bacon looked like a fair bet for a beginner, and my butcher entered into the spirit of the thing by offering four sides of belly pork at "best price." Following instructions to the letter I prepared the salt pickle and left the pork in it for four days, then hung the sides up to dry for 24 hours. The barrel, set on bricks, with the sides of belly pork suspended over the smouldering oak chips reminded me of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* and her description of life in the Wisconsin woods in the days of pioneering when her father smoked pork and venison in preparation for the long winter. He knew what he was about; I did not. It was reassuring to see occasional wisps of smoke rising from behind the loose boxes at the bottom of the garden but half-way through lunch I sensed that something was wrong. There was too much smoke. Alas, where there had been a fine oak barrel and four sides of pickled belly pork there was now a heap of ashes. Back to the drawing board.

I read more selectively and more carefully and built a substantial brick chimney with an open chamber at the bottom for the wood chips. Concentrating on bacon I made some progress over the next year and began to appreciate the finer points of the art—the sort of things I was now learning at first hand raised doubts in my mind as to whether some of the "experts" who wrote about home smoking had ever smoked anything. Mostly they described pickles or cures that contained far too much salt and recommended smoking times that were too long. The end product—meat or fish—certainly kept well but was so salty or dry from oversalting or oversmoking that it was hardly fit to eat. As can happen in medical textbooks I think some information was being handed down unaltered over the years without being challenged. In the age of the deep freeze there is no need to salt or smoke heavily to ensure that the end product keeps for a reasonable time. And there was the critical matter of temperature control—on a windy day the temperature in my chimney reached unacceptably high levels with disastrous results. I plumbed the depths of despair one day when I literally cooked an 8 lb sea trout; an expensive mistake.

The turning point

By 1975 with my confidence seriously eroded my enthusiasm waned. Suddenly my fortunes changed. I met Archie, and as our friendship developed I came to respect deeply a master of country crafts. As a retired engineer, his life was now devoted to shooting, fishing, dressing sticks (for which he took prizes at various shows), curing the skins of deer and fox, wine and liqueur making, growing unusual vegetables, and cooking, and, best of all from my viewpoint, he cured and smoked so expertly that the local laird asked him to deal with his salmon. Archie came to look at my smoking chimney, gave a wry smile, and told me "you are cooking the stuff, not smoking it!!" In time with baffles and dampers and drainpipes we corrected that. Then he talked of brines and pickles and cures and of the need to keep an accurate record of how each batch of pork or fish was prepared and smoked. Sheepishly I admitted that I did not have such a record. That was the turning point, and Archie saw to it that I took my smoking more seriously. There were fewer mistakes and I became more ambitious. The accolade came about a year later when Archie confided that he judged my brand of smoked bacon to be better than he could buy in any store.

Elusive eels

By this time I was on to mackerel, trout, and delicately smoked chicken, but eels proved to be a problem. I just could not get any. Friends who fished the various rivers of Northumberland and patients whose husbands fished out of ports up and down the coast all promised to get eels for me but no eels appeared. I even got to know a fishmonger in Soho who had a large tank specially for eels. Each time I was in London I would go along to see him and it began to resemble a visit to Ruth Draper's garden. "Doctor," he would say "you should have been here ten days ago; we had dozens then." One day he did have four eels in the tank, and I said I'd have them all. He mentioned the cost and I quickly settled for one. Gingerly he lifted it wriggling from the tank. It slipped from his grip and slithered around the floor among the feet of several startled women waiting to be served. The shop cleared on the instant, and the two of us chased the eel for fully five minutes before it was dispatched with a "priest." It cured and smoked well and was voted a delicacy by the family.

Three months after the Soho episode I was examining in Belfast, and the conversation at lunch in the Royal Victoria Hospital on the first day happened to turn to eels. My hosts, quickly aware of my ignorance, tactfully explained that Loch Neagh is a major source of eels in Europe. In the "season" 15 to 20 tons a night are flown out to Holland to be smoked. At

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lunch on the last day 16 eels in a plastic bag were quietly placed on the floor by my chair—a present from Belfast. Cured and smoked, four found their way back to my hospitable colleagues in Belfast; the others provided a popular starter for dinner parties over the next few months.

The goal was always smoked salmon, and I had seen Archie achieve this and knew it was possible. Consultations were frequent as there was little room for trial and error with such an expensive fish. Now the ultimate delicacy is part of the repertoire. There is, I believe, nothing to compare with one's own crisp bacon cured and smoked to taste or home smoked salmon thinly cut and with a texture and flavour unmatched by the commercial product. Best of all is the feeling that your efforts are appreciated. Friends may be polite, but it is gratifying to see the stocks of bacon diminish rapidly when the grandchildren arrive.

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The murderer's vade mecum

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A bubble of air and a serving of mushrooms, a hanging flowerpot and a piece of Turkish delight—would they have anything in common? Nothing, except that they are examples of the ways of death in Dorothy L Sayers's detective novels. Miss Sayers has varied the way in which her victims meet their end and she has devoted more interest and energy to the "how" in the classical "When, where, how, by whom, and why?" than any of her colleagues in the trade.

During my student days, when the professor of pathology lectured on embolic disease he mentioned that air might kill a person but added, with the characteristic, almost apologetic smile of his, "not in the small amount used by Dorothy Sayers!" This was the first time I had heard about the author, but my interest was awakened. Incidentally, when I later became assistant to my pathology professor, I found out that he liked to take a nap after lunch, and that hidden on a low bookshelf behind his office couch he kept a stock of detective novels, with most of the Sayers books included.

Years later, I read all the novels by Miss Sayers and with the lecture on air embolism in mind, I looked critically at the medical content. In most of the novels medical knowledge plays an important part and I soon realised that Miss Sayers had erred not only in the case of the air bubble but in other instances as well. I found the topic so interesting that I told myself—and others—that, when I grew old, I would write an essay on some of the medical aspects of Dorothy Sayers's novels. Well, I am not old, not even elderly according to the WHO definition—elderly being a person 60-75 years old—and so far I have not found the time to fulfil my youthful idea. It so happened, however, that during a recent visit to London I was taken to lunch at the Athenaeum. Sipping our coffee in the library, my host and I found ourselves surrounded by distinguished-looking gentlemen, probably aged (WHO definition 75-90), sleeping so quietly in their leather armchairs that I was immediately reminded of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, in which the young Captain Fentiman quotes "that old thing in *Punch*, you know—'Waiter, take Lord Whatsisname away, he's been dead for two days' " and later his uncle, old General Fentiman, is in fact found dead in his chair. Not only that, but Lord Peter also rapidly discovers that there has been foul play and that the dead general has been carried away from and back to his chair near the fireplace, "the great chair with ears after the Victorian pattern." I mentioned these associations to my host, who not only encouraged me to try my hand at the Sayers murder essay, but generously promised me space in his journal should I succeed. As mentioned by Lord Peter's uncle, Paul Austin Delagardie, "To appear publicly in print is every man's ambition," so here it is.