

“I take all the labels off me tins then I don’t know what I’m having for me tea.”

The comedy in food: looking at Victoria Wood’s dinnerladies

By Bradley Sansom

“Do you ever do that? It’s brilliant. I’m thinking, ‘What’s it gonna be? Fruit salad? Alphabetti spaghetti?’”

dinnerladies ran from 1998 to 2000. In its sixteen episodes, it explored a huge range of themes, including bereavement, terminal illness, dieting, menopause, romance, and work – and running through them all was food. Naturally, for a sitcom set in a canteen, eating played a huge part in its comedy. But far from being just a simple succession of gags and jokes, the show’s writer and lead actor Victoria Wood understood the power that food has as a central theme for exploring a variety of topics in comedy. Her characters, the lovable Bren, young Twinkle, ditzy Anita, prudish Dolly, sarky Jean, eccentric Stan, and unlucky Tony might be easy to distil down to short adjectives or archetypes, but it’d be wrong to assume there isn’t more to them than just the characters you see at first. Part of the charm of dinnerladies is it being so down-to-earth – and what could be more everyday than food.

Food is... care

"Twink makes me cakes, don't you, honeybun. And I get breakfast in bed, don't I."

"Mum!"

"I'm showing her up now. No, she's a good girl. Looks after me tip-top, don't you?"



SERIES 1 – EPISODE 4 – ‘Moods’

Victoria Wood's characters were rarely one-dimensional. Far from being a collection of lazy archetypes, the characterisation in *Dinnerladies* is as much about the stories that aren't shown as those that are. Maxine Peake's Twinkle, on the face of it, is your typical young woman – more at home at a party than in the canteen. But in the episode *Moods*, where a gathering is held for the workers' parents, we meet Bev, Twinkle's mum. From the moment she's wheeled in, a different side is revealed to Twinkle. We learn about her homelife; that she's a young carer, preparing meals for her mother. She acts embarrassed: to her co-workers, she's someone who doesn't like her job cooking in the "manky old canteen", a façade which is pierced by the realisation that she has to cook at home as well, and likely has done since she was a child. Victoria knew that revealing this other side to Twinkle would surprise viewers about the laddish caricature they'd known up to now. Twinkle makes breakfast, yes – but also cakes; an extra, a luxury. The great love that Bev communicates for her daughter is directly linked to the power of food, both to nourish, but as an expression of love.

Food is... international

"Excuse me, I haven't finished that!"

"Sorry, I thought it were just crumbs!"

"It's a croissant! If you're gonna take someone's plate away if they've made a few crumbs with a croissant, I don't know why you bother serving them in the first place"



SERIES 1 – EPISODE 2 – 'Royals'

In a northern factory canteen, it's hardly a surprise that most of the early-morning orders are for fry-ups and bacon sarnies rather than anything colder or lighter. Except for one of the workers, played by Lesley Nicol, whose tastes are far more continental than most. Bren clearly isn't used to serving many pastries to the staff, and naively decides to take away the plate before she'd finished eating. Nicol's character acts shocked, but really, she's aware of the image she's presenting by choosing an uncharacteristically gallic breakfast. She labours the pronunciation of 'croissant', trying her hardest to sound like a French enclave amidst the rest of her broad Lancastrian speech. The choices that people make about what they eat say a lot more than just what they need to satisfy their hunger. It speaks about where they view their place in society, what they want others to think of them; even if, in the end, their northern frugality gets the better of them, and they have to spend hours scraping every last morsel of pastry from their crockery.

Food is... a learning experience

"Twink, what's the soup?"

"Minestrone."

"Why didn't you put it on the menu?"

"Can't spell it."



SERIES 1 – EPISODE 1 – 'Monday'

To be fair to Twinkle, 'minestrone' is a rather difficult word, come to think of it. The humour in this scene comes as much from Maxine Peake's deadpan delivery, never looking away from the salads she's assembling, as from her (admittedly rather obvious and hackneyed) lines. But, from Twink's perspective – why should she know how to spell the name of the soup she makes? She's written just 'soup' on the board, which is accurate at least. She'd only have been shouted at if she had attempted to write minestrone and had got it wrong. Her character, a young working-class woman, being the butt of this joke feels especially inconsiderate when, in later episodes, we learn more about her character and the responsibilities she has. For her, the food she prepares for the factory workers is just her duty, day in, day out, making the food to keep the production line running.

Food is... meagre, sometimes

"Where's me chickpea patty for me vegans?"

"Over there, by Jean"

"I'm glad you told me, I nearly wiped the counter with it."



SERIES 2 – EPISODE 7 – 'Minnellium'

It's been said that in future, we'll look back on meat-eating as being like smoking; something that fewer and fewer people do, realising the harm it does. That's not the case yet, though, and certainly wasn't twenty years ago. People who didn't eat meat were seen as a nuisance more than anything, just people who had to be catered for, begrudgingly, rather than an equally valid and normal dietary option. Therefore it's no surprise that dinnerladies features quite a few characters being disdainful about veggies and vegans. In this scene, Anne Reid's excellent sarcastic portrayal of Jean mocks the attempts to try and make something resembling meat out of such a bland substance, resulting in something so unappetising she'd consider it more useful for cleaning with. It shows the appreciation that a lot of people, especially older, working-class people, have for a meaty square meal. I suspect that the veggies at the party would've been equally dissatisfied by the paltry selection they'd been fobbed off with, especially in comparison to the meat-free options that are thankfully available these days.

Food is... political

“Wholemeal pittas? What d’you think this is, the Labour Party conference?”



SERIES 2 – EPISODE 1 – ‘Catering’

dinnerladies was produced from 1998 to 2000; the era of Cool Britannia, of New Labour and all the optimism that the coming millennium encouraged in people. Life wasn’t so simple and sanitised, however, and there were of course people left behind. Without wanting to rehash the last twenty years of political argument, it’s generally considered that the transformation of the Labour party in the 1990s led to a sense of alienation amongst some of the party’s traditional working-class supporters; a sense that more highbrow, middle-class ‘champagne socialists’ were taking charge. The factory workers find little in common with these people – Victoria makes a rare political joke in the quip comparing their unusually bourgeois bread delivery with the political elites of the time. But it’s odd that such a minor difference between two types of bread has such clear connotations of social class that it can be relied upon as the punchline to a joke. It points to the two great obsessions of British life and culture: class, and food – intertwined, they’re a recipe for effective satire. There’s power in detail, and power in food.

Food is... branded

“You think I know nothing. I didn’t just come up the Manchester Ship Canal on a Ryvita, you know...”



SERIES 2 – EPISODE 5 – ‘Gamble’

One of the great hallmarks of Victoria Wood’s comedy is the amount of detail she writes in. Her lines are so specific and fine-tuned; the actors often speak about how she was a perfectionist, demanding they shoot lines over and over again so that the pronunciations and rhythms were all how she imagined them. And the actors obliged, mostly to please Vic, and because her lines were such a treat to be able to deliver. Every word is carefully considered, especially where she’s including the name of a brand or product. These occasions are rare, but they emulate the ways that a lot of people speak, such is the way that trademarks get genericised. Dolly’s remark about those who seek to diminish her capabilities references a brand of crispbreads – had Thelma Barlow instead delivered the line by saying “cracker” or “biscuit”, it would’ve lost the rhythm it has, and simply wouldn’t be as funny. The same can be said for the shout-out to the Manchester Ship Canal – not necessary, no; but essential to getting laughs out of the audience and building the character of Dolly. The line is especially humorous given a Ryvita is the sort of thing you could imagine the diet-obsessed Dolly enjoying for her elevenses, a sort of semi-aspirational product that she can’t help slipping into conversation to make her phrasing a bit more personal and a bit less derogatory. But it’s symptomatic of the value that food means to us all that brands can have such a big place in culture, and can be referenced to great applause in a sitcom by the mere mention of their name.

Food is... multipurpose

“Didn’t they teach you anything at school?”

“How to put a condom on a cucumber.”

“Honestly. What’s the point of that?”

“Be fair, Dolly, there’s not many cucumbers could manage it for themselves.”



SERIES 2 – EPISODE 1 – ‘Catering’

The cast of dinnerladies spans the generations. Workers young and old toil away in the canteen, forced into mixing with people they wouldn’t normally socialise with. Dolly and Jean are perhaps the two characters that clash most over this point, and in the scripts, Victoria exploits this to great effect. Dolly has a lot of assumptions about the young, a lot of which originate in her beloved Daily Mail. Assumptions which aren’t exactly disproven by the only young person she knows, Twinkle. She lambasts the education system, the workshyness of the youth ‘these days’, and is generally unkind to Twinkle on account of her perceived superiority. This isn’t helped when she learns about what Twinkle’s school did with the cucumbers, instead of, say, making a nice salad.

Food is... slimming

"Dolly, are you still on sugar?"

"No, that was just until Twelfth Night. Sweeteners."



SERIES 2 – EPISODE 8 – ‘Christine’

Throughout dinnerladies' two series, a constant theme was dieting. Whether it's Twinkle's trips to slimming club, Jane's office demanding 'low fat spread' on their toast order, or Dolly's insistence on never being in the same room as fried food, jokes were always being made about peoples' attempts to keep in shape. But Vic knew better than to mock those trying to lose weight; the humour instead was always focussed on the whole industry around dieting, the products that supposedly help, and the lies that people have to try and tell themselves that expose the stupidity inherent in a lot of these meal plans. As if taking sugar in tea over Christmas and then switching back to sweeteners the moment the tree comes down has any sort of scientific basis whatsoever! But Dolly seems to have to convince herself that that's the case, put those rules in for herself, in order to keep the pounds off. A lot of Dolly's insecurities seem to come from her mother, played in a cameo by Thora Hird in one episode of the first series. She refers to young Dolly as being "like a dinghy with plaits" – a funny line, yes, but one that's put into perspective when we see her attempts over the series to shed the pounds. This just goes to show the multidimensionality of a lot of Victoria Wood's characters, especially in dinnerladies. It's been described as a 'bittersweet' sitcom, one that mixes humour with poignancy in a very effective way – a lot of which, it turns out, is down to the way that it explores what food can mean to us.