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THE MONTGARRIE MOBILE PORRIDGE BAR

Stephen Brandes

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March 2014: I am approached by Nuno Sacramento, the director of the Scottish Sculpture Workshop in the small village of Lumsden in Aberdeenshire, with the proposal for me to work on a project with an artisan oat miller...

I should explain, that I am a visual artist and also one third of a collective based in Cork, Ireland, called The Domestic Godless¹. Together, we are driven by a sincere interest in food, both in the sensory experience of eating it and also in the often contradictory ways, it can be exploited like any other artistic medium; in its presentation, in its taste and through its very complex cultural associations. Our joint practice has incorporated installations, banquets, public performances and published recipes that draw a fine line between actuality and fiction.

We have never before worked with porridge.

Oatmeal and porridge have an iconic status within the dietary landscape of the British Isles. Both nutritious and versatile it is synonymous with both

healthiness and austerity. Colloquially, 'porridge' is another name for a prison sentence.

Porridge is common throughout both Britain and Ireland as a staple and basic breakfast dish. Traditionally, as purists would have it, it is made with oatmeal and water, and possibly salt. It is the perfect culinary partner to Calvinism, bereft of ornament and purged of decadence. The further south one goes from the gritty Scottish Highlands, the recipes soften with the addition of milk and sugar, perhaps even honey, until one gets to the breakfast bars of hipster London with liberal accompaniments of fruit, nuts and syrups.

I exaggerate a little, but oatmeal porridge (and how it's made) certainly comes attached with unspoken class values and lifestyle tokenism. Plenty of material there for a spot of iconoclasm...

My invitation to travel to Scotland, was to participate in an event called "The Skills Biennial". Five major



creativity of artists and their curiosity will question the paradox of a less than ideal diet in a place of amazing produce."

There is a perceived hierarchy between art and craft, which the Skills Biennial hoped to question, if not dispel. It could be maintained that art and craft are

similar activities that are framed both

culturally and commercially to inhabit unequal value systems. It is true that some professional artists, taking the role of producer, employ the skills of craftspeople for their own ends, but while

art and craft are rarely mutually exclusive of one another, I believe they have become different activities with distinct ambitions. I have argued that craft puts an emphasis on technical skill, while art makes manifest thought and imagination. Art, while having the potential to be entertaining or inspiring, also has every right to be utterly useless, be ugly, break rules and behave as an irritant to the natural order of things. Craft, on the contrary, is concerned with the transformation of



arts organisations based in Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City (Scottish Sculpture Workshop, Sound Festival, Deveron Arts, Woodend Barn and Gray's School of Art) created the platform for five collaborations between artists and local food practices, as their literature announced:

"Each organisation curates a Slow Prototype (SP) bringing together internationally renowned contemporary artists with crafts/trades people in residencies of up to 4 weeks in August / September 2014. Each SP is about different sets of skills coming together on equal terms and mutually affecting each other, generating something unexpected, unfolding through each collaboration.

The North East of Scotland has a reputation as Scotland's larder (fishing, Aberdeen Angus, traditional products such as shortbread and whisky...) but there is not a reputation for eating well in the North East. The five invited artists will spend time engaging with local food organisations and the local community. The



materials through the refinement of manual labour. I do not believe there is a hierarchy, as both, whether artist or artisan, are equally at the mercy of market forces depending on the demand for their individual practices within each chosen profession.



More interesting than these perceived discrepancies, for me, was what if anything, our differing skill sets and ambitions might produce through the process of collaboration.

I was paired with Richie Duncan, an oat miller from nearby Montgarrie. The mill itself, built in the late 1800's, has become a celebrity in it's own right, making several television appearances from *The Great British Menu* to *The Hairy Bikers*², for being the only active watermill for the production of oatmeal in the British Isles. Richie, who mills the 'Alford' oats and through skillful engineering and keeps the 140 year-old machinery functioning, has always kept away from the cameras.

I meet Richie for the first time later in June at his workplace. Montgarrie Mill is a listed building, the inside of which looks as if Heath Robinson³ had furnished a Spanish galleon. I get the tour: the furnace for roasting the oats, the water wheel, the gears and cogs that turn the immense grinding stones, the chutes and eventually the product in several grades of refinement, from pin-head oatmeal to a fine dust called *cheetabeastie*. Our mutual introduction is polite and muted, but Richie is game for the project. And then we go for lunch...

... to the Grouse Inn, tucked away in a remote glen on the edge of the stunningly beautiful Cairngorm mountains. There are over 300 single malt whiskies on optic. We sample several. Lunch arrives. Penne pasta with pork, samphire and white chocolate - on paper it sounds ridiculous, this is a remote rural roadside inn in Scotland, not a 3-Michelin-starred gastropalace in Catalunya, but all credit due to Mary, the landlady's daughter who had invented this dish that morning, it was genius! The discussion loosens up.

I talked of a previous project,

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which never came to fruition, involving the absurd notion of a Soviet style ice-cream van, which would travel around rural Ireland giving away borscht⁴ flavoured ice-cream. This idea further adapted to porridge, struck a chord in entertaining both our skill sets and a shared sense of humour. The ball was rolling...

Over the next two months, Ritchie started building the 'van' using the chassis of a horse-box acquired from his father. I started working on recipe ideas, using Alford oatmeal.

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Every week or so, we would swap developments and ideas. We each were happy working more or less independently given the geographical distance between us, though general design ideas were politely discussed. By the time I got to Scotland, the body of the Mobile Porridge Bar was almost complete, along with a functioning water wheel and a gear system to power revolving signage.

I arrived in Lumsden on 23rd August. When I got to Montgarrie, the finer details were then agreed and worked on. The interior layout and signage was discussed and shared in order to accommodate a balance of expression. Daytime was spent working on the Porridge

Bar, evenings were spent in the kitchen further developing recipes. I embarked on a series of concoctions, stretching from the sublime to the ridiculous, using Alford oatmeal as its base. Each would attempt to push the possibilities beyond the top hits of a Google recipe search.

The context too was an important factor. Heston Blumenthal's Snail Porridge⁵ is relatively well known as an extreme embellishment of the humble oat, but a porridge bar in the yard of a sculpture workshop in rural Aberdeenshire is a far cry



from a restaurant in the Home Counties, with a twelve month waiting list for a table.. I might add that Alford porridge oats are a different beast to the porridge oats we normally find on the supermarket shelves. Firstly, they are flat-kiln roasted to remove 96% of their moisture. Normal oats on average keep around 10%. Secondly, they are ground, not rolled. When cooked s a result, both the taste and consistency are very different.

The subsidiary ingredients were sourced from extremely varied locations: seaweed foraged from the southern Irish coastline; wild mushrooms and lichen foraged from woodland a stones-throw from Lumsden; spices and seasonings from Aberdeen's ethnic specialists; fish from the North Sea; molecular preparations from experimental

culinary laboratories based in the industrial suburbs of Barcelona.

The first dish, made on my site visit, attempted the absurd marriage of two emblematic Scottish products, porridge and Irn Bru⁶. Needless to say the result was inedible, but the concept itself was enough to warrant a reaction, both at the Workshop and subsequently across social media.

Successive presentations were arguably more palatable and tested over ten days on the captive audience of artists and employees at SSW and the small workforce at Montgarrie Mill. These included:

Salty seaweed, sesame and oat brittle.

Beetroot & porridge sorbet, with kipper and dill sprinkles.

Rosebud & rhubarb flapjack. Brown shrimp, dillisk⁷ and oatmeal 'dishcloth' (a tear & share snack with a soy sauce & wasabi mayonnaise dip).

Chinese style slow roasted pork gruel.

"Yokey Hole"⁸, a spiced beetroot porridge with chorizo, soured cream and a horseradish meringue.

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Girolle and amethyst
deceiver⁹ risotto (groats
having a comparable
starch content to risotto
rice, provide a perfect
alternative.)

Thai spiced coconut milk &
oatmeal drop scones with
mango foam.

Beetroot & porridge
communion wafers.
Reindeer moss & porridge
ice cream.

On the evening of Thursday
4th September, the Montgarrie
Mobile Porridge Bar was
hooked up to the back of
a Volvo estate and pulled
the 16km from the mill to
Lumsden, where it was parked
in the yard of the Scottish
Sculpture Workshop. Over the
following two days, with the
waterwheel turning and the
signage rotating, it was open
for business, serving "Free
Porridge" (ie the above menu)
to passing traffic, with the
occasional blast of 'The
Internationale' transmogrified
into an ice-cream van jingle
emitting from the serving
hatch.

The North East of Scotland, the
introductory text to the Skills
Biennial tells us, produces
amazing food and drink. They
are right: Arbroath smokies,
haggis, Speyside whiskies,
kippers, wild mushrooms, game

birds, venison, Aberdeen Angus
beef and of course Alford
oatmeal. Aberdeen, with its
university and the oil industry
is a relatively cosmopolitan
city and consequently has well
stocked ethnic food shops and
restaurants. Indeed I had the



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best Thai meal I've experienced
in the British Isles, from the
indoor market in Aberdeen. Yet,
the text goes on to say "there
is not a reputation for eating
well in the North East".

I did not launch into any
academic research on this
subject, nor would I want to.



There are plenty of reasons both cultural and socio-economic, each of which could substantiate a lengthy thesis. The pervasive advertising of processed food, the climate, the fact that socializing happens in the pub as opposed to around the kitchen table, the debatable question of whether personal tastes have been passed down genetically over generations, the idea that certain foods are beyond the bounds of the unprivileged, all perhaps contribute to the perception of 'not eating well' in this part of the world. Unfortunately however, there is a fatigue-inducing culture of nagging self-righteousness that follows our contemporary food culture around, like a child in the confectionary aisle of a supermarket. It is commonly accepted, in the West at least, that certain practices in the food industry need to change, not least to improve

the quality of the food and the lives of those who produce it. Simultaneously our dietary habits are constantly being scrutinized, undoubtedly for the common good, but through a vortex of sensational media evangelism, which is both patronizing and insulting.

Insomuch as The Montgarrie Mobile Porridge Bar had a specific context, it was an art project and art cannot preach. It is not its job. Art, perhaps, should just put on its elephant costume and wander into the room...

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1. For more information on The Domestic Godless go to <http://www.thedomesticgodless.com>
2. The Hairy Bikers are two television food presenters who broadcast regularly on the BBC. Their visit to Montgarrie Mill can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9MyvW7TlxU>
3. William Heath Robinson was an English cartoonist and illustrator best known for drawings of ridiculously complicated machines for achieving simple objectives. [Wikipedia](#)
4. Borscht is an Eastern European stew/soup, the basis of which is beetroot.
5. Heston Blumenthal is a British chef, renowned for his use of scientific techniques in his cooking methods (otherwise known as molecular gastronomy). Snail Porridge became one of his most celebrated signature dishes.
6. Irn Bru is a sickly sweet, neon orange carbonated soft drink, produced in Glasgow. It has near iconic status in Scotland.
7. *Palmaria palmata*, also called dulse or dulse, red dulse, sea lettuce flakes or creathnach, is a red alga previously referred to as *Rhodymenia palmata*. It grows on the northern coasts of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. [Wikipedia](#)
8. "Yokey", is local dialect for "itchy".
Amethyst deceivers are small edible bright purple mushrooms, foraged nearby.
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Stephen Brandes is a visual artist living and working in Cork, Ireland. With artists *Mick O'Shea* and *Irene Murphy*, he formed the absurdist culinary performance group The Domestic Godless. He can be reached here.



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[1] The Montgarrie Mobile Porridge Bar on site at Montgarrie Mill, Alford, Scotland.

[2] The raw product, Alford Oatmeal.

[3] Reindeer moss & porridge ice-cream.

[4] Brown shrimp, dillisk & oatmeal 'dishcloth' with wasabi and soy mayonnaise.

[5] Local wild girolles.

[6] The Montgarrie Mobile Porridge Bar on site at the Scottish Sculpture Workshop, Lumsden, Aberdeenshire, Scotland.

[7] "Yokey Hole", soured cream & horseradish meringue.

[8] "Free Porridge", SSW., Lumsden, Aberdeenshire.

[9] Thai spiced coconut & oatmeal drop scones with mango-pulp foam.

[10] SSW Director, Nuno Sacramento modeling the beetroot & porridge communion wafer.