

Travel like a foodie

The experiences of a socially awkward foodie travelling around Europe

Alex Sumray

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Smashwords Edition

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*For 'insert name'*  
*You are really special to me*

*With thanks to Gaby*  
*You're good at being a sister*

Thank you also to God\*,  
tastebuds were one of your finest inventions  
\*Or Darwin, whoever you believe in

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## Prologue

So, shall we start.

Actually, before we do, I just wish to point something out quickly. This book wasn't written just so you could pass some time on the toilet or skim read with the telly on in the background. No, this is a serious read, only to be partaken whilst wearing reading glasses pushed down to the bridge of your nose (whether you need them or not) and sitting in a hardback chair with your full, undivided attention. Right, are we clear? Good, *now* we can start.

Before I start my culinary tale, I think it would probably be best to give a little background about myself; not (just) because I'm very possibly a little self-obsessed, but more to help put this book into some sort of context.



So; at the time of writing I'm a twenty year old student who spends their student loan on a well planned weekly food shop and enjoys nothing more than a neatly organized spice drawer (see below) - conforming to all the student stereotype then.

I spend my spare time looking up the best restaurants, scouring menus and planning what I shall cook for the week. I also write a small, food based blog, imaginatively titled, 'Alex's food'. Here I bare my foodie soul, reviewing restaurants I've been to and discuss the latest grain that I've become excited about... I'm cracking to go for a pint with.\*

\* Saying that I'm not much of a drinker, so it will have to be a tap water for me. I also like to get my eight hours of shut eye, so will probably make my excuses around 23:30.

So I know the question on the nation's lips; 'if you love food so much Alex, why didn't you become a chef?' Well, Britain/World, let me tell you and we can all get on with our lives again.

I gave it a go, albeit a small, slightly pathetic go. On my blog, I posted about my Catering College experience, which really tells the story of a boy with too much of a sensitive disposition to make it in the harsh world that is catering.

Anyone who has read this on my blog, feel free to scroll through this section.. Mum, that means you!

## **My Catering College experience**

My love of food and cooking made me take the plunge to walk away from academia and into the heat of the kitchen and my word, it was hot!

I attended Westminster Catering College, which has a reputation of being one of the best of its kind in the world.

On my very first day I was late; the train was packed and I thought I would wait just a few minutes for the next one, so I could get a seat. I thought this was fair enough; it was hideously early in the morning, and I a spindly sort of character with scoliosis; what and I'm expected to stand! I sprinted from the station, but to no avail, the classroom door already shut. I knocked on the door of the classroom as timidly as it is humanly possible to knock on a door. I received, how should I put it, a rather stern telling off (I'm keeping this family friendly!) The chef was an intimidating Scottish man (not Ramsey), he told me 'I would never be late again' – he was right!

After a week of mainly boring work on food theory; 'if you touch raw meat, you will die', that sort of thing, we were finally in the kitchen.

Roast chicken, fish and chips, soups, among other things were practiced in this first rotation. This was the most enjoyable experience I had at college, but even here I wasn't overly happy. I know it was early days, but I wanted to jazz it up a bit with my own personal flair and not stick so rigidly to the cookbook.

I learnt certain tips however; don't use a high edged baking tray when roasting chicken and to lay the bird on a mirepoix of vegetables – carrots, celery, leeks and onions; makes for a cracking roast. I also picked up some fancy cheffing terminology, like mirepoix!

Remember the big, scary Scottish man I was telling you about, well it was time to enter his kitchen. Endless intimidation tactics and tellings off were his main teaching methods. This rotation seemed to last for an absolute age, with I dreading each and every day, and when your alarm is set for 05:30am, the snooze button becomes a tempting mistress.

I remember one particular occasion on which I was sent out of the kitchen. The corridor was a scary place, with chefs eyeing you up and down, leaving you with the sense that you are under constant surveillance, terrified in case you drop your military like stance, or let one's hands resort to the safety of one's pockets. I was called back in, where too afraid to ask what I had missed, set about cutting the tortillas we were making. But oh know, Lord above, they were meant to go in the fridge before being cut. Chef then asked if I had mental problems (on more than one occasion) and ordered me out of his kitchen once again. Bearing in my mind that my crime was cutting a tortilla before refrigeration, I felt this was a tad harsh.

Now, I wouldn't have minded (as much) if we were making something the least bit exciting or challenging, but the whole of this rotation centered around making sandwiches and salads! Saying that, I couldn't cut a tortilla without error, so who I am I to comment!

But for about a fortnight we chopped onions and cut open baguettes. I started to think that I could not go on much longer (that sounds quite dramatic on paper).

When we were finally finished the sandwich making rotation and we entered a real kitchen, one where we would be making and serving food for the college's cafe, I decided to stay a while longer. I thought away from a certain someone and with a more creative, exciting, challenging experience ahead, things would improve.

While I was happier there, the pressure one feels in the kitchen is something that I really didn't enjoy. I always felt just ten seconds away from a stern telling off and dreaded having to ask for any sort of help. It wasn't for me. As I say, sensitive disposition.

I was taking more and more sick days and at times claimed I was feeling rather unwell when I did go in. After-all, we had been taught that we can't cook other people's food when ill, so going home was the only option (at least I listened to the theory!). After a, let's be honest here, pathetic two months at catering college, I decided enough was enough, handed in my notice and walked through the exit doors with a wide grin on my face.

Fortunately, my school let me back in to belatedly start my A-levels in November. I can report that those two months at catering college were by far more stressful, intense and difficult than a year and a half studying and completing my A-levels. That's not meant to imply a level of arrogance, but more to state the intensity that was catering college.

I understand the need to start with the basics, but to be so strict and intimidating to first year students, I feel is not only unnecessary, but also unproductive and stifling. There are different ways to gain respect. All that a certain someone gained from me with his manner was a less productive chef, too scared to try anything on his own back or ask any questions; particularly questions in relation to tortilla preparation. To this day, Mexican remains my least favourite cuisine.

I don't mean to be dramatic (again), but my experience at catering college has left certain mental scars. For one, every time I hear a Scottish accent, I honestly get a bit nervous, I'm now firmly a Jamie Oliver man over that Ramsey fella. Also, I have had to change my alarm from the one I used to use to wake me up for college every morning, as when I hear it, I start to feel all anxious – I definitely wasn't cut out to be a chef!

I wouldn't advise against catering college, but expect extremely early mornings, the scariest of people and it must be something that you know will be an all consuming experience. I knew these things before going in (though I did expect a more encouraging atmosphere), but in practice, I clearly couldn't hack it.

Most of all, if you love cooking and you are prepared for a long slog to pass as a qualified chef then go for it. I clearly wasn't right for it, but love cooking at home now, where I can be more creative and stress free, and most importantly away from anybody even remotely Scottish!

## The trip

Right, onto the trip. My attempts of professional cooking then had been well and truly quelled, but my foodie instincts were and are still burning, with me realizing I'm more accustomed to eating food, than cooking it. So when summer came around, I decided to eat food, a lot of food, in a lot of different places!

This book will be a smorgasbord of tips, reviews and pictures of European foodery. There are as many restaurant reviews as you could ever want in one book (about ten... trust me, you wouldn't want anymore than that, enough's enough!). There will be tips to help you on your way to the perfect European trip, that is if you're looking to shun culture and the arts, in order to divulge in total food ecstasy. You will also see pictures via my admittedly unqualified hand, taken on my slightly unprofessional equipment (a well known handheld device named after a fruit, you catch my drift. Actually if I say the name, I may get free stuff, free APPLE stuff...). Note: please do not send me apples, only Apples!

This 'enthusiasm' for good grub led me to thinking of going further afield from London town, my usual stomping/eating ground. For me travel is food and I don't mean travel is food for the soul or any of that philosophical mumbo jumbo, I mean the reason I decided to travel was simply because I wanted to eat food. I didn't buy guidebooks for the thirteen cities I travelled to, or scour the internet for the cultural highlights, the amazing architectural achievements or the trendy art scenes. Any research I did undertake was purely food related.

So food is why I went to Europe in the summer of 2014 and is why I'm already dreaming of trips to Japan and India, heck take me to Kyrgyzstan if the foods good (I mean this in every possible respect to any Kyrgyzstanians reading or to the Kyrgyz people as Wikipedia tells me is correct). I should say that I've tried not to make a habit of using Wikipedia as a research tool for this book; that is reserved solely for my university work!

As hinted at in the sub-title of this book, I'm a bit of an introvert. I'm scared of big groups, I fear public speaking or what I like to call speaking and generally keep myself to myself. My routined nights at university usually consist of a mug of herbal tea, a few biscuits and a square or two (two if I'm feeling particularly wild) of dark chocolate. I'll then watch a film, play my guitar and i'll often end the end night by crying salty tears into my cup of chai at the loneliness of it all, I joke...

Anyway, so, when I decided to do a bit of traveling, it never really entered into the equation that I would want company, I mean my own company's good enough right guys, guys! But, I didn't want to wake up and have to compromise with my traveling partner the day's plans, especially when it came to where, when, what and how much we would eat.

Even with my acute social anxieties, traveling by oneself I had no choice but to interact with fellow travelers. I met a fair few people on my travels, all of whom were on a budget of sorts; I even took a small notepad with me containing the phrase for tap water for each country I was visiting! However, food seemed to be the fall guy in everyone's budget but my own. For example, one fellow traveler I met in Brussels, returned back at the hostel distraught at failing to find a pot noodle, settled instead on one of those subway things.

Let's get this out the way now, I am a bit of a food snob. If I lived on Pot Noodle for the duration of my five week trip, from the money I 'saved', I could afford another Interail ticket and do the whole thing again. Even with this being the case, I wouldn't want this, not because I didn't enjoy my trip, but because for me FOOD IS TRAVEL (this is a literary device known as 'repetition'; I know this because I am a real author, not just a twenty year old boy who is perfecting the practice of productive procrastination\* from his university work!) \*And alliteration as it turns out!

If you haven't found my disregard for European culture and awful snobbery offputting, you're in for a right treat. If you have, you've brought the book now, so I win either way, back of the net!

### **My itinerary**

Paris - Three nights

Bruges, Ghent/Gent (still not sure of correct spelling), Brussels - two nights in each

Frankfurt - One night (to make travel from Brussels to Berlin a little more palatable - hey get it, palatable, food - you can expect more food based puns throughout)

Berlin - Four nights

Prague - Three nights

Vienna - Three nights

Munich - Three nights

Venice - Three nights

Bologna - Two nights

Modena - Two nights

Florence - Three nights

Rome - Four nights

### **Favourite places**

- 1) Modena
- 2) Rome
- 3) Berlin
- 4) Prague
- 5) Bruges

### **Best place(s) for food**

- 1) Bologna & Modena
- 2) Berlin
- 3) Prague

- 4) Vienna
- 5) Venice

## **Paris**

France, the home of the most Michelin starred restaurants in the world. I felt like I was making some sort of pilgrimage, a kind of foodie Mecca. And no, I don't mean dinner night at the bingo!

I was expecting to stumble across many a brasserie and bistro (whatever the difference is); maybe share a beer with a French peasant, him/her letting me dip my baguette into their beef bourguignon (unfortunately, not a euphemism). This to my disappointment did not happen. In fact all the stereotypes I had going in to France; peasants, good bread, moody, rude people, were unfounded. In fact, I found quite the opposite to be true in all these pre-conceived, slightly xenophobic notions, (must watch less Top Gear).

Firstly, it turns out that the traditional French peasant I pictured were more a fixture of nineteenth century France. The bread, based on my experience failed to live up to its big reputation. Furthermore, I found the Parisians to be up there with the friendliest locals I encountered on my trip; helpful, friendly, and the garlic breath bearable and by the end of my stay, mutual! I genuinely found them to be very accommodating.

Anyway, back to the food. I was perhaps the most disappointed with the food scene I found in Paris than in any other place I visited. For starters (pun so intended), I found that if you want to eat really well in Paris, you have to pay top dollar (Euro) for it. The main tourist sites were surrounded by fairly low quality yet high priced eateries. I generally found it hard and time consuming to discover places I wished to eat in. I should mention however, that I found the service to be of the highest quality than anywhere else I visited.

Despite finding it difficult to be impressed by the restaurant scene in Paris, there were still a few places worthy of a review in this (future award winning) book.

### **Chez Papa - Paris**

*153 Rue Montmartre, 75002 Paris, France*

If like me, you find yourself lost and alone, with the night shade closing in around you on your very first day in Paris and you too are lucky enough to see Chez Papa, expect to find decent, traditional French grub within. I had a confit duck, rich in garlic and salt, which fell effortlessly off the bone, served simply with parsley potatoes. It was perhaps the perfect meal to kick off my trip. No fuss, simply well cooked, flavourful food. My memory may be a little biased towards this place however; as I say, I was lost and alone on the first day of my travels and serving me was a very charming French lady. So while the food was good, it's not particularly where my fond memories lie of the meal.

Food: 7/10

Service: 10/10!

### **Villa Spicy**

*8 Avenue Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 75008 Paris, France*

As hinted at in the introduction to Paris, I was disappointed not to be constantly tripping over bistros and small, independent cafes serving homemade gourmet treats. I was becoming slightly irritable, with my feet not yet accustomed to this month of nomadic adventure and my belly rumbling, furious at me for not abiding by its usual feeding time. In the infancy of my trip, with my budget lying there, beautiful in its untouched state, my economic awareness (polite way of saying stinginess) not yet developed, I headed into Villa Spicy. This despite it clearly being beyond what a student traveler should be spending on dinner. The table of business people meeting next to me confirmed this.

For my starter, I went for satay prawns with dragon fruit. I was sold at satay prawns and neglected my dislike for the more exotic fruits. Unfortunately, this neglect haunted my enjoyment of the prawns. The dish itself though lacked direction and didn't really come together to form a dish that felt it belonged as one.

Caramelized veal and pureed broad bean was my main course. The impression I got from my starter was that here is a restaurant that thinks it's better than it is. Offering quite unusual dishes, at a fairly exhausted price, but failing to execute how it wishes it could. The main however, soon shut me up! A huge slab of deeply lacquered, caramel coloured fillet of veal, with a smear of green broad bean by its side. The old cliché that such simplicity must be matched with perfection could have been applied to this dish. Executing perfection they did. The veal delivering smoky, sweet, meaty goodness, with the broad bean just there to bring it all together. I must have looked terribly out of place as I scavenged the bones for any remaining morsels of meat.

Must go rating:

8/10



### Au revoir Paris

So this calls time on the first leg of my trip. An enjoyable leg, but perhaps overall, a little disappointing. In terms of food, I sampled a few tasty pastries and ate one or two impressive dishes, but all in all Paris didn't do much for me food wise.

'But how did you enjoy the city as a whole Alex?' Well, thanks for asking and I shall humour you with a response. I would go back certainly. The Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe being my favourite landmarks (how obvious I know). But they really are both quite something, both genuinely amazing landmarks that are worthy of the mass of people that flock to see them every year.

However, I wasn't quite swept off my feet by a romantic, love in the air type atmosphere that I was hoping for. Perhaps visiting in the height of tourist season is the reason for this. But as cliché'd as it sounds, I think next time I would like to go back with someone special on my arm. So ladies, the offer is there. Anyone, hellooo?!

## **Belgium**

I feel I couldn't truly appreciate the gastronomic treats that Belgium had to offer. I'm not too keen on waffles, I feel that chips (frites) are amongst the most overrated of all the foods and I am one of those bores who calculates their sugar intake, meaning I didn't overly indulge on their famous chocolates.

I did enjoy Belgium yes, but I feel as though I liked the idea of Belgium (particularly Bruges) more than I actually did. I was in some way victim to a Flemish variety of Paris syndrome. Let's take Bruges then, I expected a place where I could mill around and just wander. Stumble across something old, sit by a canal, letting the hours drift away. I wanted to swan in and out of narrow lanes, plucking chocolates from free sample trays (I make exception to my sugar counting when free stuff enters the equation). However, this image was shattered when hoards upon hoards of tourists had the cheek to come and clutter up the place. I made my way out of the main tourist area to find solace in my thoughts. I came across a canal, a bench and no one else! In that brief moment I had found the Bruges of my hopes and expectations. Ah, blissful peace. An all too short while later, a maintenance van came and stamped all over my dreams (literally, I was just drifting off). With a wry smile, I arose from my slumber and went to join the crowds!

I found myself in some lovely little eateries whilst in Belgium, two of which you can now read about, lucky you.

### **Prestige**

*Vlamingstraat 12, 8000 Brugge, Belgium*

I was after a good breakfast in Bruges and stumbled across Prestige. Perfect poached eggs atop sautéed mushrooms, a cup of tea, toast, cake, fruit skewer, three types of jam, lovely service, plush, comfortable, regal interior. If I was one for Snapchat, I would have captioned the picture below, 'Life's good' or 'greedy buggler'; either one would have been applicable. Overall, a really lovely place, just gorgeous.

Must go rating:

8.5/10



*Greedy bugger!*

**Bocconi, Brussels**

*Rue de l'Amigo 1, 1000 Ville de Bruxelles, Belgium*

Now, I don't want to slag off or dismiss an entire city on the evidence of a two night stay, but I'm going to. Brussels didn't do it for me. The parts I saw I found to be a little grotty and just generally unwelcoming. I was excited to be staying on the doorstep of the (supposedly) beautiful Grand Place, then disappointed to find it covered in scaffolding.

To cheer myself up, I chose the only way I know how to and treated myself to a nice meal, any excuse! I circled this particular restaurant, Bocconi, a few times, but initially dismissed the idea of eating there due to the hefty prices and the fact it looked a bit posh. However, the seed had been planted and as I was traveling alone, I had no one to talk me out of it, so by the third circle of the restaurant, I entered (oh the joys of solo travel!) The restaurant was half empty (or full, depending on your disposition), but the receptionist still went to go and ask whether there was enough room... for this table of one. Perhaps a baby faced teen, adorned with scruffy jeans and slightly worn trainers are not their usual clientele. Fortunately, the receptionist came back and I was granted a seat... as I say, the restaurant was half empty. No full! I'm a positive person really, I meant full!

My sister once asked me 'If you had to choose one food to live on for the rest of your life, what would you plump for?' Thinking pragmatically and looking for a foodstuff that would sustain me, my original answer was porridge. After learning that there were no such stipulations (she

looking at me with disgust for saying porridge\*), I quickly changed my answer to bread and butter. I love the stuff. The bread basket on offer at Bocconi is what I imagined when I revised my answer to my sister's question; the single best bread basket I had on my trip; yes beating the bread offered at Osteria Franciscana and yes, I kept such a list!

\*She went for chocolate.



I went for bread crusted lamb (just what I needed, more bread), with fondant potato and some sort of jus for my actual meal. The lamb itself was beautifully tender, never have I had to chew so little when eating a piece of meat (no offence mum). The fondant potato lacked a little cooking however and it needed cooking with another few chunks of butter for James Martin to even consider going near it. The food was presented very well, but portions were minuscule, so much so, and I didn't want to, but I 'had' to order dessert to compensate.



For dessert, I couldn't see pass the Tiramisu. Mainly because it was titled 'Bocconi's Tiramisu', implying to me that it was some what of a speciality dish. What was served was a pretty standard Tiramisu, lacking the real coffee/alcohol punch that I like. However, its accompaniment, a coffee sorbet, was gorgeous and certainly delivered the coffee hit as promised. At nine euros however, it annoyed me a little. The tiramisu could have been found in any (decent) Italian restaurant and did not justify its price in any way, shape or form; ok maybe in the form of a delicious coffee sorbet, but in no way or shape!



It sounds as though I didn't enjoy the meal, I certainly did and would recommend it if you're ever in Brussels (though, contradictorily, I recommend that you never go to Brussels, ever!), but one has to be critical when paying, what I feel was over the odds. If eating at McDonald's, I

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