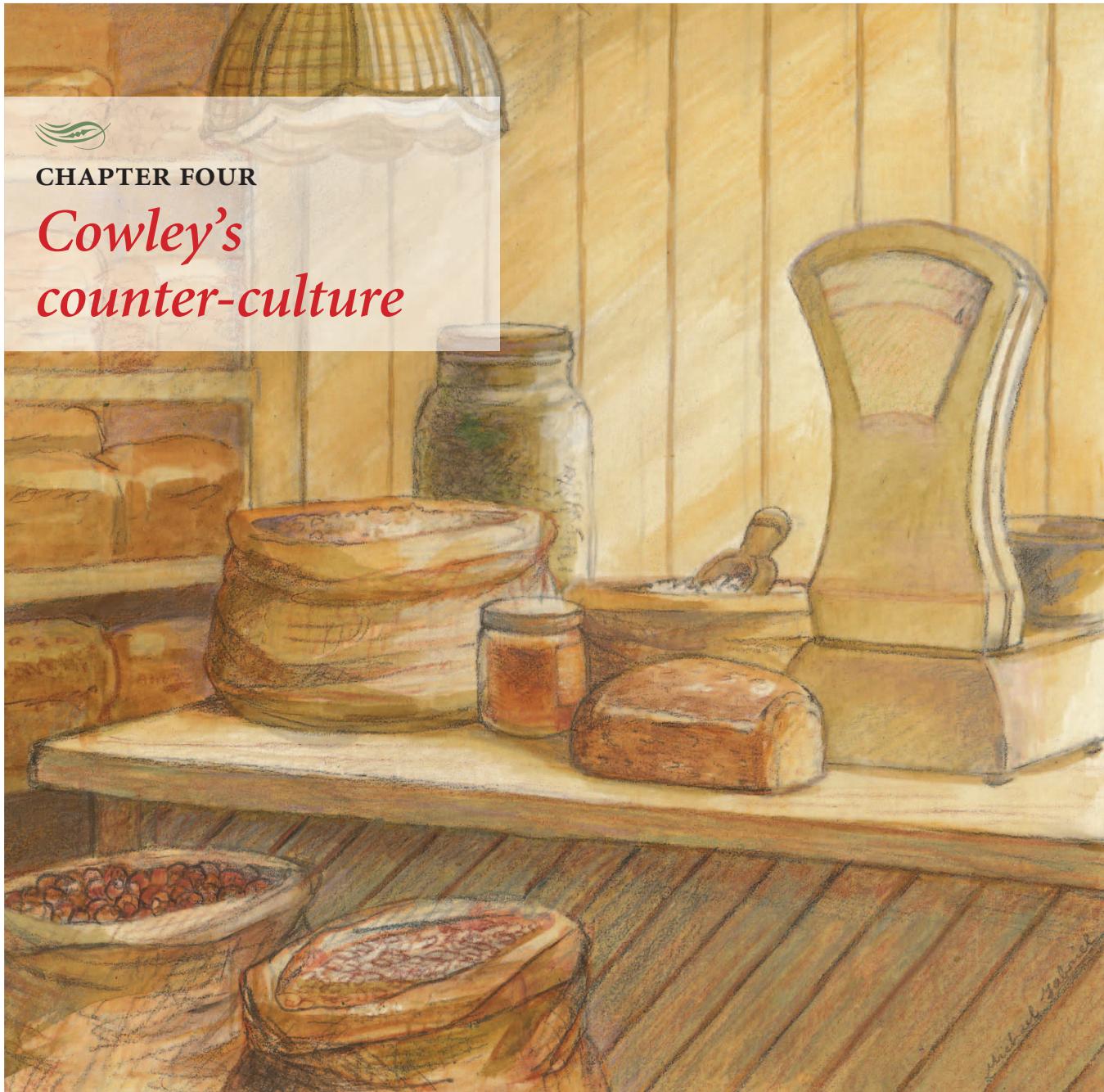




CHAPTER FOUR

Cowley's counter-culture



Although Ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras advocated vegetarianism, known then as the Pythagorean Diet (yes there really is nothing new under the sun) vegetarianism was essentially an approach to food based on religious belief and ritual, such as the forswearing of meat during Lent, or the Hindu tradition of vegetarianism in India. It was more a matter of necessity for poor people until the 18th century. It was only during that century that vegetarianism – based on ethical conviction and the radical ideas associated with the agrarian communists called the Diggers and the republican Levellers of the English Revolution – could be said to come into existence. The first identifiable vegetarian cookbook, *Primitive Cookery, or the Kitchen Garden Displayed* was published in 1767.

Unsurprisingly such an eclectic place as Oxford has its radical traditions in food as much as in other dimensions of politics. The poet Shelley, an undergraduate at University College at the turn of the 19th century, was an early and vociferous advocate of vegetarianism. He was expelled in 1811 after he published a tract *The necessity of atheism* and for his admiration of the revolutionary Thomas Paine.

Although the Vegetarian Society was founded in 1847, throughout the 19th century vegetarianism was considered extremely odd. A Mrs Brotherton published a cookbook in 1821 entitled, *A New System of Vegetable Cookery* and this was followed in 1847 by the anonymous *A Few Recipes of Vegetarian Diet*, but it was thin pickings.

However, Oxford, being the home of lost causes, by no mean rejected vegetarianism and as long ago as 1908, my copy of *Alden's Guide* includes an advertisement for the 'Japanese café' on the High Street featuring its 'special menu for vegetarians'. In fact vegetarian restaurants were relatively popular from the end of the 19th century. They offered value for money and were patronised by people who found a vegetarian meal pleasantly different as long as they didn't have to eat it all the time. This more tolerant approach reflected a gradual change in the national diet towards more fruit and vegetables, more milk consumption and the increased availability of chilled fruit imported from Australia and New Zealand. It was also a response to the shock of the discovery



Uhuru shop, 2015.

of just how poor the health of the nation was due to poor nutritional standards, when attempts to recruit fit and healthy young men to fight the Boer War (1899–1902) proved so difficult.

One key figure in this nutritional revolution at the time was a Swiss doctor, Maximilian Bircher-Benner who in 1895 after suffering from jaundice himself became an advocate of raw foods as a way to health. As well as experimenting successfully, with raw fruit and vegetables, it was his invention of muesli that made his name. Allegedly discovered during a long walk in the mountains with a shepherd, it consisted of coarsely ground wheat soaked in milk sweetened with honey, eaten with an apple. He began to serve it for breakfast at his clinic and the rest is history.

UHURU AND THE WHOLEFOOD REVOLUTION

As Cowley Road began to revive in the early 1970s after the ravages of the planning blight of the previous three decades, it is not surprising that it began to attract the attention of the radical end of the student community and with it that

strand involved in food politics – the spiritual descendants of Shelley. The first expression of this was the establishment of Uhuru in 1974. Uhuru meaning ‘freedom’ in Swahili has a unique, almost mythical place in the history of the wholefood movement and as part of the scenery of Cowley Road. It began life as a café, which sold wholefoods and handicrafts from collectives in Africa in a shop across the road. It acted as a focus for campaigning on a range of issues from third world liberation and development to community politics and mental health issues.

Its origins were in the student-based group Third World First, itself located on Cowley Road and now People and Planet, a national student campaigning organisation which is still headquartered in east Oxford. Student agitation around trade deals with former colonial nations such as sugar-producing Caribbean islands, fundraising for famine relief in Ethiopia and the like, led to discussions about a local centre to promote campaigns around development and to engage actively, by importing and selling items from developing countries, particularly those produced by co-operatives. These were idealistic days and there was a focus on the Tanzanian socialism of Julius Nyerere and the Ujamaa village model. This was in retrospect, the ‘phase one’ Uhuru. Annie Skinner quotes one of the founders:



‘When it was started, Uhuru was run by fairly conventional left/liberals who wore shoes and fairly clean clothes and ate meat. A silversmith set up his smithy in the store and someone else started a shelf of whole foods. Before long the Third World handicrafts had been inexorably into one half of the shop while the whole foods expanded. Trucks were delivering 100 lb bags of brown rice and 120 lb bags of hazelnuts, large quantities of oats, raisins and other dried fruit . . .’

Uhuru had a core of paid workers, the founder members and a host of volunteers who together operated as a collective. Skinner quotes one member who recalls the atmosphere as one where community action, the politics of food and a collective approach to management were simply assumed:

‘We were radically egalitarian – going for consensus at our meetings – an equal voice for everyone. People joined the collective easily – I don’t recall what membership rules we had. The group grew. Soon there were eleven people living above the store. Some were very much into the wholefoods, vegetarian cooking and holistic health. . . Soon meat was banished from the kitchen upstairs and it was never even contemplated for the café.’



Uhuru shop (left), and Uhuru Café, 1981.

One young volunteer, Hafiz Ladell who went on to found The Magic Café, was an undergraduate at Oxford University at the time and summarised the zeitgeist:

'... the revolution was very much about the sort of food you ate and the way you ate it. It didn't take me long to identify myself as a vegetarian: not only was it an act of solidarity with the wretched of the earth but it was a way of forcing a double-take in all sorts of social situations in which consensus participation was expected. Being vegetarian in those days required either an infinite tolerance of indifferent omelette or else demanded a bold exploration of the exciting possibilities of brown rice and soya beans, largely uncharted territory at the time . . . Just over Magdalen Bridge on the threshold of Alternative Oxford that was Cowley Road, Uhuru Café was a haven for like-minded souls. Barefoot cooking, customer washing up, "end of the world" stew, the bizarre rituals of bourgeois dining were turned upside down.'

MUESLI MOVEMENT

Another volunteer recalls an epic trip with her boyfriend. Just graduated from Cambridge, they toured England on a tandem in the summer of 1977, visiting communes and alternative initiatives, WWOOF-ing (Working Weekends on Organic Farms) up and down the land, ending up at Uhuru. Already its fame had spread. She was interested in co-ops and collectives, growing organic food and community action/alternative communities. It ticked all the boxes. They volunteered.

'It was a community and political information hub which sold wholefoods, at the front. The back was where the stuff was stored, bagged etc. There was a huge vat for mixing the muesli.

'It was all very exotic, very exciting and political. I barely knew what muesli was when I arrived. We were expected to take turns in the Café kitchen too. You would arrive in the morning and your job was to prep and cook for an unknown number of customers – soups, stews, flapjacks, crumbles – all cooked from scratch by people some of whom hardly knew how to cook, let alone for large numbers. We had our disasters. One day a huge box of plums arrived from a well-wisher in the Vale of Evesham. We decided to make jam. We poured the jam into giant glass sweet jars placed on the stone floor. Within 30 seconds of the jam

END OF THE WORLD STEW

The 'Uhuru Cooking Guide' from which this recipe is taken, may be only 40 years old, but the terms it uses feel, in some cases, more exotic today than those in many 16th century cookbooks. There is a section on the cooking of 'Red Wonder Beans', which research seems to suggest, must have been organic red kidney beans imported from Tanzania. This is an updated version which tries to stick to the spirit of the original recipe. The recipe is described as being 'for many people'; I estimate serves about 8.

350 g 'red wonder beans', aka, red kidney beans, organic or not, pre-soaked for 12 hours

3 large onions, chopped

500 g carrots, sliced • 250 g parsnips, diced

500 green cabbage, thinly sliced

3 large tomatoes, sliced, or one tin of chopped tomatoes

1 tbsp miso • 1 tsp salt • A few basil leaves

Mix all the ingredients together in a large saucepan and add 1½ litres of water. Bring to the boil, cover and simmer for one hour. Serve in bowls with tamari (Japanese non-wheat soy-like sauce), a jacket potato and butter.



filling the jars they cracked and hot jam and glass shards flowed all over the floor, under the doors, into the café and under the kitchen cupboards. It took weeks to clear up.

The collective soon realised that it wasn't just them who didn't know how to cook wholefoods. Not many of their customers did either, which restricted sales. That winter the collective sat down and wrote *The Uhuru Cooking Guide*.

In the spirit of the times the book has no 'author'. The introduction explains its purpose:

'...many people have asked how to cook the various grains, pulses, flours and other oddities sold in Uhuru. On the café side we try to present these foods in a simple way but it is not always possible for the cook of the day to explain how and why he or she has cooked such a meal. So eventually we have produced a short cooking guide that may answer some of the questions and will hopefully stimulate you to experiment with recipes of your own making.'

The book is organised around explaining how to cook basic whole foods, brown rice, lentils, soya beans, split peas or what they refer to as 'red wonder beans', with a couple of recipes for each; dishes with names like 'winter stew' or 'lentil pie'.

Prominent amongst the recipes, in the 'cereal flakes' section is the Uhuru muesli recipe. Muesli was the iconic food of this revolutionary and 'alternative' world.

Annette Mnxitama; Uhuru's longest serving member.



Such was the status of this new food in 'alternative' circles that the east Oxford/Cowley Road area soon acquired the partly affectionate, partly derisive nickname, 'the muesli belt'.

These were also the early days of Fair Trade, though the term hadn't been invented yet. Uhuru took the initiative and established 'Campaign Coffee', fair-trade instant coffee imported from co-operatives in Tanzania. In 1977 two and a half tonnes was imported for sale in the shop. A volunteer recalls the result:

'It was a fine dried powder in silver foil packages. Somewhere during transit many of the packages were damaged and moisture got in, turning them instantly into coffee 'bricks'. We couldn't sell them. All the time I was there we used to hack lumps off these unsaleable bricks in the back to make coffee for the volunteers. The taste was fairly terrible and it was a financial disaster, but it was a brave thing to do.'

The atmosphere was heady, even revolutionary. The collective members were heavily involved in a range of local initiatives including an adventure playground, welfare rights, housing action and a women's refuge. The café hosted the entire gamut of political campaigns and causes including abortion rights, anti-nuclear and peace groups, gay groups, anti-fascist groups, the Claimants Union, liberation and





Uhuru shop; mixing the muesli and playing loud reggae music.

human rights groups. Several city-wide projects had their inaugural meetings in Uhuru including the 'Free University of Cowley' in 1976. One worker during this period describes the mixture of revolutionary fervour and pragmatism:

'We were one of the first workers' collectives in this country; there were a few others . . . Suma . . . we bought our goods from them, which all came in sacks. . . we packed them in bags with political statements on them so we were linked with all the other collectives and then we wrote a book on running a collective ['Uhuru: A Working Alternative'] which was not a best seller but you know, we were pleased with it . . . [Uhuru] was very functional . . . we worked very well . . . and it was very exciting. For example although I worked in the café, when we were running short of bags of food in the shop I instigated reggae nights where we would all go and play loud reggae music and

¶ THE ORIGINAL UHURU MUESLI

Anyone connected with Cowley Road will at one time or another have heard the area being referred to as the 'muesli belt'. It is a reference both to its bohemian and counter-cultural origins, the presence of the whole foods available in the area long before they were anywhere else and its greenish-tinged contemporary image. Despite all this baggage, it is a great breakfast cereal and very versatile. It is also a great snack, not just at breakfast.

This recipe borrows from the original Uhuru recipe devised in the mid 1970s and is a more robust version than the glorified 'oats with a bit of fruit and a toasted nut'-type recipes often found in cook books these days. It harks back to the original version developed by Dr Bircher-Benner

To create the base, mix together:

200 g small oats

75 g jumbo oats

75 g wheat flakes

75 g barley flakes

75 g rye flakes

120 g mixed dried fruit (sultanas, currants, raisins and dates)

75 g chopped mixed nuts (almonds, walnuts and hazel nuts are good)

One handful of muesli is enough for a single helping. Soaking overnight in apple juice or milk improves the muesli. Add whatever fresh or cooked seasonal fruit is available e.g. apple, banana, pear, plum, rhubarb or soft fruit like raspberries or loganberries.

Serve with milk, yoghurt and a little honey to taste.

pack until about one in the morning and have the greatest time. I can declare it now because it's so many years later, I think health and safety was different then. I think it was at one of those sessions that my son's hamster disappeared!

Such episodes and issues like being unable to shut the oven door without placing a fire extinguisher against it, meant that even in this freewheeling atmosphere, health and safety loomed large. The café was forced to shut for a year in 1979-80 while 'the community' rebuilt the kitchen and installed a second toilet. By the time the café was ready to reopen, the Uhuru Collective had undergone a transformation. A second phase had begun.

Hafiz, who started to volunteer as a cook in the Uhuru Café when it reopened in 1980 after the refit, takes up the story:

'Barefoot hippy was out, radical feminism had taken over. In accordance with these shifting polarities, graffiti on nearby walls angrily proclaimed "Burn men!". I was having great fun doing volunteer cooking shifts, enjoying the freedom of the café kitchen experimenting with different combinations of ingredients. But it was all on sufferance. Easy-going anarchy was a thing of the past.'

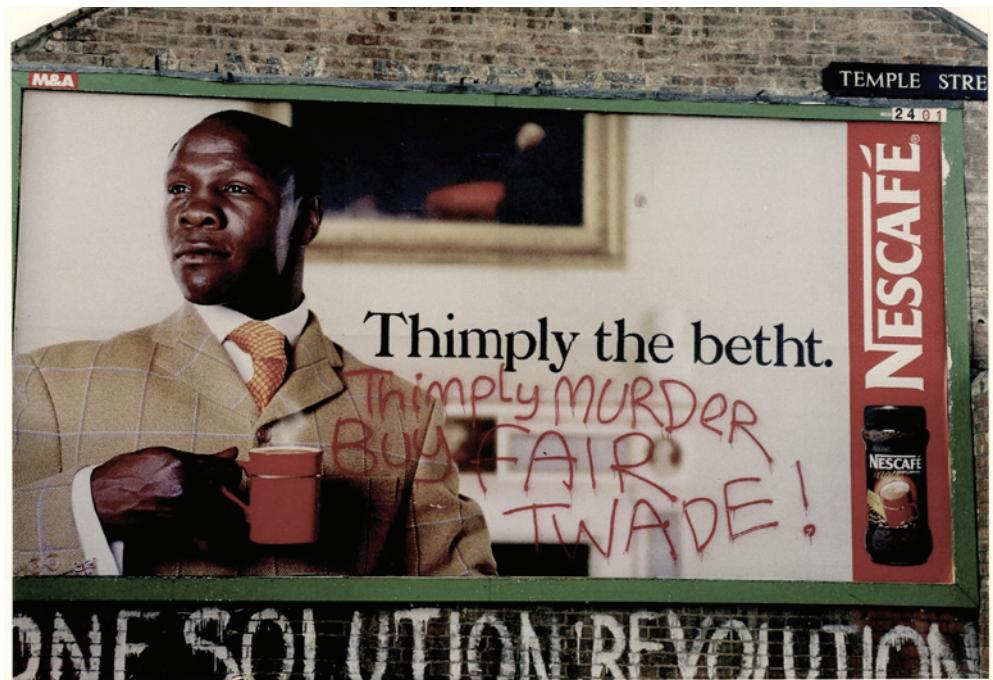
Fairtrade vs. Nescafé on Cowley Road.

One day I came in to discover that the new segregated toilet bore a new sign "Men and other worldwide diseases". This didn't feel at all right to me. Next day I came in equipped with paint and brush and painted the offending words out. It was, as I was well aware at the time, a provocative but necessary action. The response from the Collective was furious and unrestrained . . . I became identified as the arch-patriarch, banned from Uhuru for ever.'

The new collective started by banning men from the kitchen and then extended this, first to the café and then for a few months, until the rather obvious contradictions of forcing women to do all the shopping were pointed out to them, to the shop.

Hafiz recalls what happened next,

'Unsurprisingly having alienated most of its customer base, Uhuru's café very rapidly went under... the collective continued to run the shop, but all the care and hard work that had gone into the kitchen refit seemed to have been in vain. A plan was hatched to form a new collective of women and men working together under the name "Wholemeal" who would lease the kitchen and café



from Uhuru. I allowed myself to be persuaded to do some cooking shifts on their behalf. I really loved the idea of a community café. Once again the response was rapid and merciless. An ultimatum was set, either "Wholemeal" cease all connection with me or the lease would be withdrawn. "Wholemeal" refused to be dictated to and the game was indeed over.

'Wholemeal' never saw the light of day and the café shut for ever. Eventually the café space was taken over by Oxford City Council as a Women's Centre in 1986. It didn't thrive, as too many women felt intimidated by its recent past history. The Council had a wasting asset on its hands and agreed to a property swap, whereby the collective which owned the café building which they didn't use, exchanged it for the shop building which they used but rented from the City Council. The Council then restored and converted the former café building into accommodation for single people.

By this time the political context had changed dramatically, with the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979, the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp of the early 1980s and the Miners' Strike and its defeat in 1984-85. The nature of Cowley Road and the wholefood revolution set in train by Uhuru and others was shifting and Uhuru's third phase began. Personal politics was becoming more important; at the same time food awareness and the politics of food were becoming more widespread. Other outlets responded to the demand that this generated. A collective member recalls,

'I remember the day when someone came in and announced that Tesco were stocking lentils. Before that we were the only place in town that stocked wholefoods.'

Others were blunter: 'When Tesco started selling muesli, the game was up for whole food shops.' Uhuru was facing serious competition and not just from Tesco. Asian shops which first appeared on Cowley Road in 1968 also sold lentils, chickpeas, sesame seeds, various beans and flours and other whole foods – and they sold them in bulk and cheaply. The wholefood revolution had gone global.

Uhuru itself still survives as a family-run business over 40 years after it first opened, but now describes itself as a deli-style 'organic health food shop, specialising in organic and fairtrade products' with a wholefood section.

■ FAIRTRADE CHOCOLATE TRUFFLES

My daughter Alice, taught me this recipe. This will make about 40–50 truffles.

250 ml double cream

300 g Fairtrade bitter chocolate, finely chopped

For the coating:

250 g Fairtrade bitter chocolate, broken

125 g Fairtrade cocoa powder, sifted

You will need several baking trays lined with non-stick parchment paper and optionally, a pastry bag fitted with a $\frac{1}{2}$ inch plain tip. Put the cream into a saucepan and gently heat until boiling. Remove from the heat and let cool for several minutes. Put the chopped chocolate into a heatproof bowl and pour over the hot cream. Set aside for several minutes. Then stir gently until just smooth. Let cool and do not over mix at this stage. When the mixture is cool but not set, beat vigorously with a wooden spoon until thick and much lighter in colour and texture. Using a teaspoon and your hands roll the mixture into balls and place on the baking trays, or spoon the mixture into the pastry bag and pipe the balls onto the trays. Chill until very firm. Put the broken chocolate into a dry heatproof bowl and over a saucepan of steaming, not boiling water, making sure that the water doesn't touch the base of the bowl, or start to boil. Once the chocolate is melted remove the bowl from the heat. Take the chilled balls and, using a couple of forks to balance them on, briefly dip each into the chocolate until coated. Return the coated truffles to the lined trays and leave until the coating is almost set. Roll the truffles in the cocoa powder. Place in the fridge until ready to serve.

