

THE COWLEY ROAD COOKBOOK

Culinary tales and recipes from
Oxford's most eclectic street

MARTIN STOTT

AN OXFORDFOLIO PUBLICATION FOR SIGNAL BOOKS





An Oxfordfolio publication for
www.oxfordfolio.co.uk

Signal Books
www.signalbooks.co.uk



Signal Books Limited
36 Minster Road
Oxford OX4 1LY

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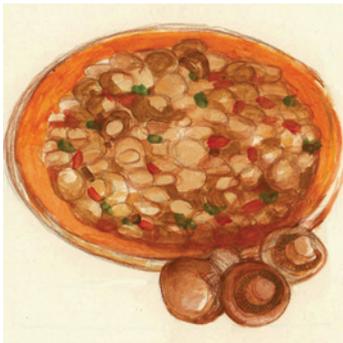
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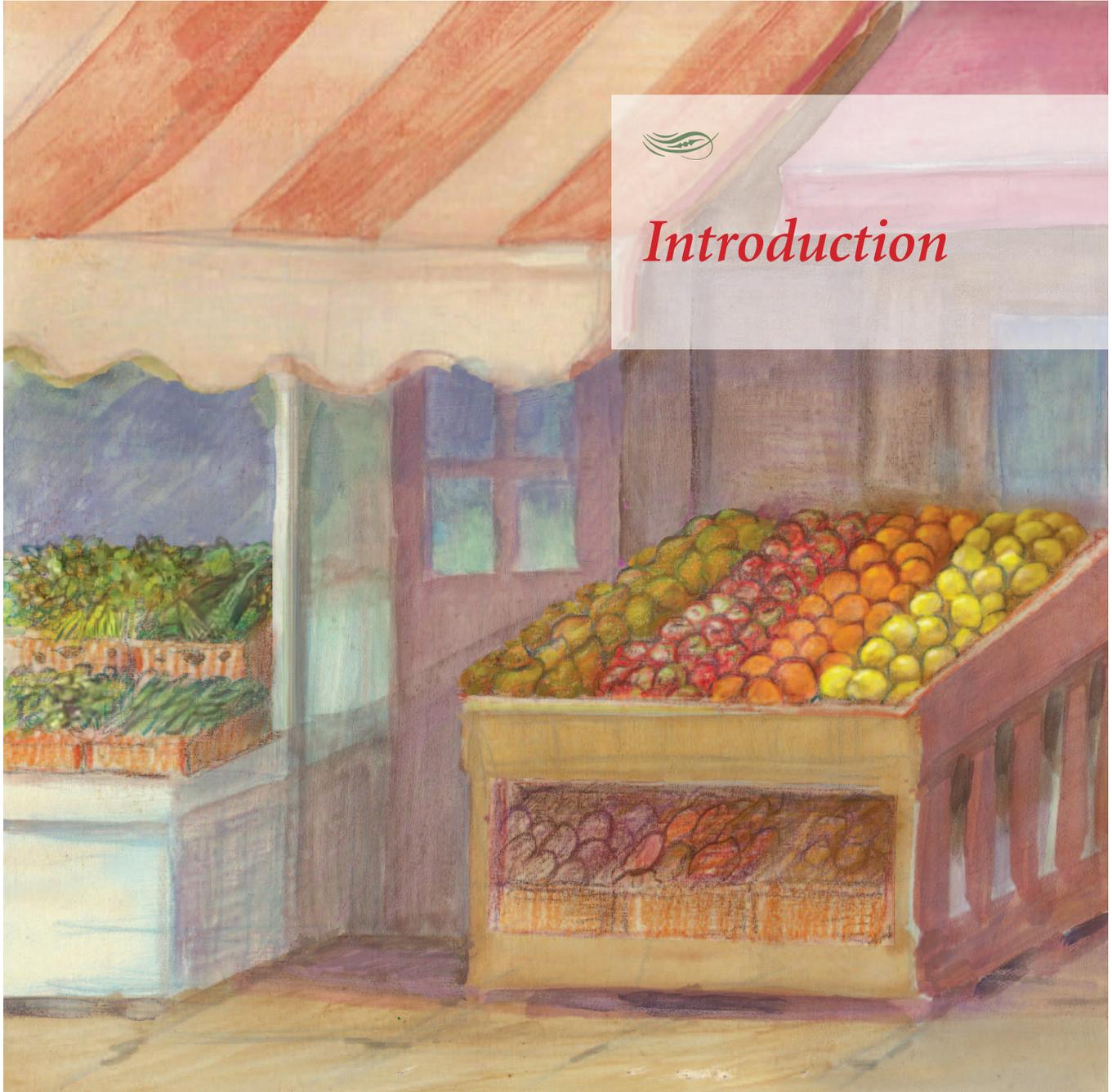
ISBN: 978-1-909930-32-2
Printed by Berforts/Information Press, Oxford



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Introduction

Cowley Road is a place, but also a state of mind. On a map of Oxford it appears simply as the B480. A visitor approaching the city along it from the south east will pass by the BMW car plant, an unfamiliar sight to many whose image of Oxford is more 'dreaming spires' than screaming tyres. The ever-popular 'Inspector Morse' TV series used Cowley Road as a backdrop or major location for many episodes; a useful contrast to the cloistered colleges of the city.

Cowley Road is a complex combination of physical form and the imprint left by various overlapping and intermingling waves of migration: pilgrims, traders, scholars, refugees, immigrants, residents and visitors upon a street that has become over time, one of the most vibrant, eclectic and ethnically diverse in England. This book both charts and celebrates this unique street's story.

It is both a culinary book and a social and cultural history of the street and surrounding area stretching over almost 900 years. As such it is about food and its place in the lives of local people through the ages. In exploring that history it also becomes a celebration of solidarity, mutuality, hospitality, neighbourliness, social and racial integration and sheer hard work.

Cowley Road has developed a distinctive food history and culture and there is much to be proud of. However, it is not some Mediterranean island, French province or Italian region, with their distinctive foods and recipes honed over centuries to reflect the best of local produce. But the 'terroir' that those localities celebrate, that 'sense of place', embodied in certain characteristic qualities, has its urban equivalent in the food culture of Cowley Road; distinctive, constantly changing, often memorable, with a desire to experiment, it is a reflection of the locality and its exuberance.

Cowley Road has evolved gradually into a place to find interesting food over at least the past 70 years. But it is not a sophisticated 'foodie heaven'. How could it be when the street is lined with pubs, bars and takeaways, primarily aimed at a student/low income clientele? Its attraction is its chaotic nature, its constant change and its diversity. In this context, food outlets – cafés, takeaways, shops, restaurants, wholesalers and all kinds of low cost pop-up opportunities including vans



An area that is well-supplied with charity shops, car washes...

selling everything from fruit and veg to specialist cakes and breads, can thrive – quirky, cheap-jack, exotic, innovative and occasionally heavenly. But they jostle for space in an area that is also well-supplied with pubs, bike shops, barbers, 'head shops', tattoo parlours, sex shops, bookies, pawn brokers, charity shops, car washes and the other essentials of daily life.

But they benefit too from being cheek by jowl with the practically unique. Where else would you find a robe-maker, customers ranging from Bishops to Vice-Chancellors, next to a fried chicken takeaway?

Cowley Road has its darker side too, with boarded up premises and a few, usually temporary, outlets with rather indeterminate purposes, which are often no more than fronts for drug dealing, money laundering, prostitution or worse, as the national publicity around the 'Operation Bullfinch' convictions in 2013 and the follow up Serious Case Review in 2015, demonstrated.

There are a lot of interesting meals to be had on and around Cowley Road in a range of cafés, restaurants, takeaways, gastropubs, coffee shops and the recent phenomenon of dessert

parlours, that would be the envy of any other city in England. But this is not a restaurant guide. Plenty of other people do that already and do it well. However food shops are too often seen as 'part of the furniture' and are overlooked.

Instead this book reflects the locality and my experiences of living on and around Cowley Road for over 35 years as a participant in the processes of its evolution, variously as parent, shopper, enthusiastic grower, cook, local councillor, campaigner and community activist.

In interviewing people involved in shops, restaurants, cafés and allotment growing in east Oxford, I have been struck by a couple of shared perspectives. One is pride in what has been created. Everyone recognises that the chaotic exuberance of Cowley Road contributes enormously to Oxford as a whole and to an atmosphere that benefits everybody: shoppers, visitors and entrepreneurs alike. The other is a concern that a tipping point has been reached and that this diversity is genuinely under threat. Even ten years

Children getting a hot meal during World War Two (below) in the Municipal Restaurant in St. Clements.



ago the idea that Cowley Road might go the way of any other English city street and become another 'clone town' product was seen as laughable; wrong demographic (too poor), wrong land holdings (properties too small to be worth the trouble), wrong part of town. At the start of the century there was one big chain supermarket on the street, Tesco, which has been a fixture on Cowley Road since 1962. Now there are three of the big multiples, and well over a dozen chain coffee shops, restaurants and takeaways. While writing this book one of the mainstays of Cowley Road since the 1950s, 'The Excelsior' café closed as a direct result of these trends. Out of this come several themes that run through the book.

Oxford's Cowley Road is nothing if not a celebration of multiculturalism through a sharing of food culture, when the very idea of integration and the mutual respect and celebration of difference seem to be under attack. The mutuality and diversity of feasting and celebration such as the annual Cowley Road Carnival is a regular, noisy, exuberant and joyful re-statement of what Cowley Road is all about. Eid, Diwali, Christmas and Hanukkah are all marked in ways that people can participate in and enjoy.

Cowley Road is also all about hospitality and mutuality, both in times of hardship and of plenty – from the lepers and pilgrims of 13th-century Bartlemas through to the still continuing presence of religious and monastic orders in the locality, via the Municipal Restaurant on St Clements during the rationing of the Second World War and after. It only closed in 1974. That tradition has continued in cafés like the Excelsior and more recently, Refresh.

Another important theme is that of self-reliance and sharing in the produce and skills to be found on community gardens and allotments – from 'Dig for Victory' to the present day. Sharing food, at least partly outside the money economy through initiatives like community kitchen project 'DinnerTime', and 'Abundance' who collect and distribute surplus fruit from orchards, back gardens and roadside trees, has strong links in the neighbourhood.

I explore all of these themes in this book and in doing so hope to make a small contribution to Cowley Road's rich history.



The noisy, exuberant and joyful Cowley Road Carnival.



ABOUT THE RECIPES

The recipes in this book, apart from some of the earlier, historical ones, are drawn from ingredients readily obtainable from shops on or around Cowley Road. An exception to this is fish. There is good fish to be found on Cowley Road but it is mostly dried or frozen. This is perhaps a reflection of the ‘localness’ of the food on the street. After all Oxford is about as far away as you can get from the sea in England. The recipes have also come out of cooking for a family, learning as I go along, making mistakes, using the materials at hand and trying not to be too extravagant. Both learning how to shop on Cowley Road and growing my own food has been crucial to that. Allotments, orchards and community gardens in east Oxford also provide a surprisingly large amount of the food to be found locally, including a substantial quantity in some of the restaurants.

As the book is at least in part a social and cultural history of Cowley Road through food, about a quarter of the recipes are historical in some sense or other. These are dotted around the earlier chapters at least roughly reflecting their social and historical context. Some of them are for meals that we wouldn’t eat much now, like pottage, but they were popular at the time with people who lived locally then and are worth a try now. To make them more readily useable as recipes I have updated them where I can, while retaining their original spirit. Chapter 5 is dedicated to contemporary recipes and the selection is based on local and personal choices.

As with many people, I like reading cookbooks, have collected favourite recipes over the years and have experimented as I have successfully grown something new or something has taken my fancy in one of the many fascinating shops. My inspiration has come in significant degree from cooks who I consider to be from the saner and more down-to-earth end of cookery writing, like Felicity Cloake, Sam and Sam Clark, Rose Elliot, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Claudia Roden, Jack Monroe, Rose Gray, Ruth Rodgers, Antonio Carluccio and Yotam Ottolenghi, along with intrepid foragers Richard Mabey and John Lewis Stempel. I acknowledge a debt to them all.