

Memorable Scientific Dinners I have Eaten

Physicists don't get paid very much but we do get to travel, and one of the greatest pleasures of travel, in my opinion, is that occasionally you get to eat good food in good company. Here are 10 of my own favourites.

Paris

I've had quite a few meals in Paris, as you would assume, but the one I remember most was actually a lunch. My friend and collaborator Coryn Hague provided this when I was a very young postdoc at Bristol visiting to work with Coryn on his soft X-ray emission experiments on disordered alloys in the Université Pierre et Marie Curie. After a morning's work in Coryn's lab, we went to what was more or less a works canteen and had pot au feu, the broth for consommé, followed by the beef and vegetables - fantastic! So simple, so tasty. I've tried to make it many times myself, usually good enough but never quite reaching the heights of that simple Paris lunch.

Gent

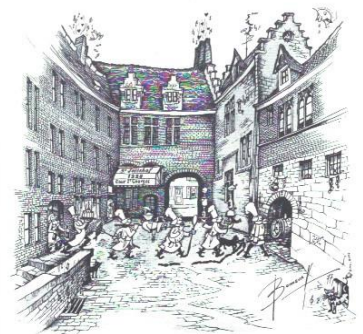
NATO Summer Schools are always fun. In 1978, there was a good one in Gent (aka Ghent) in the Flemish part of Belgium, which was also the home town of Walter Temmerman. The photo shows the attendees, including Walter and John Pendry, who was one of the lecturers.



Figure 1: Participants at the 1978 Nato Summer School in Gent

Thanks to Walter, who was interested in such things, we had many good meals during that fortnight. He took us to a restaurant in the country near Gent which specialised in eels; excellent. He also drove us just over the border into the Netherlands to what was basically a transport cafe which was serving the first mussels of the season; also excellent. This may have been the only time that Walter gave any respect to Dutch food.

The Summer School Dinner on the last night of the school was something special. It was held in a fancy restaurant, St Jorishof, in a very old building in Gent, and it too was excellent. I kept the menu - see below. The Belgians understand the importance of good food to science.



Hotel
S^t Jorishof
Cour S^t Georges
Gent

International Advanced Study Institute
"Electrons in Disordered Metals and
at Metallic Surfaces"

August 27 - September 9, 1978

Château Tiregand "Bergerac"

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Côtes du Rhône

• •

Gent, 8 september 1978

M E N U

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Crème St Germain aux croûtons

• • • •

Truite fumée Royale Baudouin

• • • •

Filet de Charolais Grand Veneur

Pomme Trianon

Pommes croquettes

• • • •

Chipolata Arlequin

• • • •

C O N A

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Bologna

In 1988 there was a surface science conference in Bologna. It was the year of the nine hundredth anniversary of the founding of the University of Bologna, often said to be the world's oldest. I was giving a talk, but I can't remember the subject. What I do remember is the conference dinner. They organised it in the cloisters of an old nunnery, the tables looking on to the beautiful garden which the cloisters surrounded, and a group of musicians playing seventeenth century music. We had a nice meal, of course - it was Bologna. But the special thing was the atmosphere - the beautiful music as the sun went down, birds (swallows?) flitting about in the garden - magical.

Taormina

I spent the second week of this same trip to Italy in Taormina, on the coast near Mount Etna in Sicily, at a workshop on electronic structure. On the first evening at our very nice hotel we had a welcome reception by the pool, featuring a tasty seafood salad. That night I developed the worst case of food poisoning I ever had. I spent that night in the bathroom wishing for death. A bus trip up Etna was scheduled for the next day, but I and a few others were in no fit state to go anywhere. We were the lucky ones. Several people were as near the summit of Etna as you can get when the symptoms hit them. Nightmare. A few days later, when everyone was better, I was in my hotel room after an interesting day's physics. It was a lovely evening. I was on the balcony with, I think, a glass of wine. Music was gently playing in the outside bar below as the sea lapped the beach, I was looking along the bay towards the next village a few miles away, where, suddenly the most spectacular firework display over the sea suddenly began in the distance. A perfect Mediterranean night.

Kobe

Kobe beef - fantastic! Another conference, another talk, this time on x-ray absorption, in Kobe, Japan. The conference was the usual thing, decent enough and with a good day trip to Himeji Castle (very like the

castle in the movie “Kagemusha” - great film¹). But the meal in question was in my hotel and I ate it alone. I just fancied a good meal in peace, so I went to a restaurant in the hotel for convenience. I didn’t understand much of the menu but I’d heard of Kobe beef and so chose a dish featuring that. What came was plate of cubes of raw beef together with a large stone which had been heated to a high temperature. The waiter managed to convey to me that I was supposed to place a cube of meat on the stone to cook it. And I must say, that was easily the BEST STEAK I HAVE EVER HAD. Unbelievable. About a year later, there was a very bad earthquake in Kobe, but I believe that hotel, which was a skyscraper near the Bullet Train station, survived.

Rome

Sometime in the 1990s Alistair Rendell and I visited IBM in Rome. I’m afraid I now have really no idea what



work we were doing with them, or who we met. But I do remember a dinner we all had in a little trattoria somewhere between the Piazza Navona and the Spanish Steps. At least I think that’s where it was - on a later trip to Rome I wandered around this area for hours and couldn’t find it. The restaurant was a completely unpretentious place, seemingly family-run, but with a wonderful array of simple and utterly delicious food in the best Italian tradition. Best antipasti ever! But then there are thousands of great places to eat in Rome, including this one in Trastevere where Walter Temmerman and I had a convivial evening, as you can see.

Figure 2: Walter and me (behind the camera) relaxing in Trastevere.

Kawasaki

Another trip to Japan, another earthquake - this time only a little one in the course of a meeting with the computer manufacturers Hitachi who were making some interesting parallel machines at the time. During their presentation everything in the room started to shake, not very violently but enough to make you take notice. Our hosts simply told us it was an earthquake and got on with their talk. Quite impressive, I thought. I was visiting Japan with Richard Kenway from Edinburgh as part of a tour of RIKEN and other Japanese supercomputer laboratories. Our interesting day with Hitachi finished with a splendid dinner in a nearby restaurant. There were about eight in our party and we all sat more or less on the floor around a kind of circular table that was sunk into the floor with a large bowl of gently boiling broth in the middle. In another form of cook-your-own-dinner (see Kobe above), we were given plates of vegetables, noodles and very thin slices of Kobe beef. You dipped these slices in the broth for about 5 seconds and that was it. Delicious. By the time everyone had finished, the central bowl contained a wonderful kind of Japanese consommé with which to end the meal. After these experiences in Kobe and Kawasaki, I’ve spent quite a lot of time trying to locate good Japanese restaurants in the UK, but haven’t really yet found anything to compare.

¹ Googling it, I find that Kagemusha was indeed filmed at Himeji Castle.

Tarrytown

Upstate New York is IBM country: Yorktown Heights, Hawthorne, Armonk, Poughkeepsie, Kingston and more. I was invited to the Thomas J Watson Centre to give a talk at a meeting about parallel computing in science, I think. As so often, I remember the dinner more than the meeting, which, let's face it, was essentially an IBM sales event. But IBM is a company with many interesting people, and I found the meeting useful. The dinner in question was in Tarrytown, on the Hudson river in a picturesque spot right next to Sleepy Hollow. The restaurant was run by the CIA, the Culinary Institutes of America, a kind of super-catering college. Actually, I may be conflating this with another IBM dinner on another occasion, but let's not worry about that. The CIA restaurant was essentially a showcase for the students and it was very good. The IBMer sitting next to me was Art Williams, of Janak-Moruzzi-Williams fame. I had a very pleasant evening talking to him about mutual acquaintances in solid state physics. There was entertainment too, a bunch of magicians who went around from table to table doing their tricks before our eyes. None of us brainboxes could figure out how any of it worked. Towards the end of the meal, our IBM hosts presented us guests with a very nice little IBM laptop, which I actually used for a few years, thus saving the British taxpayer a bit of money. I said to Art that I thought this was pretty generous in my case: "I'm not even a customer yet". "Really?" he said, "have two".

Lausanne

CECAM, more precisely the CECAM Council, has always been an excellent source of good dinners. When we joined CECAM it was hosted in Lyon by the Ecole Normale Supérieure; plenty of good restaurants there. Lausanne, the present location, is not quite such a centre of gastronomy, but Council dinners there have been pretty good nevertheless. The standout occasion for me was the celebration of CECAM's 40th anniversary conference. The conference dinner was a very splendid affair at the Beau Rivage Palace hotel, a lovely place on the shores of Lake Geneva. This a very swanky place which today hosts a 2 Michelin star restaurant. The dinner featured an excellent steak in the French style - not quite up to Kobe standards, but not far away. Last year, we celebrated CECAM's 50th anniversary. This time the conference dinner was held in the Olympic Museum, a fascinating venue actually very close to the Beau Rivage, on a beautiful Lausanne evening. Food and wine pretty good, with a hilarious after-dinner comedy double-act by the Director and Deputy Director, Ignacio Pagonabarraga and Sara Bonella. A great evening.



Figure 3: Mike Seaton, Ilian Todorov, Dominic Tildesley (former Director of CECAM), me and Jean-Paul Ryckaert from Brussels, in the Olympic Museum

Cambridge (and Oxford)

Although I'm an Oxford graduate, my only High Table dinners have been in Cambridge. Balazs Gyorffy and I went to the Physical Chemistry Lab to talk about photoemission and alloys, and in the evening we had dinner in King's College. I can't remember much about the food - I'm sure it good. The wine, on the other hand, was very good. Bordeaux or Claret, as the English call it. I can't find any note of the occasion so I can't say which Chateau it was; not Lafite, Latour, Margaux, Haut Brion, or Mouton-Rothschild (I would have remembered that) but quite possibly a deuxième cru. The drinking continued after dinner as the fellows and guests retired to their private "wine room", in which a silver train whose carriages contained

bottles of port etc travelled around the very large oval table on silver rails. I'm not making this up, and, as a matter of fact, it was really enjoyable. After that, we moved to our host's rooms for more wine. So that was good.

Another time, Mike Payne invited me to the annual Framingham Feast at Pembroke College, where he is a fellow. This was a purely social event, even though we talked quite a bit of physics, and it was a pleasure to meet many of the other fellows, all of whom were very good hosts. I even ran into John Kingman, the mathematician who was the Chairman of the old SERC for a while and therefore my ex-boss. The meal was very good and the wine too, and plentiful, as you would assume.

This reminds me that the nearest I got to an Oxford High Table was actually the Royal Institution in London, just off Piccadilly, when Richard Catlow, then a professor at the RI, invited me to an evening "discourse" he was giving, followed by dinner in the apartments of the Director of the RI. Richard was an Oxford graduate too, as was the Director at the time, Susan Greenfield who was also professor of neuro-something at Oxford. Even better, her husband (also at the time) was Peter Atkins, who was my tutor at Oxford and a very inspirational one too. He acted as host while Susan was being Director. The Chairperson, if that's the right term, of the RI was Mary Archer, the wife of Tory novelist (novelist?) Jeffery Archer. Mary Archer had been a postdoc in the Physical Chemistry Laboratory in Oxford and even supervised some undergraduate lab practicals I had to do. Other guests included Peter Day, who taught me inorganic chemistry at Oxford, and his wife. An awful lot of Oxford in Mayfair that night, then, and a very pleasant evening, especially seeing Peter Atkins and Day again.