

Times 2 - features

March 04, 2005

Cover story

Guess who's coming to dinner? Hezbollah

Phil Rees

Dining with the world's most dangerous terrorists was often the first step to interviewing them. The author found the food and the company, er, mixed

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ago, I was visiting Ireland on the day that Lord Mountbatten of Burma and his 14-year-old grandson were blown up on their boat while on holiday. Shortly afterwards, 18 British soldiers were killed during an ambush. On that August evening, I went to a pub in a small town on the Northern Ireland border. It was a shocking and bewildering experience. I watched men and women, young and old, and children, sing and drink to the success of the IRA. My only knowledge of the IRA was from descriptions in British newspapers. The IRA were terrorists, evil and brutal men who should be despised. I wondered how these friendly and normal-looking people could react in celebration to such atrocity.

Since that night I have devoted my career to meeting men and women labelled terrorists, and exploring what that word means. For the past 18 years I have covered Asia and the Middle East for the BBC, and in more than 30 documentaries I've tried to explore why men turn to violence. Gaining access has sometimes been almost impossible, and extremely dangerous — I remain the only Western journalist to have travelled and filmed with Algeria's Islamic militants (the 1994 film *Algeria's Hidden War* was the result).

An important step has often been to dine with the "terrorists". It is like an initiation ceremony; militants often eyed me up as I ate, peering to see if I accepted their food. If so, a bond was created and a basic level of humanity understood. I may not agree with their actions but I had entered their world enough at least to comprehend the motives for their brutality.

Incidentally, I have met several "terrorists" convicted of membership of the IRA, as well as other functionaries. On each occasion, dinner was liquid so the IRA does not qualify.

COUSCOUS, WITH ISLAMIC GUERRILLAS, ALGERIA, SEPTEMBER 1994:

SHORTLY before our meal, Oussama, the commander of a unit of Islamic guerrillas, had introduced himself and half a dozen of his armed men. "Hello, we are terrorists," he announced before breaking out in giggles. I did not appreciate his humour. I had arrived for a rendezvous with Algeria's Islamic guerrillas. Their bloodlust had dominated news from the North African nation; 61 foreigners had been slain during the previous year. Their favoured method of killing was colourfully described as *l'engorgement spectaculaire* — a theatrical slitting of the throat, often followed by beheading. Oussama did not look like a killer; he had an uncanny resemblance to Peter Sellers. I also discovered something of the Inspector Clouseau in him; he was accident prone as well as a fussy spot, especially regarding food.

Our perilous journey from Algiers into areas controlled by the guerrillas had developed a knot in my stomach and food was not on my mind. Soon, however, my

fears melted in the sunshine as we toured "liberated" areas in the Atlas Mountains, including a field hospital and a command centre. I met and exchanged the greeting "Peace be upon you" with about 50 guerrillas. Each bearded warrior then kissed me on both cheeks.

The guerrillas were well fed and life seemed bizarrely easygoing. I asked Oussama whether he was concerned that government forces might attack. He scoffed and told me to relax. After spending the morning touring in the Toyota Land Cruiser that Oussama's men had stolen from the police during an ambush, the commander of this unit of about 100 guerrillas stopped outside a large, mud-built house and announced with a smile: "Lunch." He took me into a room without furniture. A plastic mat was rolled down the centre and about 20 men gathered around its edge.

I dined with members of both guerrilla groups, the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) and the more radical GIA, and their food tops my list of "terrorist" gastronomy. Perhaps it was a legacy of French colonial rule. It may also be the pride that Algerians have in their national dish, couscous. It was called *ta'am*, a term that literally means "food", underscoring its central role in Algerian culture.

The meal began with a snack of flat bread, with yoghurt and honey. Then came the couscous: steamed semolina flavoured with cinnamon and plenty of butter. It came with lamb stew including carrots, tomatoes and chickpeas, spiced with coriander. It was a freshly cooked, homemade delight. Oussama was proud of the guerrillas' couscous; he boasted that their variety was the finest in Algeria. The semolina needed to be of perfect texture, he said, fine and moist enough to stick to the fork but dry enough to separate on the plate. "Bon appétit!" he declared as we debated, among other subjects, the merits of slitting the throats of foreigners.

During our meal, I witnessed the personal side of men described in official news reports as mindless killers. The label of "terrorist" is used to demonise political foes. I discovered, while chatting about family and football, that Oussama and his men may have been ruthless but they had taken up arms for understandable reasons and not a desire to slit the throats of the innocent. Oussama had been the mayor of a town near Blida, south of Algiers, a region known as the "Triangle of Death". Then the army cancelled elections that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was poised to win, his cousin had been killed and the security services came looking for him. "I had no choice but to pick this up." He held up his AK47.

We drank mint tea and, of course, there was no wine. The AIS had burnt hundreds of acres of vineyards to stop production of the Algerian red wine, Mascara. With Islamist militants, dinner is dry and a men-only affair. The couscous had been made by female cooks whom I was not allowed to see; I caught only a glimpse of their black-gloved hands passing plates from the women's quarters. It was only after a day with the rebels that I realised that I had not seen a woman. I soon discovered that the best "terrorist" cuisine is cooked by women — Islamist guerrillas were hopeless in front of the stove.

CHICKEN AND SAND, WITH THE AFGHAN MUJAHIDIN, JULY 1990:

THE Afghan Mujahidin are a case in point; their burka-clad females are sequestered and remain nowhere near the battlefield. The fighters considered food (as well as toilets) simply functions that all too often go together in between prayers and fighting.

I was with one unit during the attack on Jalalabad and enjoyed a lunch that a colleague later referred to as a "dust feast". A few young boys brought water in a thermos to wash our hands. One fighter created a dining area by laying out his green *pattu*, a woollen cloth that Afghans wrap themselves in to keep warm. Another pulled out a Koran from a knapsack. He began reciting: "In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent . . ."

We had no cutlery or napkins. Lunch was chicken and rice and a gentle breeze had carried dust and sand over the drumsticks and other chicken parts. A large bowl of rice was placed in the middle of the *pattu* and everyone made little balls with their hands before scooping it into their mouths. The men had begun to enjoy our company and when they saw that we were hungry, they started throwing chicken legs at us, unconcerned that most fell on the ground. The dusty soil provided a coating rather like breadcrumbs at a fast-food restaurant.

The group that nurtured Osama bin Laden's love for Afghanistan's mountains receives the wooden spoon in my list of "terrorist" cuisine. A dozen years later I was with the Northern Alliance, a rebranded military partnership comprising leftovers from the old Muj. I discovered that these bearded men, stuck in the trenches for decades, had learnt nothing about food. My Afghan assistant referred to one meal as "maybe-sheep-who-knows?", a dark concoction that boiled for hours over an open fire. Naturally, there is no wine but ganja is usually available on request after dinner.

The tasteless food produced by the Mujahidin as well as their incompetence and lack of worldliness served to mislead journalists, including myself. We treated the Muj as bizarre and quaint. We failed to appreciate what was happening: the revival of jihad, an idea that had lain dormant for hundreds of years.

SQUID IN ITS OWN BLACK INK, WITH BATASUNA, THE POLITICAL ARM OF ETA, NOVEMBER 1990:

WHEN I dined with men from Batasuna, the political arm of the Basque separatist movement Eta, they put me through a ritual to see if I could become an "honorary Basque". It involved eating meat with oozing blood and squid cooked in its own black ink. We drank blancos, a white wine, before the meal, and afterwards slugged back copious quantities of Patxaran, a sweet, hangover-inducing liqueur made of blackthorn berries and anisette. I was told that journalists who don't drink or favour *nouvelle cuisine* are given a frosty hearing. Batasuna was listed as a terrorist organisation by the US in 2003, when Spain joined the coalition of those willing to invade Iraq. The Basques love food almost as much as independence and discussions about their history and cuisine can run into the early hours. Don't make my mistake: when invited to dinner with Eta, it's better not to drive.

MEZZE, WITH HEZBOLLAH, FEBRUARY 1993:

THERE have been occasions when I was gasping for a beer. During a meal with Hezbollah "terrorists" in Lebanon, a mullah spent nearly an hour lecturing me on Britain's colonial misdeeds in the Middle East. The table was less than 2ft off the ground and about a dozen fighters were kneeling on the floor; I cannot kneel for long and had to sit cross-legged. A plastic cloth had been placed over the table and men with beards brought in a spread of mezze, including tahina, a sesame dip, and baba ghanouj, an aubergine paste flavoured with lemon and parsley. It was eaten with

thin, flat bread that had burnt in places. While the mezze was appetising, there was little bonhomie. The guerrillas stared as I scooped each mouthful of mezze with my bread. The mullah repeatedly used the Arabic word *Inglizi* to describe me and after a while I interrupted his monologue by declaring that I am Welsh. In a playful manner, I said that Wales had been colonised by the English for nearly 500 years, much longer than the Israelis or anyone else had occupied Arab lands. The mullah fell silent before asking: "Do you have a Resistance?" I replied that some Welsh nationalists had burnt holiday homes owned by English families. The mullah seemed pleased but hinted that that was not enough. He suddenly asked: "Do you need any military assistance?"

Once the group had warmed to me, believing that I belonged to an "oppressed" nation, the main course arrived; greasy mutton kebabs. But I was full. I had enjoyed the mezze but they insisted on piling the kebabs onto my plate. I smiled and ate far too much out of politeness.

NASI GORENG, WITH JEMAAH ISLAMIGAH ON JAVA, INDONESIA, DECEMBER 2002:

I TENDED to find the food better with Asian "terrorist" groups. The Jemaah Islamigah is an umbrella organisation of Islamists in South-East Asia, which was blamed for the Bali bombings. I enjoyed an excellent laksa, made from the Chinese-Malay flavours of Straits cookery, with followers of Abu Bakar Bashir, the pro-bin Laden theologian jailed today for 30 months whom America believes sanctioned attacks that claimed over 200 lives in October 2002. I also had the Indonesian staple, nasi goreng, as well as a wonderful spicy beef curry with carrots. It was always reliable cooking. On another occasion, a militant cleric, Habib Rizieq, provided fried banana in chocolate and avocado sauce, which was irresistible. Rizieq was under house arrest at the time; he fawned that his wife had gone shopping "especially for me" to buy ingredients. A huge poster of bin Laden overlooked the dining table.

COCONUT CURRY, WITH BEEF AND RICE, WITH THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMED FORCES OF COLOMBIA, DECEMBER 1998:

THE Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc) are inspired by Che Guevara and are listed as a terrorist group by the US and Europe. The image of a lean, wiry Che, with only dried fish in his knapsack, contrasted sharply with the ambling, middle-aged leadership of the Farc today. I enjoyed a dinner of soup followed by beef with rice, and an earthy vegetable resembling okra, with Raul Reyes, one of the movement's commanders. He had a portly manner and his military fatigues were not the ideal outfit to hide his paunch. The meat was so-so on a Che-style portable grill but the spicy banana soup was a delight, and Reyes's desire to swill it down with Cuban rum, a habit developed after long-standing links with Fidel Castro, made it an enjoyable dinner.

One third of the Farc's guerrillas are female. Che wrote that women can fight alongside men but he envisaged women having a different role: "The woman as cook can greatly improve the diet," he enthused. Two men cooked our meal. It enabled female guerrillas to spend time before dinner washing their hair in a stream and painting their nails.

CHEESE AND MEAT, WITH THE KOSOVO LIBERATION ARMY, MARCH 1997:

FEMALE cooks didn't always provide a hearty meal. In the Drenica hills, where the Kosovan rebellion against Serbian rule took root, dining was a chore. The Americans had called the Kosovo Liberation Army a "terrorist" organisation in 1998 but when they wanted its help a year later, they trained the men and described them as "freedom fighters".

Poor hygiene and lack of cutlery didn't help the overall impression of Kosovan food. Subtle flavours were ignored and huge doses of salt were poured on to food. The diet was cheese and meat as a starter and then, as the main course, meat and cheese. Maybe I didn't know the word for vegetables in Albanian but I wasn't sure they had one. Fat floated on the plates, which was often licked up by the fighters, like a dog cleaning his bowl. There was no dining table and nowhere to wash before dinner.

One of the benefits of dining with terrorists is that food brings everyone back to a basic truth: all sides locked in a violent conflict, however inhuman or mindless the "terrorists" are described, share intrinsic needs and emotions. If they can sit at the same table, they have taken the first step to finding a political solution to their problems.

THE MILITANT COOKS RATED

1Islamic Salvation Army (with help from the GIA): Algeria

2ETA & Batasana: Basque country

3Jamaah Islamiyah: Indonesia

4Tamil Tigers: Sri Lanka

5FARC guerrillas: Colombia

6Hezbollah (The Party of God): Lebanon

7Kosovo Liberation Army: Serbia

8Afghan Mujahidin

Dining with Terrorists: Meetings with the World's Most Wanted Militants, by Phil Rees, published by Macmillan at £18.99