

egg

ON THE MENU

Luc Hoornaert and Kris Vlegels



Foreword

There are few things better at turning a house into a home than the delicious smell of a freshly fried omelette wafting from the kitchen. Eggs are eaten all over the world and so they immediately create a connection and reveal the essence of what eating can be – a social facilitator, super glue bonding cultures around a well-laden table.

Eggs have a special significance in most ancient cultures too. Reason enough to explore what chefs in different cultures have to say about eggs through their dishes. Humankind is not alone in being a consumer of eggs; many other animals also regularly eat eggs. And so the egg forms a link between us and our prehistory.

The typical shape of the egg has inspired many crafts including traditional ways of aging wine to produce a better result and our language is full of references to eggs.

An egg therefore has much more to offer than you might at first think. This book contains a selection of recipes from some of my favourite chefs.

Enjoy!

Luc Hoornaert,
author

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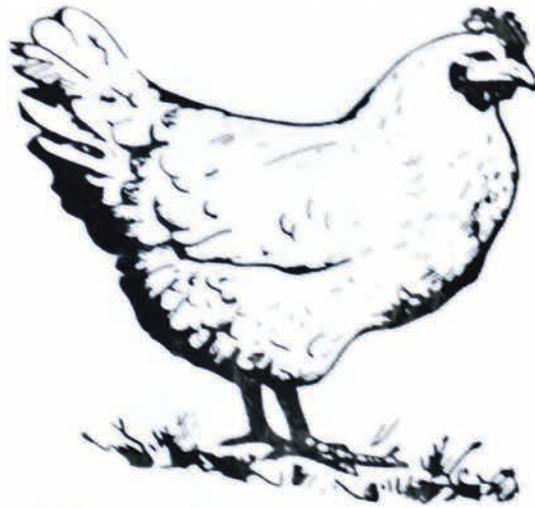
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**tips for
the girls**

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

The egg? If you stop and think about it, an egg is an incredible delicacy: fried, scrambled, boiled and so on, as well as being one of the most complete sources of nourishment. But an egg is even more than that. In many cultures it has a special metaphysical significance that usually represents a transition from not being to being.

Chaos

Ancient cultures in South-East Asia believed that in the beginning there was a sort of primordial egg. The egg contained the beginning of all things: outright chaos. The eggshell was heated by fire and the mythological figure Panu hatched from it. The weightless, light things became the heavens and the dark things formed the earth. Panu emerged to become the universe, uniting light and dark, while also creating the wind, clouds, thunder and lightning and of course the sun, because it was cold on Panu's earth. The moon served as a reminder of this cold; it shone while the sun warmed the earth.

In ancient Egypt, eggs were given as spiritual food for those who had died, as well as to placate Osiris, the god of the underworld whose job it was to guide the dead to their new lives. The ancient Greeks believed that Poseidon's sons hatched out of silver eggs. When Zeus overstepped the mark with Leda, she laid two eggs from which Castor and Pollux emerged: the birth of light and shadow. This vision is not unknown in the West either. The Kröller-Müller Museum in the Nether-

lands has a work by Constantin Brâncuși, created in 1924, which he called *le commencement du monde*, the beginning of the world. It is a bronze egg, perfectly beautiful in its simplicity.

Pesach

This Jewish festival, known as Passover in English, commemorates the exodus from Egypt. Prior to the journey, lamb was eaten. In present-day observances of Pesach people still eat roast meat on the bone, and ... eggs. The bone is a reminder of the exodus from Egypt, while the eggs are a symbol of the new life that the Jews were embarking upon in the Promised Land. In many languages, the words for Easter and Passover are very similar and much of the symbolism of our Easter is linked to the Jewish Passover, so it is not difficult to guess where our tradition of eating eggs and Easter eggs comes from.

Heaven and earth = egg

John of Damascus was a Byzantine theological philosopher. One of his striking assertions was that heaven and earth are

similar to an egg. The shell corresponds to the sky, the membrane is the clouds, the yolk is the earth and the white is of course the water. Eggs have been found in graves almost all over the world; usually they are placed in there for the dead person or the eggs are eaten at the funeral as a symbol of new life after death. In Eastern Europe people sometimes take eggs instead of flowers to the graves of those who have recently died. Apart from real eggs, many stone, clay or jewelled stones have also been found in graves.

Ostern

Easter is called *Ostern* in Germany: neither the word *Easter* or *Ostern* resembles Pesach or Passover at all. The Saxon cultures obviously knew Ishtar or Ostara, the goddess of the returning light. Because this light always returned from the East, she was called Ostara. This Ostara had a hen with an irritating habit of hiding her eggs. Ostara was sick and tired of that and turned the hen into a hare. The hare searched among the bushes and found the eggs. Images of Ostara usually depict her with both a hare and a hen, both of which are symbols of new life and fertility. This legend eventually gave rise to the Easter Bunny. In a more sober version, birds often lay eggs in hares' forms or hollows and people therefore formerly thought that hares laid eggs.

To complete the Easter tradition, we have to take a look at Russia where *krashenki* and *pisanki* are a tradition. *Pisanki* are coloured raw eggs which, after being kept under an icon for a while, are then buried by the farmer in fields to encourage fertility. *Krashenki* are hard-boiled eggs that were painted to be given as presents at Easter.

As red as an egg

When Mary Magdalen went to Rome to visit the Emperor Tiberius, she did not follow the custom of taking jewels as a gift, but presented an egg instead. Mary Magdalen, who had once been very rich but was now penniless as a result of her belief in Jesus Christ, gave Tiberius the egg, telling him that Christ was risen. 'Arising from the dead is just as impossible as this egg changing colour from white to red,' was his answer. The egg slowly started to change colour to scarlet and, since then, red has been the symbol of the blood of Christ and an egg the symbol of the grave from which He arose. Red eggs are presented as gifts at Easter in many countries to represent resurrection. The colour red has evolved into a general symbol of love and friendship.

Matryoshka

In addition to *pisanki* and *krashenki*, Russia's rich egg tradition also has its *Matroyshka* eggs. These are eggs made from wood or papier mâché which, when opened, reveal a smaller and smaller egg inside each... Tsar Peter the Great loved these eggs so much that he brought the Moscow workshops to his new city of St Petersburg. The Imperial Porcelain factory produced 254 of them there in 1799 and 960 in 1802.

The magic of Fabergé

The Tsar summoned Peter Carl Fabergé to St Petersburg to design eggs for the Tsar's family. Fabergé's eggs were made from ivory and glass, and were of course lavishly decorated with gold, silver and all kinds of precious stones. Alexander III gave his wife a present of one every year. At the peak of

Fabergé's fame, just before the fall of the tsars, production was immense. In 1914, 3391 were made and in 1916, as many as 15,365.

Smaller Russian workshops mostly made red eggs from wood which they painted with famous icons in the orthodox Christian tradition.

An egg honoured with a statue

What would you do if you sent one of your staff to India and he ended up in the Caribbean? You'd probably sack him; but for doing just that, Christopher Columbus was rewarded with a statue in Barcelona and NYC, and worldwide fame.

Spanish dignitaries at a festive dinner hosted by Cardinal Mendoza in 1493 told Christopher Columbus that it wasn't in fact very difficult to discover India. The assumption then was that the place Columbus had landed in 1492 was India. They implied that what Columbus had done wasn't that special: any sailor with a bit of experience could do the same. Columbus held his tongue, but asked for a hard-boiled egg. He made a bet with those present that they would not be able to get the egg to stand up without help. Everyone tried but the result was the same: failure. Columbus was demonstrating out-of-the-box thinking. He banged the egg hard against the table to flatten one end, and the egg remained upright. No one said anything, but they all knew what he meant. Once someone has shown you what to do, it's easy to do it again.

No one knows whether the author of *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, Gurolamo Benzoni, made this story up or whether it had been passed down and is actually true. What is certain

is that there is a statue dedicated to the Egg of Columbus in the village of Sant Antoni de Portmany on Ibiza. I'm sure this must be the reason for the gigantic number of visitors to the island...

Eggs Benedict

The Swiss brothers John and Peter Demonicco opened the first ever restaurant in the US. It was called Delmonico's and opened in 1827. Its first legendary chef was Charles Ranhofer. One of its regular guests was Mrs LeGrand Benedict. One afternoon sometime in 1860, she could see nothing she fancied on the menu. She demanded that the chef make her something new for lunch. He cut muffins in half, toasted them and laid a thick slice of ham on top. It was finished off with a poached egg richly covered in Hollandaise sauce. Mrs Le Grand Benedict was delighted and Ranhofer gave the dish an entry in the first Delmonico cookery book, *The Epicurean*, published in 1894.

The column 'The Talk of the Town' in the New Yorker magazine once contained a story about the famous retired investor, Lemuel Benedict walking into the NYC Waldorf looking for something to cure his hangover. The story dated from sometime in 1894. He placed an order with the legendary maître d'hôtel, Oscar Tschirky, for buttered toast, poached eggs and crispy bacon covered in lots of Hollandaise sauce. The staff at the Waldorf were very impressed and added the dish to their breakfast menu. And Tschirky put it in his *Cookbook of the Waldorf* in 1896. There is no mention of whether it actually cured Lemuel's hangover. There is apparently only one way to find out...



→ Tea eggs, a very popular snack in China.

AN EGG IS A NEW BEGINNING

While in the West eggs were usually found with the dead, in China they are given at parties to celebrate a birth. It is a tradition in China to hold a birthday party one month after a baby is born, once they are certain that the child will live. The Chinese also usually give gifts of eggs, mostly made of semi-precious stones, at Chinese New Year, on birthdays and on any occasion that symbolises a new beginning.

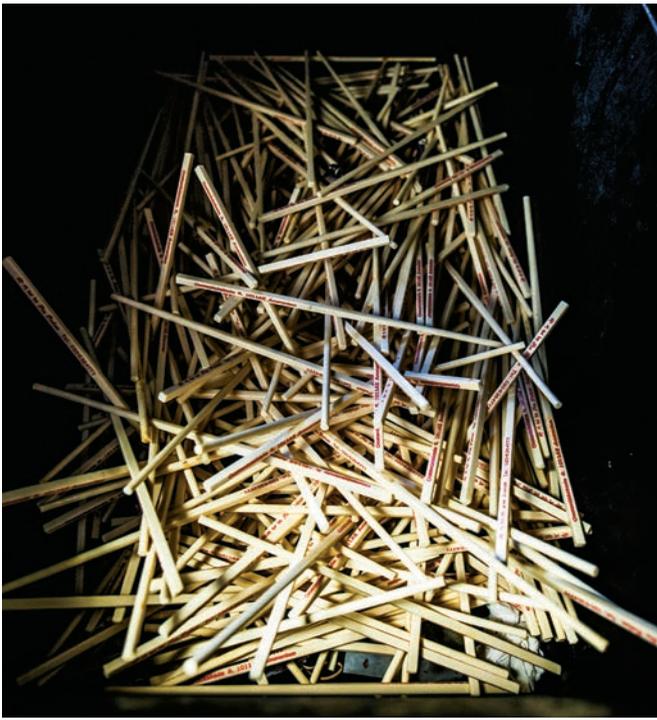
Tea eggs

Tea eggs are very popular snacks in China and in cities with a large Chinese community. These delicately perfumed, beautifully marbled eggs are generally a feast for the eyes and are delicious too. The idea is simple nonetheless. An egg is hard-boiled and then the shell is cracked all over at random, using a spoon, for example. The smaller and more delicate the cracks in the eggshell are, the more beautiful the final design will be. After cracking the shell, these eggs are then boiled again briefly in a mixture of strong black tea, five spice powder, cinnamon, soy sauce, star anise, fennel seeds, Szechuan peppercorns and cloves. The eggs are kept

hot for half an hour and then cooled, still in the marinade, for a few days (the technique goes back to the time when conservation methods were sought for eggs to cover the periods when hens were much less productive). If you then peel the eggs, you get a fantastic result. It's an ideal snack that is incredibly popular all over China.

Pidan – hundred or thousand-year-old eggs?

Call it the hundred-year-old egg, the thousand-year-old egg or whatever you want. It is a typical Chinese delicacy born from a desire to be able to preserve eggs for the periods in which there simply aren't any.



→ Pidan, a typical Chinese delicacy born of a desire to be able to preserve eggs.

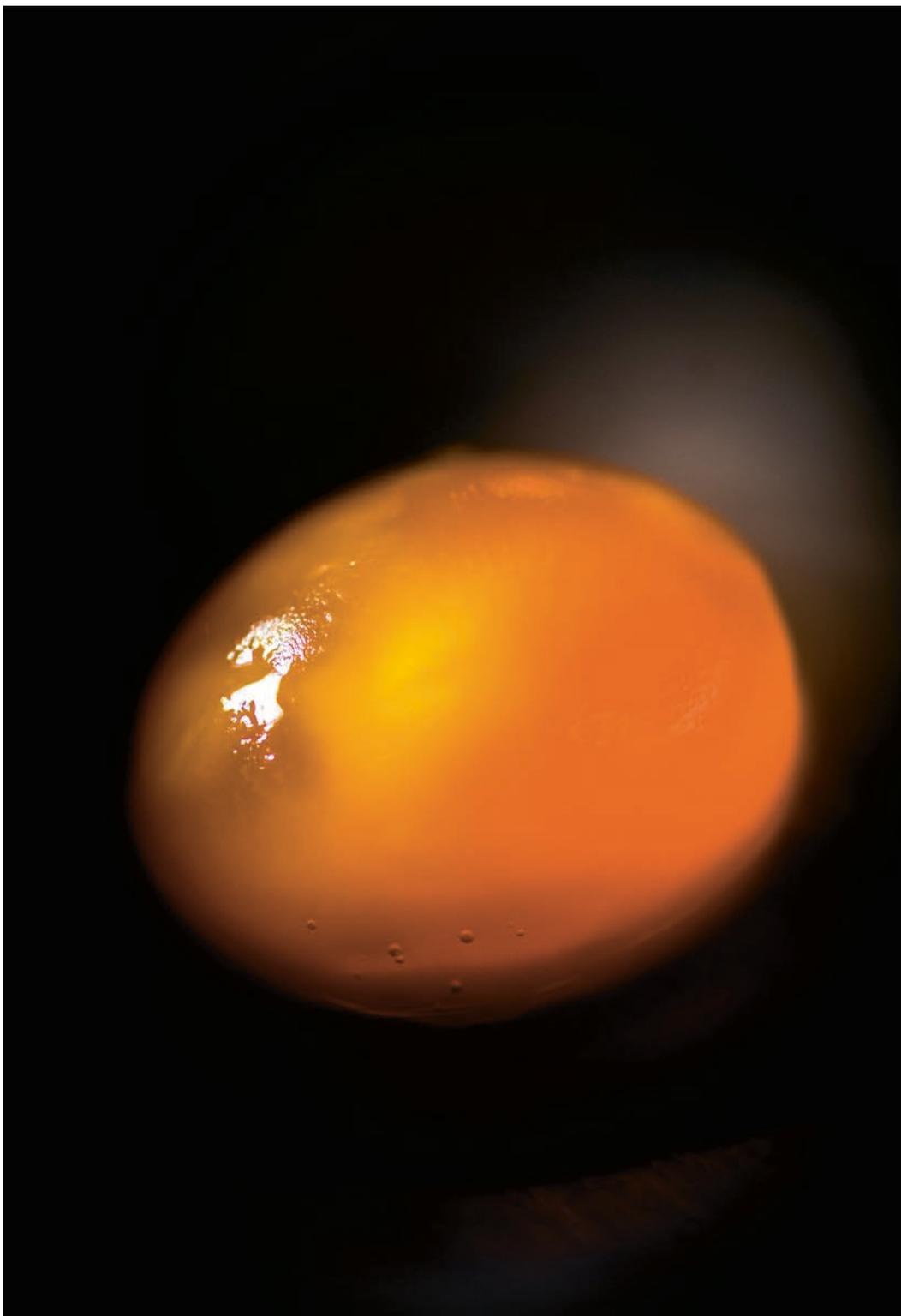
Obviously these eggs are not a hundred or a thousand years old, but many people think they look that old. The technique involves storing hens' or goose eggs for weeks or months in a mixture of clay, ash, salt, quicklime and rice hulls. This process gradually turns the yolk to dark green then to grey, its texture thickens and its flavours become strong with a suggestion of ammonia. The egg white becomes dark brown and transparent and its flavour becomes 'salty'. During the whole process the pH rises to a staggering 9-12. It becomes a really complex explosion of flavours for enthusiasts.

The discovery is attributed to a duck breeder from Hunan. A few months after his ducks had stopped laying, the man discovered eggs in a shallow pool on his farm, where the subsoil was a combination of his clay soil and the lime he had used when building a shed. After tasting the eggs, he naturally tried to reproduce the delicacy. And with success. There is of course no means of verifying it, but the first documents describing the process are some 600 years old, and date from the Ming Dynasty. Current knowledge of chemical processes has made the hygienic production of these very special eggs much easier. But these hundred-year-old eggs remain an experience, even for the most refined palates.

Pee on an egg

One of the traditional dishes from Dongyang is one in which eggs are cooked in the urine of very young boys aged under 10, the so-called virgin boy eggs. *Tong zi* or 童子尿煮鸡蛋 translates literally as 'boys' eggs' and it is a typical spring dish in those parts. Furthermore, it is undeniably part of the region's cultural heritage. The dish fits in with the search for preservatives for foodstuffs. Why the urine specifically has to be from very young boys is not entirely clear from a cultural point of view. The region is however known for ascribing strong health properties to urine.

The principle here is the same as that for tea eggs, except that here the eggs are first soaked in urine before being boiled in it. After that, the shells are cracked in various places using a spoon and then they are put back into the urine. Herbs and spices are added. At the end of the process, the egg white becomes golden yellow and the yolk turns green. In stark contrast to the hundred-year-old eggs which are popular all over the world, this dish is only enjoyed in Dongyang. Oh yes, in case anyone is wondering: the urine for these virgin boy eggs is collected at schools where mobile receptacles have been provided for the boys to urinate in instead of toilets. This is culturally perfectly acceptable there.





→ Leung Kwai Lam, a truly exceptional chef who conjures up one masterly dish after another.



Leung Kwai Lam

There is only one man in Belgium who comes close to emulating the authenticity and versatility of the top Chinese kitchens and that is Leung Kwai Lam, or Tai Lo for friends. This highly gifted chef is truly exceptional, conjuring up one masterly dish after another with apparent serenity. His repertoire and in-depth knowledge reveal an inordinately long period spent studying Chinese cookery and its medicinal uses. He is the type of Chinese chef who has mastered everything, and in one way or another, he reminds me of Mr Chu, the main character in Ang Lee's magnificent film, *Eat Drink Man Woman*. Not just because of the evident mastery he

displays, but also because of the gratifying effect this food has on the human organism. *Eat Drink Man Woman* is an apt quote from Confucius' *Book of Rites*, which states that everything a man desires can be found in sexual pleasure, food and drink.

Leung Kwai Lam works his magic every day in the modest restaurant 5 Flavors Mmei in hip South Antwerp. He can count on a crowd of true fans who regard going to this restaurant almost as a pilgrimage to a Chinese temple of food. The Dim Sum here is an absolute must: this is where you'll find the quintessential Dim Sum and it will not fail to impress.



FRIED TOFU



INGREDIENTS

400 g tofu ·
1 shiitake ·
5 scampi ·
1 tsp spring onion, finely chopped ·
1 tsp coriander, finely chopped ·
3 egg yolks ·
2 Tbsp. cornflour ·
1 Tbsp. flour ·
½ tsp salt ·
pinch of pepper ·
2 Tbsp. oil ·
1 Tbsp. sugar ·
1 tsp chicken powder ·

METHOD

Dry the tofu with a cloth.

Dice the shiitake and the scampi finely (brunoise). Add them to the spring onion, coriander, egg yolk, cornflour, flour, salt, pepper, oil, sugar and chicken powder. Mix everything very thoroughly in a food processor. Form quenelles using two spoons and fry in oil heated to 150 °C until they are nicely golden.



FRIED MILK DALIANG



INGREDIENTS

6 Tbsp. whole milk or ·
buffalo milk (about 90 ml) ·
1 tsp cornflour ·
6 scampi ·
5 eggs ·
½ tsp chicken powder ·
pinch of salt and pepper ·

For the bird's nest

200 g potato threads ·
1 tsp cornflour ·
1 tsp flour ·

To finish

10 g Parma ham ·
(or Chinese dried ham) ·
1 tsp pine nuts ·

METHOD

Mix the ingredients for the bird's nest and make into equal shapes. Place them in a sieve, place a second sieve over the top and fry them in a deep fat fryer pre-heated to 180 °C until they are crisp.

Bring the milk to the boil and add the cornflour. Cool completely.

Chop the scampi finely and fry.

Separate the eggs and beat the whites. Add them to the milk, together with the chicken powder, salt and pepper. Heat two tablespoons of oil in a wok to a temperature of about 80 to 100 °C. Pour the mixture into the wok and stir gently in the same direction until it is cooked (on a gentle heat). Put the cooked milk into a bird's nest and sprinkle on the ham and the pine nuts.

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Colophon

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