

## Food glorious food **Culinary life on the road**



You are what you eat, they say. It's a particularly scary proposition for opera singers, whose life is one of snatched meals, rented apartments and late-night munchies. Christopher Gillett lifts the biscuit-tin lid on the far-from-gourmet reality.



Nine years ago I was doing something very odd. I was photographing everything I ate. Not just fancy meals that were pleasing to the eye, but every single bowl of porridge, pork scratching and piece of toast. I kept it up for a whole year, eventually turning the photos (all 2500 of them) into a massive collage which was displayed in a local art gallery.

Many people thought I was completely bonkers, several pixels short of a panorama, but to someone who gets up on stage and sings for a living, frequently wearing women's clothing or half naked, it didn't seem too far outside the norm. Opera singing and eating have always had a reputation as co-dependants. Yes, mention 'food' and 'opera singer' in the same breath and everyone's imagination leaps to monumental bowls of spaghetti and straw-wrapped flagons of Chianti being wolfed down by a fat tenor with a beard.

### **A singer's life is solitary and quiet, which means lots of cooking for one**

Most singers, even those I've heard refer to McDonalds as 'my outside caterer', love food and I'm no exception. Away on the road I fantasise about eating at nearly every restaurant I pass, and usually fill the empty hours wandering around markets and delicatessens, dreaming of magnificent meals I could put together: massive paellas busting with shellfish, a coq au vin made with a real cockerel, a choucroute piled with steaming meats... The problem is that, for the most part, a singer's life is solitary and quiet, which means lots of cooking for one, so the usual stuff of which gastro-dreams are made of are completely unsuitable. Once, I went a bit stir-crazy and cooked about a gallon of boeuf bourgignon on my two-ringed stove in Rennes. By the seventh day of piling it on my plate for dinner I was suffering from my own version of mad-cow disease.

Another spanner in the gastronomic works is the very fact we have to sing, which requires a lot of energy and flexibility, so you have to eat sensibly. It also often involves projecting large quantities of breath into the face of someone with whom you are supposed to be passionately in love. Precede a show with a slab or two of garlic bread and you won't be the most popular person on stage.

**Back in my digs, hungry and still full of adrenalin, I can easily pig out on cheese and chocolate until well past midnight**

Our dinner times are very strange, mostly because we're getting down to work when normal people are tucking a napkin under their chin. On a show day I'll eat a large lunch – usually pasta for the slow-burn carbohydrates – at about three or four in the afternoon. That and a banana in the interval will see me through until after the performance. That's when I commit every single cardinal dietary sin known to man. Back in my digs, hungry and still full of adrenalin, lonely and a bit bored too, I can easily pig out on cheese, crackers and chocolate until well past midnight, while waiting to get sleepy.

Sometimes there's an extravagant post-show dinner laid on by a promoter, especially in Spain when eating much before 11pm seems to be considered eccentric. Stuffed with suckling pig, I've stumbled out of Madrid restaurants at nearly two in the morning, just as they seem to be getting lively, my belt straining and my digestive tract in turmoil.

It's hardly any surprise then that the very last thing I pop in my mouth before bed is anti-reflux medicine.

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