



Watercolour drawing of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra,
dated 1804.

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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Food

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Jane Austen grew up in a household where the provision of food was not a simple matter of shopping or placing orders but of forward planning, hard work and daily contrivance. Almost all the foodstuffs consumed in Steventon Rectory were home-produced, the exceptions being luxury imported goods like tea, coffee, chocolate, sugar, spices, wine, dried fruit and citrus fruit. These items were valued and guarded accordingly: 'I carry about the keys of the wine and closet', Jane Austen wrote on one occasion (*L*, 27 October 1798) and there are several references in her letters to keeping careful watch on their stocks of sugar and tea.

The glebe lands attached to the benefice of Steventon were only about three acres, but Mr Austen also rented the neighbouring 200-acre Cheesedown Farm from his patron Thomas Knight. For nearly forty years, from the Austens' marriage until their retirement to Bath, the farm kept the rectory supplied with meat and cereals. Though Mr Austen had a bailiff to supervise the labourers in the field, he took an active part in managing the farm: Jane Austen writes very precisely of 'my father's mutton' (*L*, 1 December 1798). The dairy and the poultry-yard were her mother's province: even by the turn of the century, with a reduced household to feed, Mrs Austen had three cows in addition to ducks, chicken, guinea-fowl and turkeys (*L*, 11 June 1799). Potatoes, vegetables, herbs and fruit, including grapes, were grown in the garden. Beer, wines and mead – the latter from the honey given by their own bees – were made on a large scale: when the family came to leave Steventon their effects included '13 iron-bound casks'.¹ Fish and game were brought home on occasion by the sporting sons, and various gifts of food took place among the wider ramifications of the family and their friends: venison from Godmersham Park, fish from Southampton and apples from Kintbury are among the many commodities mentioned in the letters. Those with less ready access to foodstuffs had to be catered

for: Mrs Austen cured pork for her sailor sons to take on voyages, while brother Henry in London was the recipient of gifts ranging from a pot of raspberry jam to nine gallons of mead made by his sisters.

All this produce had to be converted into meals or, very often, into supplies of preserved food which would last until the next season came round. Vast quantities not only of time but of space indoors and out were devoted to the cultivation, production and storage of food. Variety and sufficiency at table depended on just the right quantities of everything being produced and preserved in season, and then served to the family judiciously throughout the year. The household at Steventon fluctuated in numbers over the years, but including servants and boarding pupils Mrs Austen often had to feed ten or a dozen people three times a day – an enormous feat of organisation as well as of sheer labour. Though the family always kept a cook they did not aspire – as many of Austen's fictional families do – to a housekeeper to plan meals, organise stores and superintend the daily work of the kitchen. This was done first by Jane Austen's mother, later by Cassandra, with Jane herself as subordinate and sometime deputy.

When the family moved to Bath, and took lodgings at the seaside, this burden was eased; Bath had some of the best shops and markets in the country, but the cost of food then became an issue – as indeed did its wholesomeness, with no refrigeration or legislation against the adulteration of food (the first Food and Drugs Act was 1875). Settling at Chawton brought matters under their own control again, though there was never the same self-sufficiency as at Steventon, and they would never again be free of 'vulgar economy', as Jane Austen called it when wryly comparing their own home-made orange wine with the French wine invariably served at rich brother Edward's house.

Far more than her own heroines, therefore, Austen in her girlhood and young womanhood was initiated into the arts of domestic economy. Her observations of life at Steventon would have impressed upon her consciousness the primacy of food provision among female duties and occupations. Her mother would have seen it as an essential part of her daughters' training that they could manage a home, whether they be called upon to make a small income go a long way or to preside over a full complement of servants.

At Chawton, Jane Austen's own especial duty concerned breakfast. We can imagine her insisting on sharing at least some of the housekeeping duty with Cassandra, and Cassandra's giving way over breakfast but insisting that Jane had the rest of the day free for writing. Breakfast in Austen's era was very different from the cold meat, coarse bread and ale of earlier ages, or the abundance of eggs, kidneys, bacon and so forth under which Victorian sideboards groaned. Rather it was an elegant light meal of toast and rolls, with tea, coffee or chocolate to drink, all taken off a handsome set of china. Jane's job would have been to make the toast and boil the kettle at the dining-room fire. Like many ladies, not trusting to clumsy servants, she may even have washed and dried the china, and put it away, together with the precious tea and sugar, in a dining-room closet.

The chief meal of the day was dinner, the timing of which altered considerably during Austen's lifetime, and depended very much on one's social position. It was originally a midday meal, taking advantage of natural light for cooking and eating. As the eighteenth century progressed, more fashionable people took their dinner later and later, copied by those lower down the social scale. In 1798 Jane Austen writes of half past three being the customary dinner hour at Steventon, but by 1808 they are dining at five o'clock in Southampton (*L*, 18 December 1798, 9 December 1808). There are many mentions of the timing of dinner in the novels, but none is so explicit as in the fragment *The Watsons*. Tom Musgrave knows perfectly well that the unpretentious Watson family dine at three, and times his visit to embarrass them, arriving just as their servant is bringing in the tray of cutlery. Tom compounds his rudeness by boasting that he dines at eight: the latest dinner hour of any character. At Mansfield Parsonage they dine at half past four and at Northanger Abbey at five. The effect of London fashion can be seen in the difference between the half past four dinner at Longbourn and that at half past six at Netherfield.

As the dinner hour became later, some sustenance was required between breakfast and dinner. It was some time before the name for it became genteel. In *Sense and Sensibility* Willoughby speaks of taking 'nuncheon' at an inn, and in *Pride and Prejudice* Lydia and Kitty order 'luncheon', also at an inn. But when a light meal is taken in the middle of the day at home, the characters refer simply to 'cold

meat', or 'a collation'. Sandwiches appear at Mansfield Parsonage, with Dr Grant doing the honours of them. There is meat, bread and hothouse fruit at Pemberley. Except for the most formal occasions, midday food was served not in the dining-room but wherever the ladies were sitting. The meal would have occasioned the servants little trouble, leaving them free to cook the all-important dinner.

Until half-way into the nineteenth century, dinner was served in the form of 'courses' composed of many dishes placed on the table together. Cookery books of the period often include diagrams showing how the dishes might be arranged on the table to provide a pleasing balance. Depending on the number of diners and the means of the host, several large joints of meat and whole boiled or roasted fowl, sometimes garnished with a few vegetables, would occupy the central area, with a tureen of soup at one end, a whole fish at the other, and pies, cutlets and so forth in the corners. Each gentleman carved the meat nearest to him and helped his neighbours to this and other dishes within his reach. Jane Austen mentions one dinner she attended where a lady's dinner plate remained empty for some while because her neighbour neglected her, though she asked him twice for some meat.

When everyone had eaten enough of this course there would be large-scale disruption and bustle while the servants carried away the dishes and brought and arranged another complete course. A memorable moment in *Emma* occurs at the Coles' party, when conversation between Frank and Emma is interrupted at an interesting point: 'They were called on to share in the awkwardness of a rather long interval between the courses . . . but when the table was again safely covered, and every corner dish placed exactly right' private conversation can be resumed (2:8). (The Coles have never entertained Miss Woodhouse before, and one can imagine how their servants have been made nervous with instructions.)

This second course might contain lighter savoury concoctions such as fricassees and patties, together with a selection of fruit tarts, jellies and cream puddings. After this the tablecloth would be taken away and what was known as 'the dessert' set out. The word was taken from the French *desservir*, to clear the table, and bore a meaning quite different from its common modern usage. Comprising a variety of dried fruits, nuts and sweets, it was a way of prolonging the meal with titbits which could be eaten using the

fingers after the servants had been dismissed. When Mrs Jennings seeks to cure Marianne's broken heart with offers of sweetmeats, olives and dried cherries she is describing a typical dessert.

Often in Austen's novels – and letters – the invitation is to 'drink tea' with neighbours. This is not the afternoon tea of the Victorians and ourselves, but a drink taken an hour or two after the completion of dinner. Sometimes visitors would come only for this drink, at other times it would be part of a dinner invitation. The gentlemen of the party, having lingered over the port after the withdrawal of the ladies, would enter the drawing room in time for tea, which was always made by one of the ladies of the house, often a young one. Fanny Price makes the tea when Mrs Norris is not at Mansfield Park; Elinor Dashwood 'presides' at the tea-table in Mrs Jennings's London drawing room, while at Longbourn, Jane makes the tea and Elizabeth pours the coffee.

Supper was the last meal of the day. It had once been a substantial repast, but now that dinner itself was becoming an evening meal, all that was required was a tray of elegant light refreshments. It is the older characters who are most attached to the idea of supper: Mrs Phillips, Mrs Goddard and Mr Woodhouse 'because it had been the fashion of his youth' (*E*, 1:3). It was at a ball, with exceptionally late hours, that supper came into its own. 'A private dance, without sitting down to supper, was pronounced an infamous fraud upon the rights of men and women' we learn in *Emma* (2:11), while Jane Austen herself reports attending a ball for fifty people at which 'we began at 10, supped at 1, & were at Deane before 5' (*L*, 20 November 1800). Soup seems to have been the essential component of a ball supper: there is soup at the Crown in *Emma* and at Mansfield Park on the night of the ball, and one of Mr Bingley's two conditions for fixing the date of the ball at Netherfield is that his housekeeper should have time to make 'white soup enough' for his expected guests.

This mention of white soup in *Pride and Prejudice* is an excellent example of the way Austen uses food to illustrate character. Based on the expensive ingredients veal stock, cream and ground almonds, white soup originated in the courtly cookery of medieval England and France, when its name was *soupe à la reine*.² Mr Bingley is here humorously acknowledging that only the most elegant concoctions suit the notions of his house guests Mr Hurst (who favours French

cookery) and Mr Darcy (who can afford a French cook). In this most passing of remarks Mr Bingley displays the attractive qualities of wit, generosity and – slightly more questionable – carelessness about money.

When Mr Hurst scorns Elizabeth Bennet because she prefers a plain dish to a ragout, he is condemned and Elizabeth endorsed for their respective tastes by the narrator. All through the eighteenth century controversy raged in England about French food, which was at once fashionable and unpatriotic, held to be suspect and dishonest like the French character itself. In *The London Tradesman* of 1747 Robert Campbell railed against 'Meats and Drinks dressed after the French fashion' disguising their 'Native properties'. Parson Woodforde complained of a meal eaten out in 1783 that most of the dishes were 'spoiled by being so frenchified in dressing'.³ The antithesis of French food was English roast beef. 'I have more than once been asked at table my opinion of the roast beef of Old England, with a sort of smile, and in a tone as if the national honour were concerned,' wrote Robert Southey in the guise of a foreign visitor to Britain in 1807.⁴

Of all the meals which the characters must consume in *Sense and Sensibility*, the only one of which Austen chooses to specify is Willoughby's snatched lunch at a coaching inn in Marlborough. We know that this consisted of cold beef and a pint of porter because he tells Elinor so, in order to refute her imputation that he has had too much to drink. But the menu does more than that: it has a moral dimension. He is behaving honourably and with feeling at last; he is not so foolish as to starve himself in his haste to reach Marianne before she dies, but neither will he waste time (as General Tilney, for example, does) by ordering a more elaborate dish. Elinor does not consciously reflect on this but it undoubtedly contributes to the reassessment of Willoughby's worth in her estimation and ours. Some of the sterling character associated with the roast beef of old England attaches to Willoughby now: he is reformed.

In such ways does Austen use detail sparingly to signify several things at once. Every mention of specific food and drink contributes more than mere local colour to the narrative. *Emma* is the Austen novel by far the most laden with references to food, and here they build up to show us the interdependence of the village community, where some people have more access to food, through wealth or

occupation, than others. Robert Martin gathers walnuts for Harriet, Mrs Martin sends a goose to Mrs Goddard and Miss Bates is the grateful recipient of apples from Donwell and pork from Hartfield. Food in *Emma* is a metaphor for neighbourly love.

But even in this novel, the heroine and other worthy characters never talk about food in relation to their own appetites – never anticipate or remember a meal with relish. Across the oeuvre, no hero, heroine or other character who enjoys the narrator's approval ever willingly speaks about food. Elizabeth has to be pressed even to admitting she prefers plain food. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood cannot be made to choose between boiled fowls and veal cutlets on the journey from Devon to London. Catherine Morland is indifferent to the French bread at Northanger. Fanny Price is not to be consoled for her homesickness by gooseberry tart. It is left to Mr Elton to enumerate the cheeses and dessert at the Coles' dining table, or Mrs Bennet to boast about her soup and her partridges, or Dr Grant to salivate at the prospect of turkey. And the same prohibition extends to the narrator herself. With the single exception perhaps of the pyramid of fruits at Pemberley (symbolic of the social pyramid which Elizabeth must conquer), any mention of a specific foodstuff in Austen is made by a character who is thereby condemned for being greedy, vulgar, selfish or trivial. That Jane Austen herself could write very differently in correspondence ('Caroline, Anna and I have just been devouring some cold souse, and it would be difficult to say which enjoyed it most', *L*, 14 January 1796) is merely one of the disjunctions between life and art which make art the conscious process it is.

NOTES

1. Robin Vick, 'The Sale at Steventon Parsonage', *Annual Report of the Jane Austen Society* for 1993, p. 14.
2. Jane Grigson, *English Food*, repr. (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 5.
3. James Woodforde, *The Diary of a Country Parson, 1759–1802*, ed. John Beresford, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), entry for 18 August 1783.
4. Robert Southey, *Letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella*, repr. (London: Cresset Press, 1951), p. 89.