

Place Settings

offers a literary selection of travel and world cuisine experiences, hosted on the website of Michael Connor, author and travel writer. Check out regular updates on the blog place.settings.michael-connor.co.uk and daily twitters on [@michaelconnor_](https://twitter.com/michaelconnor_)

Licked

By Michael Connor



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For this piece, the emphasis is less on travel; the bias being towards food. Not some dish stumbled upon deep in a chaotic multi aromatic souk or dug from an under-earth barbeque, carcass marinated, wrapped in huge leaves and slow cooked. But still, something that has an exotic basis and can form a drug-like habit with unpleasant consequences, if one were to spend a lifetime of over indulgence.

Now I would be the first to admit that my diet is not exemplary, but with a strong will I do make a serious effort. Last Christmas, my partner P and I received a gift voucher for a ‘Special Day Event’ and as with many vouchers it took longer to exchange than one normally envisages. Supermarket offers often do not surface in this house until long after the expiry date, then are scan-rejected by po-faced cashiers when presented. This gift did have some eighteen months of redeemability, but there were substantial challenging hurdles before arriving at the event and enjoying the day. Firstly the date: a four-way thing requiring negotiation between my diary, P’s diary, the event organiser (and availability) plus the dogs (kennels, sitter or long periods in the back of the Land Rover). Of course, before much of this could seriously be considered or resolved the choice of event had to be

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agreed. Some options totally repelled me, while others P was beyond considering. Two remained on the table, and both had long distant aversions as baggage. However, we were each prepared to put the past aside.

P had been thrown from a horse when young and had never remounted, never the less despite harbouring the shadow of a belief that somewhere lurking deep in their psyche was a vengeful streak capable of surfacing at any moment, she was prepared to take courage for a trekking adventure. For me, it was chocolate. Not really breaking a piece off and enjoying the flavour, but the production of chocolate confectionery. I had spent a full year of three at catering college in the bakery department where the curriculum seemed to be dominated by a large variety of breads, biscuits and pâtisserie, an uncannily large percentage of which involved chocolate as an ingredient. It is surprising how quickly revulsion sets in. When it wasn't baking with chocolate it was *Icing and Piping* – producing royal icing then coating rusty tin cake dummies and piping an assortment of fine decoration on the top and around the sides. Finished, marked, scraped off, beaten up and started over. All this overseen by a giant of a man in a white coat who wandered around the kitchen constantly playing pocket billiards. What's not to like. I dropped this part of the course after the first year.



Well, the weather was the deciding factor. We did not feel we could allow the present to remain unfulfilled as the following Christmas approached, so November was the month and our money was on cold, wet and generally unpleasant. P would have to conquer the field sharks on a day when the sun provided warmth and reassurance.

Booked, we received our passes and arrival instructions by email. Tucked away in central London, a prestigious venue which I had not previously visited was our destination and the journey in went without major hold-up. We pulled up at the barbershop barrier, flashed our passes and were waved through to a parking spot close to the building hired for the occasion. Early, we mooched around taking in the feel of the place, venturing into areas reserved for members 'strictly' but having spent a number of years circulating in 'gentlemens' clubs' I was well aware of the protocols expected so was not challenged. A pleasant enclave in a demanding part of town.

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Greeted in the hallway by a youthful chap in chef's uniform and with an agreeable manner, we were shown where the loos were and pointed in the direction of the kitchen. On entering the 'kitchen' proved to be a small conference room where the carpet had been protected with plastic sheeting on which half a dozen trestle sprigs had been arranged. Each had been set with bowls and spatulas for eight attendees. Close to the door three extremely large plastic containers of water stood on a table with hand written signs fastened to the wall indicating two had been designated for washing and the third, in the centre, was to be used for rinsing. It looked as though this was expected to be a messy affair! Around the corner tucked discreetly in an alcove, a chocolate fountain surrounded by marshmallows was already receiving a flow of repeat visitors - and the event had yet to start.

As the minutes ticked close to the moment our instructions had defined as the point when the programme

would commence, the room filled, and places were chosen. We opted for those clearly at the rear, always the case; neither P nor I ever wishing to be the one selected to play the part of the guinea pig or the brunt of a presenter's embarrassing humour. Out of the forty, I was not the only guy, there were a few others but the majority were female. A motley bunch. A few who had 'glandular' problems or were without restraint. Others, skinny who 'worked-out' or were simply not 'hooked' but all looked pleasantly expectant and a low level of chatter flowed. Sharp on the hour, we were brought to order by the *chef du jour* and asked to assemble around his table. Basic and low-level was the order of the day. No fridge, no overhead mirrors and no gas cooker; a couple of bowls and a domestic microwave appeared to form the totality of the *cuisine*. The lack of mirrors, did mean our rear stance policy made it difficult to obtain a clear view, but in the main it did not detract too much from the experience, although for someone short, with no previous knowledge this may have proved a problem. There were occasions when the group were summoned that P did concede to take up the middle ground.

Chef introduced himself, explained his non catering background and how he had come to be standing before us, and the ethos of the company employing him. He imparted his views on us as a class; apparently quite restrained compared with some he had hosted. It would appear the event is a popular hen party choice, and much of his light hearted patter of innuendo was obviously geared to that audience while he rolled chocolate balls in his palms, warning of the stickiness hot hands and overworking can cause.

'Latecomers are often greeted by an enthusiastic round of applause when they arrive' he suggested, spying through the large window two ladies out of breath and flustered, hurrying across the car park in our direction. His opinion on the class was, it seemed quite correct, as they were greeted with understanding smiles and room made for them close to the front. Chef apologised that it was not possible to repeat his introduction as the schedule was tight and the room was apparently required for a different event that evening. Questions preceded explanations, allowing the attendees to show their ignorance of chocolate origins and the process, while encouraging audience participation.

Holding up a chocolate ball the size of a marble 'one I prepared earlier' the question was asked why it was known as a *truffle* – the only item on the menu today. I had decided not to be cast as the know it all and spoil it for others, so remained silent, along with everyone else. Answer - because it resembles one of those things pigs and dogs are trained to dig from the ground predominantly in France, known as truffles.

A bowl of small brown nibblets was passed round with the invitation to sample. This was becoming close to flashback. I abstained. Comments were sought with many rejecting the taste for its lack of sweetness. The secret was shared. Cadbury's, Fry's and other such high street old favourites weren't really chocolate! Only the flavour remaining, the process they used removed the butter-fats, as the major raw ingredient is known and were replaced with cheap fat, a type of lard, allowing the highly prized butter-fats to be sold to those prepared to pay far higher prices for the commodity than your average chocoholic – the cosmetic industry; think lipstick!



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The true authentic chocolate retains at least 70% of its butter-fats and the cocoa having been fermented, retains a distinct bitter taste, it was explained. Think Swiss chocolate! And who is the worlds largest grower of the cocoa tree from which the cocoa bean is harvested? – Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa. Other questions and answers followed with little crowd knowledge being displayed.

With the science out of the way, the first steps of production begin. Nibbllets melted and long-life cream (sorry nothing fresh due to the lack of refrigeration) beaten in to create a bowl of ganache with melted butter and sugar. Any flavouring of personal preference could also be added, but not on this occasion – something for the future - vanilla, rose-water, mint and many others possibilities, including the increasingly popular chilli perhaps. This was *Icing and Piping* territory. Old memories flood back. The mixture, cooled in a *bain marie* of iced water, it quickly thickens and extreme care needs to be taken to ensure it retains the correct consistency – that of a soft pastry. Looking around, the *tasting* has spread almost universally, lips and the odd cheek are tell tale. I am not tempted but I seem close to arriving in my past.

“This was Icing and Piping territory. Old memories flood back.”

Following numerous trips to the table for instruction, the next step is to pipe the mixture into dowels the thickness of a standard panatella (opportunity for more innuendo here), then cut into short lengths - the thickness and length determining the final number of truffles produced and available to take home. Of course, the other contributing factor to the final number being the volume of the mixture consumed during production. Pale blue polythene disposable piping bags had been provided, only the pointed end requiring scissoring to the preferred size before one could begin. Far less demanding than the greaseproof paper self-roll variety I had trained with, or the large linen variety that required metal piping tubes some as fine as needle holes, others more suitable for piping out *éclairs*. The bag filled, the warning was given not to squeeze too hard, and like toothpaste, not from the middle. A split would be sure to occur; and do not pipe too fast or the line would break and not too slow or the mixture would turn solid in the bag.



I began. One length completed, I stopped the pressure and pulled the bag away. Now old habits, thought long forgotten, die hard. My immediate reaction was to lick the end. A disgusting habit widely practiced in *Icing and Piping* and which by the end of a year had brought me to the point of gagging and near vomit at the rusty metallic taste, which I can still conjure in my mouth today.



Licking or sucking the end of the pipe was not truly something that would (should) occur in a *live* situation. I am now back reliving one of the classes I have long put behind me. Twenty of us in immaculate white chefs jackets with original cloth buttons, boys wearing their aprons folded and tied tight like mini-skirts, girls head through loop wearing theirs full length, blue dog-tooth trousers, white neckerchiefs and tall, aggressively starched, white hats. At the event, it is no hats and a flimsy blue plastic disposable apron, not unlike the piping bag. Royal icing and ganache are not unsimilar in production, two main ingredients beaten together in a bowl. Chocolate with cream or egg white with icing sugar, which if not sieved sufficiently, particles of sugar grit will create grooves like ski marks in snow or settle in the metal piping tube, blocking the operation - first reason to

lick the end! I look around, back in the moment, a piping bag particularly in untested hands can cause upset and it appears no table is trouble-free. I see one piping bag has split allowing globules of ganache to ooze from the side; another gripped by a strong masculine hand is squeezing large quantities from the top and very little from the end resulting in lines similar to hand-rolled liquorice paper cigarettes, rather than elegant Monte Christos. But the star of the exercise is a tearful chocolateer who is attempting by hand to stick together the irregular pellets squeezed painfully from a bag in which the mixture is quickly reaching the consistency of quick drying cement in its later stages. She is not upset, simply in a state a frustration bordering on rage. Chocolate is rapidly moving outside its designated arena and thoughts to what the washing bowls now resemble should be avoided.

I drift back to the orderly environment of starched whites, stainless steel and years long dead. To sounds of heavy breathing, rhythmic beating and tired biceps each of us is now ready to create wedding cakes of intricate design. Turntable with cake dummy showing signs of metallic fatigue at the ready, palette knife in hand, the first splodge of the white mixture is spread – too wet makes it easy but it will soon fall away, too dry and texture takes on the consistency of crumble. Nice topping, piping bag with number three fluted tube filled, and the decorating begins with shells or scrolls around the edge. Converting to a bag with a number one plain tube, one fine line on top of another and across. Finished, bored and snow blind, I take it up for marking. The critical eye finds fault, noticeable breaks in the trellis. I don't really care. I would prefer to be anywhere than here.

The overwhelming aroma of chocolate releases me. Many have finished their task, others struggle on persistently until Chef (old habits die hard) steps in and rescues their plight. I finished mine early on, it's far from the best, but I know any errors I will be able to correct in the final stages. While Chef works his magic, many out of boredom or loss of will power are nibbling away at the stock, I drift back to *Icing and Piping*.

Wedding offerings two, three, four and five are complete with dramatically deteriorating results, I am about to wipe down, dump the icing and wash up only to be assured there is time for a sixth. One of the girls whose life this is going to become, smiles with a look of glee, the lecturer shoves his hand deeper into his trouser pocket. I begin the impossible task to beat the fine dry skin that has once again formed on the icing into the smooth paste it was an hour earlier, and loose the grey metallic swirls gained from the dummy during the five previous scrape downs. Miscreant bits damage the surface layer that it is unlikely any configuration of trellis or gnome bride and groom could hope to disguise. Shells are quickest and less prone to the adverse quality of the mixture. To hell with the wedding, I go for a speedy Happy Birthday, but with this ploy the tube spends longer in my mouth than on the surface of the dummy. Am I the only one that finds this practice revolting? Time to go.

At the last moment, I draw the bag from under my nose and cut the mixture sharp with a knife, cheroot style. Now is the time to ensure cool hands as each bullet is balled (not my term) in preparation for a final coating. Ground nuts, icing sugar and cocoa are on offer, along with liquid chocolate which will require tempering. White, milk or dark chocolate are all commonly used. Definite focused attention is essential for the tempering process. Nibblers are being used but in the past I have found better results with a shaved or grated block.

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Heat the chocolate while stirring to 115 °C (110 for milk or white). Again one would normally use a bain marie, but with the only heating method present being a microwave, this was utilised, with acceptable results I must add. The temperature is critical so the use of a chocolate thermometer or similar is essential. When it has reached the correct temperature, allow to cool to between 85 – 88 °C, which is a good working range. We were not directed with such precision on the cooling. However, the test was made using a spoonful of the warm liquid spread thinly on wax paper and then allowed to cool further. If tempered satisfactorily it will be crisp and offer a good shine. Our short cut process seemed to work and appeared to provide a popular alternative to potato crisps. To complete the kitchen process, we were split into four groups and began rolling single balls in a chosen coating, each person have more or less sixty to cover. Fingers at this point seemed regularly to be going from coating to ball to mouth to wash bucket to rinse bucket and back.

Truffles complete, the chef then provided instruction in the art of packaging, using large squares of cellophane paper tied with various coloured ribbon. Looking at everyone's offerings and the various expressions, some still showing signs of clown-style chocolate-smirks, the *Special Event* seemed to have passed off with a level of success. Within minutes of the final ribbon being bowed, the Chef and his assistant were stripping the room, loading a white van and apparently racing off to another event on the coast.

Slipping my coat on, I glance outside. It has begun to rain and the wind is tossing garbage discarded in the street around the car park. People carrying sports bags with racquet handles protruding are milling around heading for pre-booked courts where they can enjoy chasing a bouncing ball and losing a few calories. But in here the balls are gift wrapped, the enjoyment level appears high and counting calories does not appear to have formed part of this days exercise.

P became the recipient of my endeavours, but only retained a single bag of indulgence, passing the rest on as stocking fillers a couple weeks later. And I felt one phobia, maybe two, had been licked!

Author's bio

Michael Connor is a regular contributor to Place Settings, and is author of biographical novel, *The Soho Don*. More information and samples of his work can be found on www.michael-connor.co.uk

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Contributions from guest writers are welcome

Well-written, original pieces of 400-2500 words will be considered. No recipes or guide book material that is not part of a narrative travel piece, please.

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