

16th November 2021

Fancy

“The whispers of fancy, and ... the phantoms of hope.”

Samuel Johnson, Rasselas (1759)

The French cookery expert, Mardi Michels, tells us that at one time the French considered potatoes “only good for animal fodder.” So, what do the discerning French make of the gastronomic delights of the Shepherd’s Pie from a recently published list of the UK’s favourite foods? For a start, they give it a fancy name, for Shepherd’s Pie in France is *Hachis Parmentier*. And it’s considered a classic French comfort food.

Hachis is our “hash”. *Parmentier* (as all cooks know, from *Master Chef* if from nowhere else) is used to describe any dish made with potatoes. The 18th-19th century pharmacist, Antoine-Augustin Parmentier, had experienced the nutritional value of the potato as a prisoner of war in Germany, and he wanted to change public opinion about the humble spud. He grew potatoes in and around Paris, and in 1773 won a prize for showcasing the potato as an important crop in the event of a famine. The potato crops in Paris were even guarded by the army, and slowly *les pommes de terre* became more popular. Parmentier spent his life educating the masses about potatoes – how to grow them and, crucially, how to prepare them. He even prepared a dinner for Benjamin Franklin at *Les Invalides* where the menu consisted of *only* potato-based dishes.

But if you call Shepherd’s Pie by the fancy name of *Hachis Parmentier*, does this make it tastier or more nutritious? And if the French find their “potato hash” labelled as “Shepherd’s Pie”, would they look on it with disdain? Beware Samuel Johnson’s “whispers of fancy”.

In, *A Man’s a Man*, Robert Burns wrote:

*A prince can mak’ a belted knight,
A marquis, duke an’ a’ that,
But an honest man’s aboon his might –
Guid faith, he mauna fa’ that.*

Use whatever fancy name you like, says Burns, but it will always be the substance, the honesty of a person, that’s ultimately important.

Fancy? No, I’ll just keep it ordinary, thank you, and appreciate that my basic worth and goodness hasn’t changed. So, Shepherd’s Pie, anyone?

A prayer for today

In my ordinariness, Lord, I thank you that I’m still on your list of favourites. Amen

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