

# Jonathan Meades

**Renowned as an acerbic restaurant critic, the writer and presenter talks about his upcoming ‘anti cookbook’, along with his latest TV series exploring architecture under the Mussolini regime.**

**T**he book is about everything I cook and is blindingly unoriginal.” This is how Jonathan Meades describes his forthcoming book project, *The Plagiarist in the Kitchen*.

“A recipe book which is also an explicit paean to the avoidance of culinary originality, to the daylight robbery of recipes, to hijacking techniques and methods, to the notion that in the kitchen there is nothing new,” writes Meades in the introduction to his “anti cookbook”. It’s the second book on food from the ex restaurant critic for *The Times*. In 2002 *Incest and Morris Dancing* collated Meades’ writings for *The Times* between 1986 and 2001. “Purveyors of the bland, the unauthentic and the mediocre will have been sleeping easier since last December, when Britain’s most vitriolic, knowledgeable and literate restaurant critic handed in his napkin,” wrote Christopher Hirst in his review of *Incest and Morris Dancing* in *The Independent*.

The thematic shift in Meades’ relentless, caustically witty prose for *The Times* was both disorientating and thought provoking. “I find everything fascinating... everything looks

fantastic if you look at it long enough,” he once said. It’s been that way since he first appeared in his trademark black suit and Ray-Bans on the BBC in the early 1990s, with the series *Abroad in Britain*. In the introduction, he strode across the screen in a polka dot tie and pink platform shoes to announce that the series was to be “devoted to the proposition that the exotic begins at home”.

Meades’ subsequent series *Magnetic North* and *Off Kilter* brought a similarly surreal critical eye to northern Europe and Scotland respectively. In 2013 he celebrated *The Joy of Essex*: “All places, all counties are various, all counties, all places are equally defined by a shorthand that denies that variety and reduces them to cliché,” he announced. And in 2012 he broke down other myths with the series *Jonathan Meades on France*, where he has lived for the past eight years. In the series he looked beyond the stereotypes, promising: “No check tablecloths, no ‘Gallie’ shrugs, no strings of onions, no art of living in Provence, no dream homes, no boules, no ooh la la.”

In his 2014 memoir *An Encyclopaedia of Myself*, about growing up in 1950s Salisbury, in Wiltshire, Meades used evocative black-and-white photographs that brought to mind those in W.G. Sebald’s book *The Rings of Saturn*. And there are echoes of Sebald in the narrative and temporal jumps of Meades’ prose. Another writer whose footsteps Meades treads in is Ian Nairn. In 1957, the writer and architecture critic wrote *Counter-Attack Against Subtopia*, a term he used to describe bland post-war suburbia.

Meades’ own attacks against the bland, and celebrations of the bold, could be seen in his 2014 TV programme *Bunkers, Brutalism and Bloodymindedness: Concrete Poetry*. His alternative reading of architecture also resulted in his darkly comic study of *Jerry-Building: Unholy Relics of Nazi Germany* and *Joe-Building: the Stalin Heritage Trail*. This spring sees the broadcast of the third in this trilogy with *Ben Building*, on the architecture of Mussolini’s Italy.

Hurtling between seemingly disparate subjects and finding the magical in the mundane, Meades saves some of his most caustic wit for the restaurant industry. “The sheer bollocks that chefs spout is startling,” he once wrote. Terms like “fine dining”, “sourced” and “drizzle” are easy game for Meades – as are celebrity chefs, Michelin stars, and the idea of London as the gastronomic capital of the world. Nearly 15 years since his last restaurant review for *The Times* and eight stone lighter, he has returned to the subject of food in *The Plagiarist in the Kitchen*.

We travelled to Marseille to meet Meades at his home in Cité radieuse, the proto-brutalist housing development designed by Le Corbusier in the late 1940s. Before the interview we explore the building together, including the sculptural béton-brut roof terrace that Meades described as “a transcendent work [that] is exhilarating and humbling” in his 2012 book *Museum Without Walls*. So it is on the subject of architecture that we begin our long discussion.

**It must be a great building to live in, how long have you been here?**

We moved here just under five years ago. We had lived for ten



years in Bermondsey Street in south London. That area changed dramatically. If you got up early enough you would see this grey swarm heading towards the City, in time for the Japanese stock markets to open. So from being this forgotten backwater it suddenly became a building site, and is now wall-to-wall tapas bars. So then we moved to outside of Bordeaux. I hadn't lived out in the country before and didn't realise what it would be like. I quite like the country if I'm in a car.

**Was the building the main reason for moving here?**

Yes, I'd known the building since the early 1980s and had always been rather obsessed by it. I would often come here and look at it.

**What is it that you like?**

There are a whole load of things. There is something so primitive about it. And I love the muscularity. Le Corbusier came up with this idea of using crude concrete just after the war. And I much prefer post-war Le Corbusier than the white, orthogonal, very smooth stuff. And the roof is wonderful. It's the greatest sculpture park in the world I think. Unfortunately, it gets ruined because the gym up there has been taken over by this guy called Ito Morabito, who is kind of like the French Thomas Heatherwick. He puts on shows of this very bad conceptual art up there. It's just absolute rubbish, complete drivel. And he puts his sculptures outside, which are fighting with the wonderful sculpture that is there already. It doesn't work and I think it's going to go under. I mean one hopes it will. But the guy is a complete self-publicist in the way that Heatherwick is. He doesn't have much to back it up though.

**You've also spoken before about how the English restaurant industry has deluded people through PR. How did this come about?**

English restaurants have a much greater talent for PR than they do for cooking. It's the peddling of dreams and illusions rather than particularly great food. While London has improved, it's



nowhere near as good as it thinks it is. And London as I first knew it in the 60s and 70s was nowhere near as bad as it's made out to be now. For example, I used to go to a restaurant called Koritsas in Camden Town. It also happened to be the unofficial headquarters for artists like David Hockney and Peter Blake. It was great, wonderful, Cypriot food, simple and really well done. I much prefer that to ridiculously misspelt menus of foams and all these things that people like Heston Blumenthal do.

**When did PR become so important in the restaurant industry?**

It really started in a big way in the 80s. The first hugely successful restaurant PR was

a guy called Alan Crompton-Batt. I liked him very much but one knew that he was a salesman, and a very good salesman. He was absolutely obsessed by Andrew Loog Oldham and what he had done with the Rolling Stones. And he was very much in that tradition. He more or less invented Marco Pierre White, also Nico Ladenis.

**How did you end up being the restaurant critic for *The Times* for so long?**

I only expected to do it for

Cité radieuse, Le Corbusier's seminal Marseille housing project and home to Meades





a short while and after a few months I thought, I'm going to jack this in. But they gave me a pay rise so I kept doing it. And it kept on going like that. And I did it for 15 years – but I don't think it did me any good.

**You mentioned the food in England in the 1960s, but what food were you brought up on in the 1950s?**

Well the impetus in the years following the war from 1945 to 1950 was cheap food. But Clement Attlee's policy didn't work because we were still using ration books until 1954. And even after that there were shortages. But having said that I thought the food I grew up with was very good. People were very resourceful. They'd use everything. In this new book I've put in a

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recipe for tripe and onions, which both my mother and grandmother would cook. I thought it was delicious. They do it at St John, one of my favourite restaurants in London. I also remember as a child frequently having boiled ham. My mother would make a soup from the stock with some dried peas. You didn't have a lot of food that came from outside of Britain either apart from some commonwealth stuff. You didn't get the array you get today, but it was very nice and people were very healthy generally.

**In *An Encyclopaedia of Myself* you spoke about some of the dishes your mother cooked when you were a child. Was she the norm or an anomaly at the time?** She was probably a bit of an anomaly and cooked more interesting food, but in the book I also mention the food some of my friends' mothers would cook. Again it nearly

all came down to being resourceful. I had a great childhood friend and for his mother no bread went to waste. She would dip it in milk and put it in the oven overnight so you'd have rusks. And I still do that myself. I can't stand waste and that's to do with those years. All leftovers get used up in one way or another. In fact I like leftovers because you can always work out something interesting to do with them.

**You have written about how, in the post-war period, the English lost their links to their indigenous food. How did this happen?**

There was some great indigenous cooking that did endure, like steak and kidney pudding, toad in the hole, Yorkshire pudding etc. But then in the very late 50s you got people like Elizabeth David. Although they were mostly very good writers, they convinced the British that our food wasn't worth bothering with. So an avocado is superior to a cauliflower. And as a result there began to be an inferiority complex about British food, and people became ashamed of what they cooked. And then you'd get these crazes: the smorgasbord craze, the paella craze. It was like food started becoming pervious to fashion. So it all became much more self-conscious. Food also became much more of a class and culture signifier.

**What were the main cookbooks you had in your house?**

My mother had Elizabeth David and Patience Gray's books, and also *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* [by Julia Child]. I've actually got my mother's copy here, which is falling apart. It's a brilliant book because if you follow the recipes you will learn how to cook. Step one, step two, step three, and do not digress from this. And it does teach you, so the title of the book is apt.

**When did you start cooking yourself?**

I'd cook from home at about the age of 13 or 14 I suppose. I worked my way through certain recipes from *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* to the point where I could do them without referring to the book for the whole time. And then I would use other recipe books, but I would seldom read the whole recipes, they would bore me stiff. As I say in *The Plagiarist*, quite often I would just look at a picture of something and know how to do that. But that comes with confidence and I've been doing this for half a century now.

**In the series *Slow Cooking* you said, “Cooking is a craft not an art.” Can you explain?**

There's a quote of Gore Vidal's: “Art should always be different, craft should always be the same.” I think writing should be experimental and should always be trying something new. I think with cooking you shouldn't be trying something new. I think trying self-consciously to create new dishes is futile and terribly arrogant. I also don't like a lot of things on a plate, and hate trimmings and garnishes and all that. It's usually a way of adding value to something that's not particularly good in the first place.

**There is a big industry now behind cookbooks. How many of them do you think are any good?**

There used to be these things called the Glenfiddich Food and Drink Awards. I was one of the judges in around 1990 and I was sent all these cookbooks.

I think I was sent about 60. The one that won was by Pierre Koffmann, who is a really fine chef. But I sold all the others. They were endlessly repeating each other, while pretending to be original. The other thing is that people like Elizabeth David, Claudia Roden and Jane Grigson, they were very good writers, but most of these new cookbooks are by people who really can't write.

**Why did you decide to do your own cookery book?**

I had published *Museum Without Walls* with Unbound and that was very successful. And [co-founder] John Mitchinson, who is a good friend, said that I had once talked about doing a recipe book back in 1998. And so that is what I have done. The only criteria I use in the book is that if I haven't cooked a dish ever it doesn't go in. What I think might be of interest is the certain number of recipes that people might not have come across as they are mostly quite old.

**Many of the recipes look quite straightforward compared with what people might expect from reading other cookbooks of today.**

One of the first recipes I wrote down was for a dish called Poulet à l'Oignon from a friend of mine, Jean-Pierre Xiradakis, and his restaurant in Bordeaux. It's almost fail-safe to make because it's basically chicken with sliced onions. You don't even brown the onions. My favourite recipe in the book is for grilled mackerel, and the ingredients are “a mackerel”. And that's it. I remember Matthew Fort at one point when he was writing for *The Guardian* had a campaign for dishes of no more than five ingredients. And that's a very good idea I think. I don't mind sauces like salsa verde, but on their own and not on a nice piece of fish. If it's really good fresh fish, it shouldn't need anything on it.

**I think it was in *Slow Food* that you said we'd lost the basics of cooking. When did you see this happen?** There was this obsession with new techniques, with pressure cookers and so on. Also lots of pre-prepared stuff.

And once you start relying on pre-preparation you do probably forget the basics. I think it's quite interesting that a lot of French people are really terrible cooks. And this is because they can go to the supermarkets where you can buy very, very good cassoulet or stew or whatever. And the butchers will always have three of four prepared dishes. So you don't actually need to cook.

**How closely connected were the indigenous dishes of France and Britain?**

There were archetypal peasant foods you would get in both cultures. For example something like slow cooked boiled beef. That was because in many instances, people didn't have any choice but to slow cook because they didn't have their own stove. But yes the same things do turn up in many cultures. The difference is that the British didn't appreciate them and lost the hang of doing them. For example boiled beef and carrots was a regular dish, but the British threw it out. This is quite odd when you consider this idea that Britain is respectful of its past and so on. Which I think is completely wrong. I think Britain is far more susceptible to fashion than other countries in Europe. For example, the British tear down buildings with huge enthusiasm.

**What do you think about British supermarkets?**

When I do go into one it's usually when I need something very specific. And I'm horrified by the comparison to French supermarkets. They are on a completely different level here. The quality and the freshness are incomparable. French supermarkets are run on different principles and there is a lot more local produce. You've got stuff that's come from 10 or 12 miles away.

**One of the other things that has really become a big industry is organic of course.**

Yes "organicising" as we called it in the programme, *Meades Eats*. I think it's a compete racket. The sheer number of fraudulent instances of deception is startling. I remember being on a panel at the Bath Literary Festival and



this issue came up. Jonathan Dimbleby was chairing the thing and I said it was a racket. He was also a president of the Soil Association and he got really angry with me and said, "No, no, all these people are really honest, hard working people," and I said, "Yes hard working, but criminally inclined Jonathan." Anyway he stormed off afterwards. It was as if I had insulted his faith. And it is a kind of faith I think, and absolute nonsense.

**Does France have this same obsession with organic?**

It's much more ambiguous here. The certificates and stamps of being organic don't exist to the same extent because

there is so much more agriculture. It's much more ad hoc. People are also so used to getting good stuff that they won't accept the rubbish. They don't need regulations, which I think is very important. There is also a kind of implicit trust between the consumer and the purveyor, the retailer. And that's evident in other ways in France. If you go into a café here you get a coffee and you don't pay for it on the spot. In Britain that would mostly not happen because the expectation is that you are

Details of Le Corbusier's Cité radieuse, Marseille



going to do a runner. Everyone is thought of as a potential criminal.

**"Crass tossers with the spray-on grins, gestures and catchphrases" was how you once described celebrity chefs. Are there any that you like?**

Firstly I think the idea that cooking has become a form of light entertainment is abhorrent. It's a craft that should be taken seriously rather than something mediated by people like John Torode and Gregg Wallace. The only good one there has ever been really was Keith Floyd. He was a performer, whereas most of these other people are terrible and embarrassing to watch. They really don't know what to do and have been put through some kind of media training, which has not been particularly efficacious. But Floyd was great. I don't believe this stuff of people being naturals; he really worked at it and knew exactly what he was doing. And he could really turn it on. He could turn it off as well, and could be an absolute pain in the arse. But he was rather brilliant even though every programme was the same as the last one.

**Another commentator you had a lot of time for was the late architecture critic Ian Nairn.**

The thing that made his name was *Outrage*. Written in 1955 it was an account of going from Southampton to Carlisle, and the homogeneity that he saw. At that point there was very little being built apart from social housing. He was thinking that there is a generation of architects just champing at the bit and they are going to transform Britain. Ten years later, those architects had indeed built stuff. And he wrote this famous article in *The Observer* saying that British architecture is just not good enough. That stirred something in the architecture establishment and they really went for him. But he had been presuming that something really bold was going to happen. And after that he became really disillusioned.

**He was one of the only supporters of brutalism at the time wasn't he?**

He was a great fan of the Tricorn Centre in Portsmouth, and Rodney Gordon and Owen Luder's other brutalist works like Eros House in Catford. In the most part he was pretty sniffy about the moderate stuff, the every day norm is what he really disliked. But I don't actually think he was that important as an architecture critic. He was important as a wonderful writer about London. *Nairn's London* is just a fabulous book. The writing is a lot more interesting than most of the places he describes. There's one place near Mitcham Common in south London of which he says: "It is always 4 o'clock in the afternoon in November here." And it's just such a wonderful description of a place. People tried to portray him as some sort of an activist, which he wasn't at all. He couldn't stand committees or things like that, he would much rather be down the pub. Which he did all too successfully.

**When did you become consciously aware of buildings and topography?**

When I was very young. I made a film about this called *Father to the Man*. My father was a rep for a biscuit company and I used to go with him to small towns in Wiltshire, Hampshire and Dorset. And at a very tender age I would just be left and so I would wander around these towns looking at the buildings. But my interest kind of crept up on me because I didn't write anything about architecture for the first few years I was writing. Then I was asked to review a show called *Marble Halls* at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, which was one



of the first shows to make a really big effort to popularise Victorian architecture. And then I realised how much I actually knew about architecture – without having studied it but having absorbed it. I’d always make a detour to look at interesting places. I could never go from A to B without going to Z as well.

**Why was Victorian architecture looked down on?** I don’t know exactly but I think it’s to do with fashion. Several generations grew up despising Victorian buildings and pulling them down. And it got to the point that people like Evelyn Waugh, Kenneth Clarke and Osbert Lancaster had to stand up and say, “This is actually really valuable and remarkable stuff.” And so the Victorian Society started intervening and things got better. And it’s very similar to the kind of thing that is happening with brutalism at

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the moment. Every week there is a new book about brutalism, but in many instances, it’s too late because so much of it has been torn down.

**Like in Birmingham where the last of John Madin’s buildings, the Central Library, is currently being knocked down?**

Yes Birmingham had some very, very good stuff. The thing is English Heritage always take the easy route. They will list things that are not going to be troublesome. So they will list churches and individual houses but when it comes to listing something like Birmingham Central Library, the Tricorn in Portsmouth, or the Trinity in Gateshead, they don’t want to know. Those last two were the greatest works of British brutalism I think. And now everything that Rodney Gordon and Owen Luder did is more or less gone.

**Your new television show *Ben Building on the architecture of Mussolini’s Italy* follows ones on Hitler and Stalin. How are these films different?** They are all very different architecturally, but they also very different filmically. I think *Joe-Building*, the one on Stalin, is a much better film than the Nazi one actually. It was much more textured and had more layers. The new *Ben Building* film is much more to do with defining what fascism is or isn’t. We filmed more in the studio and it’s more polemical than the other two films, which were more descriptive. We filmed this one in Rome, Genoa, Milan and Redipuglia on the Slovenian border, where there are these huge weird structures that you can see from the sky. Also in Sabaudia, which is this extraordinary new town and very eerie. In the film we talk about [Italian artist] Giorgio de Chirico. His influence on the architecture of the 20s and 30s really is considerable, and especially in Sabaudia.

**Were these buildings the vision of the architects or Mussolini?**

Mostly the architects. Mussolini liked the fact that there were these warring factions between the modernists and traditionalists. He liked the divide and rule thing. But one of the interesting things when you start looking into it is the idea that progressive architecture as the realm of the left is completely wrong headed. There is probably more modern architecture of high quality in Italy from the 20s and 30s than there is anywhere else in Europe. And it was made under a tyrannical and authoritarian government. So you can’t just link modernism to progressive politics and so on.

**You’ve spoken about the influence on brutalism of the Nazi bunkers in places like Guernsey. I’ve seen them in Jersey and they are incredible structures. Why were they built like that?**

Friedrich Tamms was the main designer and the thinking was to scare the local populous. Some of them look like animals and some like visors, and they really are quite frightening. And they only occurred like that in occupied countries. The stuff that was built in Germany is not graphically potent in the same way. It didn’t need to be. You had a largely obedient population that didn’t need to be cowed by these things. So in the occupied countries they had a dual purpose, they were both defensive and offensive towards the indigenous population. I think Paul Virilio was really the first person to study these bunkers. They fitted into his idea that most technological breakthroughs are caused by war. So computing, binoculars that work at night, camouflage, and such like.

**Alongside *The Plagiarist* and *Ben Building*, you’ve also got your first art exhibition in London soon.** I just started mucking around with manipulating images to see what could be done with them. Also taking a lot of paintings that I photographed and then re-photographed. Doing a lot of tearing up of paintings and putting them back together, dousing them with things. I also use a lot of froissage [a collage technique involving crumpled paper]. There is an artist I very much like called Ladislav Kijno. He’s a wonderful painter and he did this froissage a lot. I watched this film on him and he’d be painting away and then put a sheet of paper on top. He’d then pull that off, so you would have a new image of that, and so on.

Then he’d screw that up, and then do even more things to it. He was a big influence.

**I’m thinking also of artist Gerhard Richter?**

Yes, but it depends which Richter. I like the late abstract stuff very much, but I don’t like those earlier blurry paintings.

**Was there anyone else who influenced you?**

There is also very late Warhol done with oxidation and metal. They are really beautiful although they are not very well known. I’m not a fan of Warhol’s in general, but I really like that stuff. That was definitely another influence. I also use chance in quite a deliberate way. I am more interested in process than results, but if I can get a result I like then it’s great. What I really like about Ladislav Kijno though was that he was very eclectic and always doing different things. Although I don’t set out to copy anyone, I do think other people’s work can be very inspiring, whether that applies to writing, TV, painting or whatever. But the art is totally different to food because it’s like a perpetual experimental. I really don’t know what is going to happen next.

*The Plagiarist in the Kitchen, a recipe book by Jonathan Meades, is out in October*  
[unbound.co.uk](http://unbound.co.uk)

*Ben Building. Mussolini: Monuments, Modernism and Marble, presented by Meades, is on the BBC later this year*  
[bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk)

*Ape Forgets Medication: an Exhibition of Treyfs and Artknacks by Jonathan Meades goes on display at Londonewcastle Project Space, 28 Redchurch Street, London E2, 7-27 April*  
[londonewcastle.com](http://londonewcastle.com)