

GOULASH CANNONS AND SOYER COOKERS

THE COOKS AND THE KITCHEN

On a Saturday morning at the end of April, a year after my visit to Brasserie-Restaurant-Party Venue De Volksbond, it seems as though war has broken out in the village of Zonnebeke. The entrance to the local chateau grounds has been blocked off by barbed wire. To the right of that are a few tents and a group of men dressed in Belgian First World War uniforms. Passing a provisional barrier, I see a group of British soldiers led by a sergeant marching – *left, right, left, right* – towards the chateau. To my right, German men are digging a trench. A little further along are two encampments with French, Russian and Australian troops wandering around. Two mounted officers make their way slowly along the shingle path meandering through the chateau grounds.

More than a hundred men and women are spending the weekend re-enacting the First World War. 'Re-enacting' sounds a little unfortunate, considering the seriousness with which it is being carried out. To some visitors it may seem like a First World War version of *Dad's Army*. But these men and women are more than hobbyists; they are experts who know from memory entire detailed histories about the regiments whose members they are imitating.

Amongst them is Kristof Blieck, Education Officer of the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 and organiser of the museum's weekend with its 'big historic evocation,' as it is called in the promotion leaflet. He is wearing the uniform of a Belgian soldier from the war era. Blieck is a large figure clad in khaki, with a brown belt tied around his corpulent stomach and a copper helmet on his head. He has arranged for me to assist the three cooks in their

preparation of the food for the re-enactors. 'The forgotten heroes,' Blieck suggests, referring to the cooks in the war. He points at three men in greasy aprons standing in the field kitchen they have set up in the museum grounds. The cooks have started making breakfast: baked beans, white bread, vegetarian sausages for the devotees and Lorne sausage, a kind of mince that has been pressed into slices and is fried in large frying pans.

The field kitchen consists of two rusty Soyer cookers and a blackened oven, attached to which is a baking tin measuring a metre in length. On these, four cauldrons are bubbling. Delicate wisps of smoke spiral out of the cookers' chimneys. Behind the cooking units stands a white marquee stocked with further cauldrons, tins of baked beans, and bags of potatoes and frozen meat. Kitchen equipment is spread out on to a table, and there are crates with pots of salt, pepper, parsley, packets of tea, matches, metal plates, mugs, soup spoons, whisks and other small items.

The inventory resembles the list of kitchen utensils described in the *Handboek van den kok te Velde* (*Handbook for the Field Cook*), written by 'a commander of a unit' within the Belgian Army. It is a catalogue of the bare minimum a soldiers' kitchen should have in wartime in order to prepare a nutritious meal. It includes a decent butcher's knife (with a 26cm blade), a steel, a tin opener, a butcher's saw, a skimmer for fried dishes, a nutmeg grater, two meat boards, a coffee filter and a wooden masher.

A special mention on the list – because it was the most important tool for a cook according to the guide – was a mincer. This could be used for all kinds of tasks: grinding coffee, mincing meat 'for the meatballs and pies,' chopping vegetables and grating cheese for macaroni.

According to the British regulations, the mincers were especially useful for grinding bones into small pieces. These pieces of bone had to be kept in nets marked 1, 2 and 3, so that the cooks could differentiate between the bones from the first, second and third day. All nets had to be stored in a stock pot, and each day the contents of this pot had to simmer for six to eight hours. The dirt that rose to the surface had to be skimmed off as often as possible. The stock pots were indispensable for supplies of stock, soups, stews, meat pies and gravy.

In Zonnebeke, I am measured for a uniform from a Tasmanian unit that served in the war; green trousers and a jacket with a white and red emblem on its sleeves. Above the jacket's epaulettes is spelled out in metal letters the word 'Australia.' It is not exactly a suitable outfit for a kitchen auxiliary, but that doesn't matter, Blieck thinks: 'In civilian clothes you'd stand out too much. Now you're part of the set-up.'

The cook with a Royal Scots Regiment cap on his head wipes his hands on his apron, shakes my hand and introduces himself as Pete Scally. 'You're late,' he barks. He runs his eyes down me and growls: 'Do you know Gordon Ramsay, that grumpy chef from Scotland?' I nod. 'I'm also from Scotland,' replies Scally. 'And I'm even more grumpy than him. Take those hands out of your pockets and get to work, or bugger off.'

Cooks worked hard during the war. They were the first to get up to prepare breakfast and went to bed last. Between these times they were constantly busy keeping the fires burning in their kitchens, cooking and making sure their working environment was clean.

Even though a cook by no means always worked in the front line, neither could he be sure of whether he would live or die. Like high church steeples and the chimney stacks of factories, the plumes of smoke rising from the field kitchens were an ideal target for enemy fire. Those field kitchens were sometimes reduced to rubble as a result of shelling, and the cooks themselves would not be spared. But there were definite advantages: a cook was not, or rarely, involved in exhausting exercises, was not part of the working parties that had to dig out the collapsed trenches, and hardly ever took part in man-to-man combat. An exception was during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, when the British cooks saw off a German attack. One of the cooks was armed with no more than a spoon. In Zonnebeke, John Stelling, one of Scally's colleagues, demonstratively waves a large ladle in the air and laughs: 'Can you imagine what it must feel like to be hit by one of these?'

'Start dishing out the sausages,' Scally orders when breakfast in Zonnebeke is ready and I have meanwhile tied a white apron around my waist. A long queue of waiting soldiers, officers, machine gunners, cavalrymen and Red Cross nurses gather with their mess tins, plates and cutlery to be served their food. I see

Germans with handlebar moustaches and steel helmets, British men who have carefully smeared mud on their faces because they were supposed to have been lying face down in a trench. In the queue are Australians with their plumed hats and French re-enactors wearing long blue coats. As if there isn't war on, but world peace has broken out instead.

Scally is up for it today. He is a decent guy whose nose is put out of joint sometimes, or rather, pretends it has been. 'Smile boy, smile, or aren't you happy you're getting some food?' he says to a lad in the queue. 'Smile! Like that! Here, your plate. And now bugger off.' His eyes peer from below his bushy eyebrows at the queue slowly filing past. He stands with a stoop, as though he is preparing for a rugby scrum. When Scally was serving with the Royal Military Police in Northern Ireland he was injured in his spine after a bomb attack. 'That back is getting worse and worse,' Scally says. 'In ten years' time I'll be completely bent double, my head resting on my chest. It could've been worse. There was nothing left of one my colleagues to find after the attack.'

Scally was not only a member of the Royal Military Police; for twenty-five years he was also a Cook Sergeant in the British Army, and during that time prepared food for a company of one hundred men. Now he is retired, partly because of his back trouble, but he still misses army life. That's why, in 1996, he set up the 29th Field Kitchen with a group of military history buffs who arrange authentic catering for First World War and Second World War re-enactments. The division of roles is clear: Scally is the boss; John Stelling from Newcastle works as a kind of sous-chef and stirs the pot containing the baked beans; Andrew Harris, from a village near Belfast, is responsible for making tea and stoking the cookers and the oven. I haul in wood, occasionally stir in one of the cauldrons with a wooden spoon, fry sausages and do the washing-up.

The field kitchen was the highlight in the daily gloom of the war. It had to try and keep the men on their feet during long marches. When marching at normal pace, the troops usually got a ten-minute break every hour. During the marches, the cook drove the horses that pulled the wagons carrying the cooking pots. Together with his assistant cooks, he was responsible for keeping the field kitchen's fire burning. After fifty minutes of marching, the men lay

down on the ground, massaged their stiff muscles and smoked a cigarette. There was no rest for the cook. The break was used to allow the food in the pots to cook until done. The coal had to be poked; cauldrons had to be stirred. He was not allowed to be distracted by anything. Only after a long day's marching, when the last food had been served to the waiting soldiers and officers and the cauldrons had been scrubbed clean, was the cook able to think about himself.

'I was up all night making tea for the lads as they come out of the line,' British soldier William Bink wrote on 26 July 1915 in his diary. Bink was working in France with the transport division of the 1/8th Leeds Rifles Battalion (West Yorkshire Regiment):

We moved again on the 27th and it is no fun cooking for your own men and then making tea for 1,000 men and officers and having to drive your own cookhouse about. We stopped two days and moved again at night and it rained again in torrents. I am about half dead with cooking all day and then at night in the saddle 6 and 7 hours at a stretch with two spirited horses that it takes you all your time to hold and wet to the skin.

After the Race to the Sea, the kitchens had to be better equipped and made more mobile. It was absolutely vital that the wagons, sometimes pulled by mules, could come close to the front line. If the lines between the kitchen units and the men in the front line were too long, then this would render the supply of food more difficult.

The mobile field kitchen tended to comprise a front and rear wagon, the latter intended as a cooking island on wheels. The front wagon consisted of four asbestos sections to keep food warm. The rear of the front wagon contained the knives, a hatchet and other kitchen utensils. The rearmost wagon was made of steel with five to eight cauldrons to cook in. In drawers at the back, the cooks kept their supplies of sugar, tea, salt and herbs, but also candles, cleaning brushes and canvas buckets. The cooks were only able to prepare the simplest of meals in a field kitchen; little more than stews, beans, carrots and potatoes were served up as hot food.

On the Western Front stood hundreds of cooking installations. The British *Manual of Military Cooking and Dietary* from 1917 describes the use of all kinds of ovens and other appliances with curious names such as the Richmond Cooking Apparatus, Warren's Improved Appliance, Dean's Iron Ovens, Dean's Steel Boilers and Dean's Combined Cooking Apparatus. Most of these pots or ovens were big enough to prepare coffee or boil vegetables for fifty men.

The Germans used two types of field kitchens during the war, pulled by two horses: the large field kitchen (the *Heeresfeldküche Modell 1911*) and the small field kitchen (the *Heeresfeldküche Modell 1912*). These were called *Gulaschkanonen* (goulash cannons) by the Germans. The large field kitchen was meant for companies of 125–250 men. The most important part consisted of a round, double-walled, 200-litre cauldron. The inner wall was made of nickel, the outer of copper. The space between the walls was filled with glycerine to stop the food from burning. The large field kitchen also included a single-walled, square coffee kettle that could hold 90 litres. In a later version, which was produced from 1913 onwards, the cooks also had a 30-litre roasting and warming oven at their disposal.

Thousands of cooks were needed to prepare the food and to gather wood for the field cooker fires. It was a quite a job getting these going if the wood had been rained on and was wet. The cook had to lay small criss-crossed bundles of dry wood on top of the coal and cover this with more coal. Then he could light the fire. If no suitable fuel was to hand, the British cooks would sometimes use the hard (in actual fact inedible) biscuits from the men's ration to light a fire.

Thriftiness was the order of the day when it came to using fuel. The fires were not allowed to burn any longer than was necessary. Once the soup had reached boiling point, some of the coal and wood had to be removed from the fire. This could be re-used later on. Only strict, specific rations of coal and wood were allowed to be used per type of oven or cooker. Warren's Improved Appliance was clearly economical, as it roared on 2 kilograms of coal, whereas a brick kiln needed more than 7 kilograms.

Where there were no field kitchens, alternatives had to be devised. The British guidelines for these, in the *Manual of Military Cooking and Dietary*, read like an SAS survival guide. Beer barrels

could be used as cooking pots by cutting off one end and covering the sides and top with clay. Dug-out sections of trenches or hollowed-out ants' nests were suitable substitute ovens. Shepherd's pie could easily be made in washing bowls, and empty Maconochie tins were perfect for cooking pastry-based pies. Puddings could be prepared in ration sacks, and there was no better makeshift oven than a biscuit tin.

Only after all the re-enactors in Zonnebeke have been given their meal are the cooks allowed to eat. This can involve some waiting, as the odd person doesn't say no to a second helping. We have a thirty-minute break. Perched on folding chairs, we chew the baked beans, bread and Lorne sausage. The pressed slices were pink before they landed into the pan, now they are golden and taste unexpectedly good.

The cooks are proud of their field kitchen and of their oven, retrieved by the cooks themselves at the beginning of the 1990s from a British Army storage depot. The original appliance had been kept there for a while in case of a nuclear war, when cooking units would be needed that worked without electricity or gas. They are also proud of their Soyer cookers, with their 45-litre volume, all original as well, and invented by the Frenchman Alexis Soyer in an attempt to feed the troops during the Crimean War better than had been possible before. 'Soyer, the Gordon Ramsay of his time,' Harris tells me.

Cooks, good cooks, were highly valued in the war. If they managed to improvise in impossible situations and prepare a hot meal with precious little firewood and under enemy fire, they were worshipped. At times, there was plenty of food. The cooks would make thick soups or stews full of vegetables and meat. The men could have two helpings, two full mess tins. And when they were finally eating, entire companies would sit down in silence. In a crouched position, stooped, to prevent the soil from the top of the trench dropping into their food. Or because shells would splash the mud up so high that it ended up in their stew or scrambled eggs with fried potatoes.

At other times, the news of losses, of yet further fatalities, would take days to reach the reserve lines. Those lines would hold rations for more men than was needed. At such times, there was food aplenty.

The cooks at or behind the front not only took care of feeding the troops. The field kitchen or kitchen unit was also known as the 'village pump,' the place where people gathered for the latest news, gossip and tall stories: that a regiment had to be broken up in order to be moved to another part of the front; that the French General Joffre, the German Crown Prince or the British King – always one of them – had been killed in battle; or that peace, peace at last, would soon be declared and everyone could go home again. The 'Cookhouse Official' is what the British called these vague persistent rumours and half-truths emanating from the kitchen brigade.

Amongst the cooks who prepared the supplied provisions and stirred their big pots were experienced men. They included distinguished figures such as the French master chef Morla, who was decorated with the *Cross de Guerre* (Cross of War) for the valour he had shown wielding the ladle under enemy fire. There were cooks working at the front who had stood behind the stoves of hotels and restaurants in major cities such as Frankfurt, Wiesbaden, Sheffield, Leicester, Lyon and Bordeaux. Chefs who thought nothing of preparing roast pig with plump lentils. But more than anything these were the men who were of little use in combat and were therefore placed behind the stove, just as conscientious objectors were able to contribute to the war effort as cooks or assistant cooks. Older men too, or men who had large families at home, were sometimes spared by being allowed to work as cooks and keeping them away from the firing line as much as possible.

A few months after my visit to Zonnebeke, in the Reading Room of the Imperial War Museum in London, I have in front of me dozens of letters from British soldier Jack Sweeney, who was deployed as a cook at the front. Large yellowed sheets with scrawling handwriting, and smaller notes he penned with a small nib or blunt pencil under candlelight. There are also postcards issued by the army at the time, on which Sweeney could mark in a kind of multiple-choice menu whether he was injured, would soon be on leave or that he was doing well, by deleting what was appropriate. A single line, no more than that.

The ink in the letters has watered down and faded over the years, and this makes the handwriting difficult to read. Sweeney wrote down long confessions: about his love for home, his homesickness,

his growing aversion towards the conditions in which he had to live at the front and about how pointless he thought the war was. But things didn't always turn out badly for Sweeney. In a letter dated 17 December 1915 he wrote to a friend that he had been lucky and had been deployed as an officers' cook. Earlier in the war, Sweeney had worked as a cook, when he had stood behind the pots in an area where there was little to fear. Now he wrote that, much to his regret, he nonetheless had to go to the front to cook. Anything was better than standing guard, but he found it tough going. It was hard work preparing food on an old bucket filled with coal while his officers expected a five-course dinner.

And yet the position of cook was sought after. The men who cooked for officers in particular had a relatively good existence. The men Sweeney served were not only given large portions but also the best of what was available. Food that the cooks could have themselves. Sweeney was deployed in a trench in which he had the use of a dug-out to cook in. Once the officers had eaten, they would usually leave so much that Sweeney would invite the men in from the trench and offer them a hot meal and a cup of tea. These were leftovers, but the soldiers were glad that they were able to eat something and shelter from the rain. They crawled into the dug-out like wet dogs and snuggled up against each other. The warmth inside wicked the moisture from their clothes. It cheered him up, Sweeney wrote to a friend, that he could give them something.

Like Sweeney, most cooks at the front had no practical experience whatsoever. Only later in the war were prospective cooks trained for a few weeks in especially established cookery schools before they went to work at the front. The Americans had set up a butchery school in Florida where men learnt how to cut and debone meat. The US Army also sent trained butchers to France to teach the cooks these skills. But this training was often inadequate and not completed.

Complaints about the quality of the food were plentiful. In the trenches, the men sang, to the tune of 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus,' the song 'When this Lousy War is Over':

When this lousy war is over no more soldiering for me,
When I get my civvy clothes on, oh how happy I shall be.

No more NCOs to curse me, no more rotten army stew,
You can tell the old cook-sergeant, to stick his stew right
up his flue.

At the end of 1915, the British organised the training of cooks and catering staff in the army in earnest, with the appointment of a catering inspector and fourteen catering instructors. The Cook Sergeant, a Pete Scally type, was the boss in a battalion kitchen. He allocated the work, took orders and, most importantly, guarded the key to the pantry. Officers were responsible for ensuring that a few men in every British company focused on the instruction of field kitchen construction, cutting meat and cooking itself. This did not stop inexperienced cooks from preparing food throughout the war, such as the gunner Stuart Chapman, who occasionally was put to work in the kitchen, for example, in October 1918. The rations had just arrived, and he was tasked with cooking. He did not have much cooking experience, but he was a dab hand at improvising. He found an old bucket in which he cooked cabbage and potatoes, fried beans in four ounces of butter and added some tea. In order to peel the potatoes and cut the meat, he used an old shaving knife. In Chapman's opinion, it was the best meal he had eaten since Christmas 1916.

The *Manual of Military Cooking and Dietary* from 1917 defines a number of the cook's tasks. In this guide, cleanliness is paramount. The kitchens must be spotless and the utensils spick and span, even if you only had a handful of grass, hay or ashes from a wood fire to scrub and polish the iron pots with.

There were further guidelines cooks had to keep to, such as those outlined in the booklet titled *Things that every cook should know*. The cook and his assistants had to wear clean, washable aprons over their canvas uniforms, and they were forbidden to shave or relieve themselves in the kitchen unit and pantry. Each cook needed to have at his disposal a washing bowl, soap and a clean towel. Food had to be covered in muslin in order to protect it against dust and flies, and every pantry had to have a meat safe for storing the meat. No food residue or kitchen items should be on the floor of the pantry or kitchen unit. There, the rule applied that once a week the entire area should be cleansed by whitewashing.



German soldiers having a meal. (In Flanders Fields Museum)



German soldiers sharing a beer. (In Flanders Fields Museum)

If meals were prepared in a field kitchen then the cooks had to clean the cauldrons thoroughly every day. Without this cleaning mania, too much food would perish and be lost, while the warm summers and primitive circumstances were already responsible for food going off quickly.

Private W.D. Corney, a member of the South Lancashire Regiment, was one of the British soldiers who was taught to cook. He followed a course at the School of Cookery in Brighton. The Imperial War Museum in London has a well-thumbed green-marbled notebook that once belonged to Corney. It extends to eighteen pages. When I open it, I see that he has noted down recipes in a graceful script for, amongst other things, bread baked with baking powder, tinned-meat pie, rice with apples, and braised meat with rice for one hundred men. Apart from recipes, the notebook also contains drawings by Corney: sketches of a French kitchen and a so-called Aldershot oven with instructions for how to build it; portraits drawn with a fountain pen of, according to their captions, one Cecily Debenham and 'The Dawson Girl' also feature. The prospective army cook clearly had other things on his mind than ovens and recipes.

An Aldershot oven had to be installed if there was no regular oven or field kitchen available. According to Corney's description, its construction was a rather complicated affair. It starts with a list of what was needed to build one: two arched sections, four bars, two ends, one bottom plate, one peel and a baking tin. Then follows a set of instructions which suggest that the cooks evidently needed to have engineering skills: place the oven on a gentle slope, avoiding sandy or marshy ground. Smooth and clear the site. Place the four bars in position and attach the arches to these, the flanged back arch in such a way that it overlaps the front one. Face the mouth of the oven towards the prevailing wind. Fix the back plate firmly in the ground and attach two arches to this with wire. Lay an arch of two rows of bricks over the front of the oven. Cover the remaining part of the oven in a clay mixture of up to twelve inches thick with a backwards slope of ten inches, which needs to continue for a further twenty-three inches to carry off the rain. Built like this, the cook had a functional oven at his disposal which would cater for 200 men.

The description is almost unintelligible. It's no surprise Corney had his mind on other things and was also thinking about Cecily Debenham and 'The Dawson Girl.'

In the Liddle Collection in Leeds, I come across another notebook, by a gunner named O'Brien. He also gives a description of the Aldershot oven, with an even more lucid drawing. The notebook also contains a sketch showing the edible parts of a cow.

Zonnebeke. After breakfast I take a thirty-minute turn around the site to see what the other re-enactors are doing. There is a stall staffed by Red Cross nurses on which all kinds of medical attributes from the First World War are displayed. Elsewhere, soldiers and officers are polishing saddles and cleaning guns. Over our heads buzzes an old, small yellow plane. A model from just after the war, but okay. Even though the atmosphere is a little lethargic and sluggish, it gives an impression of what it must have been like at the front.

When I return, Scally says: 'Ah, there you are. I thought you'd deserted.' He gives me the recipe for potato soup for one hundred men which will be served for lunch: '52 pounds of potatoes, cut into slices. 22 pounds of leeks, cut into pieces. A little salt, pepper, parsley, thyme and coriander. Cook everything until the potatoes are done and falling apart. This gives the soup body.' He shoves a knife into my hands. Those potatoes and leeks are for me, I understand.

As was the case with the British, the German Army initially worked largely with inexperienced cooks. In Germany, it was not until 1916 that men were deployed for work in the kitchen who had properly learned their trade. Better organisation was also needed. Witness the booklet *Die Gulaschkanone, Soldatenkochbuch für's Feld!* (*The Goulash Cannon: A Soldier's Cookbook for the Field*), compiled by the German cook Walter Schmidkunz. Commissioned by the army in 1915, Schmidkunz had tried to give the troops in the field some 'no experience necessary' cooking instructions for all possible circumstances. In his foreword, Schmidkunz wrote:

My field experiences proved to me that the kitchen menu hardly, if ever, rises above soup with beef, preserved foodstuffs, rice, goulash, tinned beans, potatoes, coffee and tea. This is always due to inexperienced officers or a bad cook.

It belongs to the main army responsibilities that the meals of the field kitchen should be greatly improved because of the extraordinary importance of varied, nutritious and tasty food for the troops in the field. The cause of numerous gastric and intestinal diseases which occur on a daily basis in parts of the front, yes, even an overall physical malaise amongst the soldiers lies in the frugality of what the kitchens have to offer. For this the *Gulaschkanone* offers a contribution. Moreover, this booklet will prevent harmful food preparations as well as urgently advises the use of diverse ingredients.

Ultimately, Schmidkunz wanted to see more beaming faces above the mess tins. And he never wanted to hear again: 'In God's name, food is food and an order is an order.' 'Because,' Schmidkunz wrote, 'like love, the way to victory is through the stomach!'

The growing shortage of food in Germany and, by extension, amongst the troops meant that the preparation of nutritious meals became ever more important. It required skill to be able to serve up good food with limited means. For that reason, from June 1916 onwards, a growing number of soldiers received cookery lessons. The main goal during the three-week course was to train twenty-five to thirty kitchen teams, led by an experienced professional chef, in preparation of varied meals. The men who learned a genuine trade in this way came under the responsibility of the quartermaster, the officers of a regiment, the *fourrier* (quartermaster) and *Küchenfeldwebel* (kitchen sergeant). Answerable to the cook were two assistant cooks. These had to peel potatoes, cut vegetables, chop wood, fetch water and keep everything clean. Exactly my role in Zonnebeke during the museum weekend at the end of April.

The booklet *Anweisungen für Truppenküchen* (*Instructions for Soldiers' Kitchens*), which was used in the training of German cooks and which had been drawn up by a committee of three men, contains a raft of practical suggestions:

Take advantage of the cooking skills of campers. Use a spirit burner with two pans with tightly-closing lids and a large surface area for rapid heating, for example the one offered

by Natterer from Munich, a practical field kitchen called 'Sieg' [Victory], an appliance that burns on methylated spirit. Bicarbonate of soda is good for improving drinking water and helps soften dried vegetables. Potassium is important for preserving meat. If, after transport or due to warm weather, meat is in the first stage of decay, it should be soaked in potassium for a short time and rinsed in water. The meat will lose its unpleasant smell and taste. Instead of butter for roasting and sautéing, lard, grease or vegetable oil can be used just as easily. Before transit, eggs are best packed in flour, sugar or salt; butter in a loaf of bread of which the inside has been scooped out; meat in a cloth soaked in vinegar. Tough, old meat becomes tender by rubbing it with brandy, wine-spirit or stomach bitter.

There were other people who gave some thought to what soldiers were given to eat, such as one Hans Werner, who wrote a recipe booklet for the trenches: *Kochbuch für den Schutzengraben (Cookbook for the Trenches)*. It is full of recipes for roasting meat and preparing fish, eggs, potato dishes, sauces, rice, vegetables and dishes with apples. Werner also wrote a heartening poem:

Whoever joins the soldiers
Likes roast in his hide-out.
Sometimes with a piece of fish
The lieutenant enriches his dish.

Yes. In the entire trench, it's true
One gladly wants good stuff.
Caviar and truffles are too dear,
Therefore, take eggs, about some four
Make a pancake or an omelette.
Shouldn't it come off, it's again your move.

Potatoes in their jackets
With gravy or just dry, whichever you want.
Oatmeal, peas, bones or rice,
Nothing healthier to feed on.

Even a genuine water hater
Cooks his veggies in some water,
So let it all be to your taste
Whenever there's a cease-fire.

This booklet of general's quality
Makes you prepared for heroic deeds.

Just as with the British regulations, the German ones emphasised the importance of hygiene in the kitchen. The clothes of the kitchen staff had to be clean at all times. Pots and kitchen utensils had to be cleaned immediately after use. Constant airing of the kitchen units behind the front was important, and smoking was not allowed. Dogs and cats were only allowed in these kitchens to catch rats and mice, and only after cooking and when there were no longer any articles of food present. NCOs and men who worked there had to make sure they were checked twice a week for infectious diseases.

It was not only rats and mice that had to be controlled, but also flies, which were especially dangerous as they would come into contact with the food and contaminate it. They could transmit diseases such as dysentery, an infection of the digestive tract, and typhoid, an illness that is characterised by high fever, drowsiness, skin rash and diarrhoea or constipation. That's why the kitchen windows had to be sealed in muslin and all articles of food had to be covered. Waste had to be removed instantly. Dung and waste heaps were not allowed to be near a kitchen, as these would attract flies.

The longer the war lasted, the scarcer food became. It became increasingly important to use it efficiently. The British document *Things that every cook should know* advised the cook to keep the meat of fat and bones and turn this into a stock. This meat could be used for pâtés, shortcrust pastries or brawn. Fat should not be thrown out, but collected and melted, and could thus serve as a base for sauces and for making sautéed potatoes, apple slices or macaroni. In order to avoid waste, cheese should not be cut into chunks, but into 1.5-inch square cubes. Any remnants of cheese could be incorporated into a cheesecake or Welsh rarebit. Food that was left on plates could be utilised as a filling for pasties. In Zonnebeke, Pete Scally used all kinds of leftovers to make his famous soup: the

'Goesinto,' thus named because 'everything goes into it.' The motto in the various manuals was clear-cut time and again: do not throw anything away, because days of plenty are rare.

The French distribution system collapsed as early as 1915. When, at the time, the army tried to hoodwink the general population into believing that the men at the front were getting two meals a day, Army Command received tens of thousands of furious letters from soldiers who knew better. The Germans had to make ever greater efforts to get sufficient food to the front line. This was not least because the country was completely cut off from the outside world as a result of the Allied blockade and virtually unable to import anything to alleviate its great need. The situation for the British was not much better: because of the submarine warfare declared by the Germans, the number of British ships transporting food across the channel diminished rapidly. The British government placed the responsibility with the men themselves. It campaigned for less baked beans with beef and less bully beef. They shamelessly called on the men to 'Eat Less and Save Shipping.' But the soldiers adopted the slogan and soon corrupted it into 'Eat Less and Save Shitting.'

Zonnebeke, late April. When, on Sunday morning at 8 a.m. I arrive on foot at the chateau grounds, I see that Scally, Stelling and Harris have already started preparing breakfast: scrambled eggs with a slice of white bread. I'm late again. The previous night we worked until 9 p.m. cleaning the pots and pans. After that we drank pint after pint on a terrace in Ypres until 3 a.m. Scally, Harris and Stelling told stories: the modern-day Cookhouse Officials. The story of Scally, for example, who, somewhat the worse for drink, was preparing a dinner for a group of officers. He made savoury biscuits with pâté as an appetiser. After the meal, officer after officer came up to Scally to heap praise on him for the quality of the food and especially the biscuits. Everyone wanted to have the recipe. The following day, sober again, Scally saw that instead of pâté he had spread cat food on to the biscuits.

Truly fit we are not this day. After a short night with much alcohol we get on with our work wearily and in silence. Harris makes tea and, standing at a burning Soyer cooker, wipes the sweat from his brow. In a temperature of 23 degrees, and with the field kitchen

positioned in full sun, it is hot in front of the fires. Stelling breaks the eggs in some pans and Scally lays out slices of white bread. I kneel with difficulty in front of a tin of warm water and begin to do the washing-up. From the chateau domain, gunshots ring out from the trenches dug yesterday: Germans firing at the British. Dozens of Belgians who have come to the museum weekend watch the battle from the tops of the trenches.

It's all about routine in the kitchen, I realise: starting the fire in the morning, hauling wood all day long to keep the fire burning, maintaining the water in the Soyer cookers at the right temperature so that men and women can have tea at any time of the day, and constantly getting yet another meal ready.

Routine or not, cooks take pride in their work, in Zonnebeke as well. Four factors are key here, Scally, Stelling and Harris teach me later that day. The food should not only be nutritious, but tasty. The meals should look appetising and should be served on time. This last aspect is something we are not managing particularly well today. Because the shops did not open until 8 a.m., and we were only able to buy our ingredients then, all the meals are served later than planned. Scally isn't happy with that. 'Fucking shops,' he complains. After having made me clean the cookers and cauldrons, he tasks me with peeling dozens of kilograms of potatoes at speed for mashed potatoes, which will be served that afternoon alongside Scottish stew. Once again, those potatoes. 'Faster lad, faster!' Scally urges me. 'People are hungry!'

With a knife in my hand, my fingers dirty from the soot of the cooking pots, I dispatch bag after bag of potatoes. I ask Scally where the satisfaction lies for him, with all that routine of preparation, cooking and cleaning, followed by more preparation, cooking and cleaning. He rubs his chin and ponders this. 'Satisfaction, eh?' he asks, pausing to think. 'I think it has to do with a kind of family feeling,' he finally says. 'Everyone here does his or her best. Everyone in their own way and as best as they can.'

He places his hands on his stomach and muses: 'It makes you feel good, doing something for the men and women who also work hard here. We are all like coals in a fire. If the little coals don't burn, the big ones won't either.'

BROWN FLOUR SAUCE*Ingredients*

lard
flour
water

Preparation

Heat the lard or butter. Add the flour, stirring constantly until the sauce turns brown (for each spoon of flour use a nut-sized piece of butter or lard). Slowly add some cold water. Boil this down until it is done and, while stirring constantly, little by little add small amounts of water until the sauce has the desired richness. If it suits the dish, mushrooms and herbs can be fried in the lard at the same time.

Die Gulaschkanone (The Goulash Cannon)

CABBAGE SOUP*Ingredients*

one small Savoy or white cabbage
2 tablespoons of lard
4 tablespoons of flour
1.5 litre of water
pinch of pepper
salt

Preparation

Clean the cabbage, cut into slices and wash. Heat up the lard and braise the cabbage in this. Sprinkle flour over the cabbage and stir well. Add 1.5 litre of water and simmer for one and a half to two hours. Season with salt and pepper.

Kriegskochbuch, Anweisungen zur einfachen und billigen Ernährung (War Cookery Book: Instructions for Simple and Cheap Nourishment)