

Bill O'Hagan, pioneer of Britain's sausage renaissance, died on May 15th, aged 68

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The best sound in the world to Bill O'Hagan was the slow crescendo of sausages sizzling in a pan; the best smell, the charred skins of the same; the best sight, a glistening heaped plateful of the same, with mash; the best taste, a succulent tongue-teasing blend of minced lean pork, rolled oats, fresh eggs, sea-salt, chervil and winter savoury, generously dosed with real ale. He lived for sausages and—a close second—beer, and had the girth and rosy cheeks to prove it. "Sausages? I love 'em!" he would cry, before the interviewer had asked one question; and twitching aside his striped butcher's apron he would show, on his own plump anatomy, the best bits of a pig for his purpose.

British commercial sausages, before he arrived on the scene, were poor limp things, flaccidly pink, that would burst and stick in the pan (hence "banger") and lie heavy on the stomach. They tasted of nothing much, and that was just as well, because they were composed of muscle, gristle, head-meat and tail, padded out with rusk, injected with 11 chemicals and stuffed in a plastic tube. "Bloody rubbish!" Mr O'Hagan called them, unworthy of the name of sausage, though post-war Britons, with their propensity to chew stoically on anything, liked them well enough. Doused with brown sauce they became a national dish, of sorts; together with flabby fish and chips eaten out of yesterday's newspaper, and jam roly-poly pudding.

Mr O'Hagan was the man who, from the 1980s, started to change all that. First, he put proper meat into sausages. Second, he removed the breadly filler. Then he took the chemicals and additives out, replacing them with alecost, tansy and woodruff, plants of the hedgerows, which were natural preservatives. "No nasties!" his flyers promised. Once the true nobility of the British sausage was restored (a nobility that needed no pricking, for a proper sausage never exploded), he began to play about with flavours, adding apples or brandy or blue cheese, or ginger, or coriander. He reckoned he had tried 2,000 variations, of which about 160 went into regular production. They included Pork, Banana and Honey, made at the request of children when he featured on a TV show.

History often inspired him. His Pork and Spinach came from a mention in Samuel Pepys's diaries, and his Boerewors from a 1920s Women's Institute cookbook. In 2005 he celebrated Nelson's victory with Trafalgar sausages, containing a generous tot of rum. He travelled to Spain for a 600-year-old recipe for chorizo, and wandered the South Downs in Sussex to find herbs the Romans might have used when they introduced sausages to Britain. Not least he dug back into his family past in South Africa, reviving his great-great-grandfather's lean-pork-and-oats recipe from the 1820s. His boyhood in Natal had been enlivened by Saturday-morning lessons in a butcher's shop, picking up pork- and beef-mincing from a nostalgic Yorkshireman. He was said to have fled South Africa in 1970 after a run-in with the police over sausages seasoned with marijuana.

His apogee came when the British Sausage Appreciation Society crowned him the best sausage-maker in the country. He had won his laurels largely as an amateur. For years he made the sausages in his garden shed, and he combined this labour of love with being a night editor on the Daily Telegraph, sweeping in to work in a black cape "like a ruddy-cheeked vampire", one colleague said, with packed coolboxes of his produce to sell to hungry subs. At 4.30am, when he left again (many pints of good beer to the wind, and driving a decommissioned black cab, which he claimed was less likely to be stopped by the police), the boxes would be empty. Sausage-making at last took him over in 1988, when he opened the world's first fresh-sausage shop in Greenwich. By 1991 he was selling 2m a year, and super-premium sausages had become the rage throughout the land.

Sadly, they were not all his. In fact, relatively few were. The world of sausages had turned cut-throat. Supermarkets wanted to muscle in, and one sent spies to his shop to buy a sample of each variety; suspicions aroused, he gave chase in a minicab, but could not catch them. Martin Heap, employed to help him with the financial side of the business, left him to set up Simply Sausages and hit the big time, with shops in central London and a contract with Waitrose supermarkets. Mr O'Hagan, whose main retail outlets were the Woolpack Inn near Chichester and a clutch of local farmers' markets, claimed that Mr Heap had taken many recipes with him.

But recipes, alas, could not be patented. Mr O'Hagan locked them in his safe like treasure, and when he strolled in his cold-room among the flecked and gleaming, subtly coloured garlands of pork and beef, treasure was what he saw. An expert taster, though, could soon tell what was in them—including the make of beer, for Mr O'Hagan loved to declare whenever Ballard's Best Bitter had been poured into the mix.

Apart from that, there was no bitterness in his nature. He failed to make a fortune, but he thoroughly enjoyed himself. By tradition a British butcher is a jolly chap; and few could be jollier than a man whose life was devoted, first, to making the perfect sausage, and, second, to matching it with the perfect foaming pint.