**[Food with thought](https://www.dawn.com/news/1840778/food-with-thought)**

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IT is not a novel idea: which interesting personality would you want to share a meal with? From 2012, The New York Times has run a weekly column ‘By the Book’, in which famous authors are asked to identify three writers (dead or alive) they would like to invite for a literary dinner. Predictably, most chose William Shakespeare — provided he spoke modern English.

Even earlier, since 1994, the UK’s Financial Times ran its series ‘Lunch with the FT’, in which a singularly important living personality was invited for an interview over lunch at a location of their choice, at FT’s expense. Out of 1,000 or so lunches, the FT selected 50 interviews, publishing them as Lunch with the FT — A Second Helping (2019).

Intended to be a one-to-one, the FT occasionally had to pay also for accompanying security details. One brought five guards. Modest by Pakistani standards, where no leaders worth their salt travel without a 50-strong police escort, not counting the ambulance team.

Not every interviewee honoured FT’s open-palmed largesse. The newspaper tycoon Richard Desmond, for example, ordered a bottle of wine before the FT host could open the menu. It cost £580.

Many of the interviews themselves border on literature.

The Brexit spoiler Nigel Farage (who now threatens to disrupt the forthcoming UK general elections) preferred to drink before, during and after his meal, and then between meals.

Donald Trump for his interview in 2013 chose his own Trump Grill, in the basement of his own Trump Towers on Fifth Avenue, New York. The bill for two came to a modest $74.

His fellow American Edward Snowden released CIA’s and NSA’s classified documents to The Guardian and to The Washington Post and then had to seek asylum in Russia. (Putin has since granted him Russian nationality.) Snowden asked his interviewer Alan Rusbridger (formerly editor-in-chief of The Guardian) to meet him in the latter’s room in the secluded Golden Apple Hotel in Moscow.

Snowden’s choice of food was unexpected: spicy chicken curry, followed by ice cream. His trenchant remarks about the limited choices before the US voter in 2016 — Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton — will resonate among voters of recent elections across the world. He complained: “We’re a country of 330 million people and we seem to be asked to make a choice between individuals whose lives are defined by scandal.”

Particularly moving is the interview with the juvenile Bana al-Abed, trapped at Aleppo in the war between the Syrian regime and opposition militias. In the absence of coverage by journalists, she became the voice from the carnage through her Twitter feeds, managed by her mother.

Especially poignant were her tweets in December 2016: “My name is Bana. I am seven years old. This is my last moment to live or die.” Earlier she had posted: “I am sick now, I have no medicine, no home, no clean water. This will make me die before a bomb kills me.” She spoke for every child in Gaza.

Readers of the FT book who savour the pickle of corruption should read the interview with Sepp Blatter, the controversial head of FIFA 1998-2016. He admits being startled at the 14-8 decision in December 2010 to award the Soccer World Cup 2022 to Qatar. He had tried to rig the vote ‘behind the scenes’ to ensure that the 2018 and 2022 competitions would go to the ‘two superpowers’ Russia and the US.

Blatter griped that French president Sarkozy had let him down. After an indecent interval, in April 2015, Qatar bought 24 French Dassault Rafale jets for $7 billion. (Pakistanis will recognise overtones in the infamous French Agosta 90B submarine deal in 1994. Sarkozy was then budget minister.)

Many of the FT interviews themselves border on literature. The novelist Hilary Mantel who has written best-sellers on the Tudors and Thomas Cromwell was asked whether she was the greatest English prose writer. Her reply was artfully simple: “You’re only as good as your next sentence.”

The best interview — it is a personal view — is the one of Roger Federer by Simon Kuper, conducted on board a private jet flying from Zurich to Madrid. Federer talks movingly about balancing the demands of world-class tennis with the imperative of playing Lego with his young son.

Kuper concludes with this paragraph that is an ace in itself: “Federer throws an arm around me, and I put my hand on his back. Every other back I’ve touched felt like a single undefined mass. On Federer’s back you feel every bone and muscle. It’s like reading an anatomy textbook in Braille.”

It is sentences like these which subordinate the locale, the food consumed, and the price of the meal. Such interviews elevate reportage into an art form.

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