

Taste

There were six of us at dinner that night at Mike Schofield's house in London: Mike and his wife and daughter, my wife and I, and a man called Richard Pratt.

Richard Pratt was famous for his love of food and wine. He was president of a small society known as the Epicures, and each month he sent privately to its members information about food and wines. He organized dinners where wonderful dishes and rare wines were served. He refused to smoke for fear of harming his ability to taste, and when discussing a wine, he had a strange habit of describing it as if it were a living being. 'A sensible wine,' he would say, 'rather shy but quite sensible.' Or, 'A good-humoured wine, kind and cheerful – slightly rude perhaps, but still good-natured.'

I had been to dinner at Mike's twice before when Richard Pratt was there, and on each occasion Mike and his wife had cooked a very special meal for the famous epicure. And this one, clearly, was to be no exception. The yellow roses on the dining table, the quantity of shining silver, the three wine glasses to each person and, above all, the faint smell of roasting meat from the kitchen brought on a strong desire for the immediate satisfaction of my hunger.

As we sat down, I remembered that on both Richard Pratt's last visits Mike had played a little betting game with him over the claret. He had asked him to name it and to guess its age. Pratt had replied that that should not be too difficult if it was one of the great years. Mike had then bet him a case of that same wine that he could not do it. Pratt had accepted, and had won both times. Tonight I felt sure that the little game would be played again, since Mike was quite ready to lose the bet to prove that his wine