It shouldn’t take a huge effort of imagination to picture yourself at a fiendishly difficult meeting on car manufacturing held in an industrial town of northern Europe, all grey skies and even greyer expressions. You prepare the meeting with executive rigour, poring over magazines that car enthusiasts buy (one mid-life crisis I have deftly sidestepped), watching YouTube clips on how to find your spark plug and discovering firsthand the unalloyed joys of double-declutching. Loins thus girded, you work your little socks off at the meeting, rendering the trials and tribulations of the car industry with accuracy, good humour and a clear windscreen.

So far, so good.

The organisers have invited all the participants to dinner at a famous local restaurant, and the interpreters have been asked along too – a generous afterthought it would be churlish to spurn. Evening comes and you mingle, drink in hand, until called in to dinner. At the table you find yourself sitting with delegates from several countries and at this point someone says it’s lucky you’re here because the menu is written only in the local language, but you can do a sight translation so we know what to choose. An alarm bell tingles quietly in one of the deeper recesses of your brain.

Topping the menu is a list of local fish, and if you could just run through the options, they would be very grateful. Fish! Nobody in their right mind or booth would venture the name of a fish without consulting a long list or surfing the net, and you have been busy enough recently learning the difference between a camisole and a camshaft. But here you are at the dinner table, expectant eyes on you, as you scrabble through your stalled brain to think of some fish names. Bass, bream, scream...The trick at this point is to create a diversion. Adopt a pensive pose and ask: “Isn’t the snarling sea cucumber in danger of extinction because of by-catch in the Norwegian pout box?” This masterly gambit will hook several fish with one worm (birds and stones never put to sea).

People won’t have the foggiest idea what you are talking about but will probably prefer to keep that to themselves. The thronged diners will see you as a woman or man of wisdom, vision, a veritable sea-salt au fait with the complexities of fisheries policy and the environment. If there are some doubters in your new fan club who still want to know the Danish for Portuguese Chubby Chops, clinch it with something along these lines: “But they are a straddling stock as defined by the recent UN agreement.” Only a consummate expert can use such a term without risking a hernia, so you’ll have rescued your and the team’s reputation. Good save.

There is another aspect to food and interpreters that has at times left me wondering.

Try not to talk about this at home, but eating out is one of the joys of the job, at least when we are not called upon to work at the same time. I have sometimes wondered exactly what waiters make of us. I’m sure that people who work in restaurants develop an ability to place their clients by
nationality, language, job and quite possibly other things based on the clues an experienced waiter picks up. But what do they make of a gaggle of garrulous interpreters? A group of six of us could well speak five languages, often at once. Someone asks a question in Spanish and someone else replies in French and then the French speaker makes a joke in English. This does not make for easy pigeonholing. And we do tend to say things that, let’s face it, sound a tad pretentious to outsiders. “Did we meet in Reykjavik or Cape Town?” “I just loved that wine bar in Buenos Aires we went to all the time.” “I’m not going back to Kuala Lumpur because of the terrible drafts in the convention centre.” And in the meantime four colleagues are comparing the cost of fresh lobster in Bali and Havana. So you’ll concede me that tad.

This is but the innocent badinage of working interpreters. Although it would be wrong to assume that we’re immune to name dropping (Tony Blair and I often discuss its perils), I think it fair to say that we are not (always) trying to boast when we say these things. It’s an attempt to find some kind of structure in our unsettled lives; constant travel precludes our taking an evening class in spot-welding at the local college but we can instead wax lyrical on recipes for cooking walrus. Once a waiter even asked me, “Who are you people? Everyone talks at once and nobody listens?” We clearly did not fit into his normal – read reticent – client profile.

I just looked up a quotation that was on the tip of my brain: “What is patriotism but the love of food one ate as a child?” attributed to the Chinese writer and translator Lin Yutang. I expect we all have a favourite taste that takes us tumbling back to childhood. In line with the low expectations inculcated by my culinary homeland, I like a soft boiled egg and strips of hot buttered toast to dip in it (we call it boiled egg and soldiers). But while waiting to realize that dream of soothing comfort, we can always chatter our way through slap-up meals in *per diem*-swallowing restaurants – just as long as there are no unidentified fish on the menu.

Recommended citation format: