

The taste of success

■ Here's something that the French may find hard to swallow. Simon Hulstone, a 20-year-old chef at Bristol's Royal Swallow Hotel, has just won a gold medal for cooking in the International Youth Skills Olympics in Lyons – the gastronomic capital of France, if not the world.

Simon, one of 25 young Britons who tested their skills in contests watched by 250,000 people, earned the highest overall score of any of the 500 youngsters from 28 countries in competitions covering 40 trades. The French did not even collect a diploma, let alone a bronze medal in cookery.

These days their skills lie in bricklaying and refrigeration techniques while young Germans carried off golds in plastering, painting and decorating and men's hairdressing. It is six years since the UK last won a gold medal and then it was for women's hairdressing.

Things should soon be looking up in the canteens of UK Plc, at least.

Wondermobile

■ Is there no end to what the Germans will do to rekindle the good old days of unbridled, 1950s-style economic growth?

Days after Chancellor Helmut

Kohl was urging them to take more risks in an attempt to revive the *Wirtschaftswunder*, Rewe, one of the country's biggest supermarket chains, has launched a special bargain week, which, in a deeply clever, punning fashion, it's calling... *Wirtschafts Wunder Wochen*.

Topping the bill is the VW Beetle – imported from Mexico. Rewe has shipped over about 300 and is selling them for the knockdown price of DM16,666. While VW dealers are furious that supermarkets are now selling Beetles, the slowness with which they're going out the door suggests things were *indeed* better in the 1950s.

Do it slowly

■ National Heritage secretary Virginia Bottomley is very keen that the BBC should adhere to the finest standards of taste and decency. But her department doesn't seem to have the same sense of urgency about soft pornography beamed into the UK by satellite.

Jon Davey, head of cable and satellite at the Independent Television Commission, sent a formal recommendation in March that action should be taken against Sweden's TV Erotica, which can be received via satellite in the UK. He's still waiting to hear. But the battle against invading porn goes on. Davey has just written to the

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'Norman's a curmudgeon's curmudgeon'

heritage department again, this time trying to get something done about *Rendezvous*, a French channel, also broadcasting out of Sweden. Keep it up, Jon.

Cartoon capers

■ Admirers of Banx, whose daily pocket cartoon has illustrated this column for several years, may care to know that he has just published a new collection.

Called *The Many Deaths of Norman Spittal*, and published by Insect Publications, the book (price £4.99) defies easy categorisation. Indeed, Norman's antics are quite

likely to turn the grey matter a whiter shade of pale.

To quote the blurb, Norman is "an insignificant non-entity, more sinned against than sinning, who buttons his cardigan and carefully knots his tie as he suffers the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune". Phew.

Third man

■ Bank mergers are all the rage these days. So Observer is distressed to hear that Bank Austria, Austria's biggest bank, is having such difficulty getting GiroCredit, Austria's third largest, to bend to its will.

Ever since a majority stake in Giro was acquired by Bank Austria's controlling shareholder, a city of Vienna foundation, the two sides have been bickering. Gerhard Randa, the Harley Davidson biker running Bank Austria, complained publicly a couple of weeks ago that Giro was dragging its feet on integrating the two banks' foreign offices.

Giro officials, who were trying to drum up support for a Sch2bn capital injection, were miffed by this intervention and accused Randa of being in a rush only because his New York and London branches were doing badly while Giro's were doing well.

Bad blood comes naturally to these two. Giro, traditionally a "black" (conservative) institution, was far from thrilled when the

"red" (socialist) city of Vienna, on Randa's recommendation, upped its stake to 56 per cent last year. The city in turn was dismayed when Giro passed its dividend, which meant that it had to dig deeper into its own pockets to service the loan it took out to buy the Giro shares in the first place.

Bank Austria has swallowed Giro's investment banking and fund management activities, and Giro is increasingly worried that there soon won't be much left. Hence, Giro's minority shareholders, Austria's 75 savings banks, are being leaned upon to block Randa's grand ambitions.

Giro chief executive Herbert Lugmayr and Randa, former colleagues at Vienna's old Zentralsparkasse, plan to thrash the matter out in Vienna today.

Germ of an idea

■ Maybe next time you visit your doctor for a check-up you should ask when was the last time the stethoscope was examined.

Peter Cartwright, a pharmaceuticals analyst with Williams de Broe, has appended some vital information to a piece of research. A recent census of 160 physicians taken at a "major Paris teaching hospital" revealed that only 12 per cent of them regularly cleaned their stethoscope; of the instruments examined for bacteria, 53 per cent had more than four times the acceptable level.