

'Women are not allowed at the Old Bridge Inn Pork Pie Appreciation Society. But members have graciously agreed to suspend standing orders for the evening.

'We did once admit a woman," muses one member. 'We were going through an expansionist phase. "But it didn't last. She had to go. It seems women prefer watching Blind Date to drinking beer and eating pork pies of a Saturday evening."

I am, they tell me, incredibly privi-legged to be invited to their weekly pork pie fest. Regular drinkers are used to this unlikely gathering in the far corner of Ripponden's picturesque Old Bridge Inn.

The society has been meeting here for 10 years, attracting attention from television, national newspapers and radio. An eerie hush descends and excited members huddle round the ceremonial serving box. Tonight's specimens have been brought for dissection. Members take it in turns to seek out the best pies in the land, with the condition that they are freshly baked on the Saturday



President' Kevin Booth says he can tell straight away if the butcher has been fibbing.

"We've had pies before that haven't been fresh they've been spruced up a bit in the oven. "That's known as 'boosting' and it's a dirty trick." Vice-president John Denton by day the well-respected supremo of Quarry Garage, Outlane is this week's pie fetcher.

'We once had some Red Starred in from the Malvem country. But they were completely inedible. We threw them to the swans in the river outside the pub," he says. Then there was the lengthy journey through the sleet and snow to collect a consignment from Derbyshire. But they too failed to meet association standards and were tossed straight over the bridge.

"Kevin has an especially low tolerance level of bad pies," continues John. "Generally, the best ones come from Bamsley and the Colne Valley." "Some of the worst pies come from Lancashire, although we did have some real classics from Lytham once," the president chips in. John explains the official procedure "The first test is its overall appearance. "How well filled it is. Whether or not it's hand made. Does it have a distinctive tapered shape? "The next step is to smell the pie. And take a bite. "We take into account the flavour and spicing of the jelly. The texture and taste of the meat is it granular, chewy or crumbly? "You have to watch out for the nasty bits, like pigs' toenails or teeth we've had them before." The pie is assigned a mark out of 10

Every member gets to air his view. "It's a good workman-like pie for everyday. Nice lean meat, but a bit too salty," says Peter Charntey, who currently holds the trophy for best pie fetcher. "It reminded me of the seaside," said another member, to jibes about rotting fish. "It's got a nice fancy edge," added a third man. The identity of the pie is then ceremoniously revealed as the creation of butcher Michael Thewlis, of Golcar. Conversation drifts to past master-pieces as members, brimming with pastry and good spirits, wind down now the serious business is over. "We had a pork and apple pie once," reminisces John. "It caused some controversy, I can tell you. "But they're the best nights, when some give it three out of 10, but the fetcher insists it's worth nine and a half." Kevin believes the society has singlehandedly raised the standard of pies across the north of England. "Now butchers are competing among themselves to come up with better and better pies, and putting a lot more effort in." But have they ever been lured away from their cause to test the charms of, say, the sausage roll? My innocent enquiry is greeted with all round frowns and dark mutterings. What would the point be in that?