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# A Critic at Large

- The Promises Martha Stewart Made—and Why We Wanted to Believe Them

# The Promises Martha Stewart Made—and Why We Wanted to Believe Them

From 2000: By branding herself not as Superwoman but as Everywoman, Stewart made even her troubles an integral part of her success.

By [Joan Didion](#)

February 13, 2000



## Content

According to “The Web Guide to Martha Stewart—The *UNOFFICIAL Site!*,” which was created by a former graduate student named Kerry Ogata as “a thesis procrastination technique” and then passed on to those who now maintain it, the fifty-eight-year-old chairman and C.E.O. of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia L.L.C. (“MSO” on the New York Stock Exchange) needs only four hours of sleep a night, utilizes the saved hours by grooming her six cats and gardening by flashlight, prefers Macs in the office and a PowerBook for herself, commutes between her house in Westport and her two houses in East Hampton and her Manhattan apartment in a G.M.C. Suburban (“with chauffeur”) or a Jaguar XJ6 (“she drives herself”), was raised the second-oldest of six children in a Polish-American family in

Nutley, New Jersey, has one daughter, Alexis, and survived “a non-amicable divorce” from her husband of twenty-six years, Andrew Stewart (“Andy” on the site), who then “married Martha’s former assistant who is 21 years younger than he is.”

Contributors to the site’s “Opinions” page, like good friends everywhere, have mixed feelings about Andy’s defection, which occurred in 1987, while Martha was on the road promoting “Martha Stewart Weddings,” the preface to which offered a possibly prescient view of her own 1961 wedding. “I was a naïve nineteen-year-old, still a student at Barnard, and Andy was beginning Yale Law School, so it seemed appropriate to be married in St. Paul’s Chapel at Columbia in an Episcopalian service, mainly because we didn’t have anyplace else to go,” she wrote, and included a photograph showing the wedding dress she and her mother had made of embroidered Swiss organdy bought on West Thirty-eighth Street. On-line, the relative cases of “Martha” and of “Andy” and even of “Alexis,” who originally took her mother’s side in the divorce, get debated with startling familiarity. “BTW, I don’t blame Andy,” one contributor offers. “I think he took all he could. I think it’s too bad that Alexis felt she had to choose.” Another contributor, another view: “I work fifty hours a week and admit sometimes I don’t have time to ‘be all that I can be’ but when Martha started out she was doing this part-time and raising Alexis and making a home for that schmuck Andy (I bet he is sorry he ever left her).”

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Although “The *UNOFFICIAL* Site!” is just that, unofficial, “not affiliated with Martha Stewart, her agents, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, LLC or any other Martha Stewart Enterprises,” its fairly lighthearted approach to its subject’s protean competence (“What can’t Martha do? According to Martha herself, ‘Hang-gliding, and I hate shopping for clothes’ ”) should in no way be construed as disloyalty to Martha’s objectives, which are, as the prospectus prepared for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia’s initial public offering last October explained, “to provide our original ‘how-to’ content and information to as many consumers as possible” and “to turn our consumers into ‘doers’ by offering them the information and products they need for do-it-yourself ingenuity ‘the Martha Stewart way.’ ” The creators and users of “The *UNOFFICIAL* Site!” clearly maintain a special

relationship with the subject at hand, as do the creators and users of other unofficial or self-invented sites crafted in the same spirit: "My Martha Stewart Page," say, or "Gothic Martha Stewart," which advises teen-agers living at home on how they can "goth up" their rooms without freaking their parents ("First of all, don't paint everything black") by taking their cues from Martha.

"Martha adores finding old linens and gently worn furniture at flea markets," users of "Gothic Martha Stewart" are reminded. "She sews a lot of her own household dressings. She paints and experiments with unusual painting techniques on objects small and large. She loves flowers, live and dried . . . and even though her surroundings look very rich, many of her ideas are created from rather simple and inexpensive materials, like fabric scraps and secondhand dishes." For the creator of "My Martha Stewart Page," even the "extremely anal" quality of Martha's expressed preoccupation with the appearance of her liquid-detergent dispenser can be a learning experience, a source of concern that becomes a source of illumination: "It makes me worry about her. . . . Of course it is just this strangeness that makes me love her. She helps me know I'm OK—everyone's OK. . . . She seems perfect, but she's not. She's obsessed. She's frantic. She's a control freak beyond my wildest dreams. And that shows me two things: A) no one is perfect and B) there's a price for everything."

There is an unusual bonding here, a proprietary intimacy that eludes conventional precepts of merchandising to go to the very heart of the enterprise, the brand, what Martha prefers to call the "presence": the two magazines (*Martha Stewart Living* and *Martha Stewart Weddings*) that between them reach ten million readers, the twenty-seven books that have sold eight and a half million copies, the weekday radio show carried on two hundred and seventy stations, the syndicated "AskMartha" column that appears in two hundred and thirty-three newspapers, the televised show six days a week on CBS, the weekly slot on the CBS morning show, the cable-TV show ("From Martha's Kitchen," the Food Network's top-rated weekly show among women aged twenty-five to fifty-four), the Web site ([www.marthastewart.com](http://www.marthastewart.com)) with more than one million registered users and six hundred and twenty-seven thousand hits a month, the merchandising tie-ins with Kmart and Sears and Sherwin-Williams (Kmart alone last year sold more than a billion dollars' worth of Martha Stewart merchandise), the

catalogue operation (*Martha by Mail*) from which some twenty-eight hundred products (Valentine Garlands, Valentine Treat Bags, Ready-to-Decorate Cookies, Sweetheart Cake Rings, Heart Dessert Scoops, Heart Rosette Sets, Heart-Shaped Pancake Molds, and Lace-Paper Valentine Kits, to name a few from the on-line “*Valentine’s Day*” pages) can be ordered either from the catalogues themselves (eleven annual editions, fifteen million copies) or from Web pages with exceptionally inviting layouts and seductively logical links.

These products are not inexpensive. The Lace-Paper Valentine Kit contains enough card stock and paper lace to make “about forty” valentines, which could be viewed as something less than a buy at forty-two dollars plus time and labor. On the “Cakes and Cake Stands” page, the Holiday Cake-Stencil Set, which consists of eight nine-inch plastic stencils for the decorative dusting of cakes with confectioner’s sugar or cocoa, sells for twenty-eight dollars. On the “marthasflowers” pages, twenty-five tea roses, which are available for eighteen dollars a dozen at Roses Only in New York, cost fifty-two dollars, and the larger of the two “suggested vases” to put them in (an example of the site’s linking logic) another seventy-eight dollars. A set of fifty Scalloped Tulle Rounds, eight-and-three-quarter-inch circles of tulle in which to tie up wedding favors, costs eighteen dollars, and the seam binding used to tie them (“sold separately,” another natural link) costs, in the six-color Seam-Binding Ribbon Collection, fifty-six dollars. Seam binding sells retail for pennies, and, at Paron on West Fifty-seventh Street in New York, not the least expensive source, one-hundred-and-eight-inch-wide tulle sells for four dollars a yard. Since the amount of one-hundred-and-eight-inch tulle required to make fifty Scalloped Tulle Rounds would be slightly over a yard, the on-line buyer can be paying only for the imprimatur of “*Martha*,” whose genius it was to take the once familiar notion of doing-it-yourself to previously uncharted territory: somewhere east of actually doing it yourself, somewhere west of paying Robert Isabell to do it.

This is a billion-dollar company the only real product of which, in other words, is *Martha Stewart* herself, an unusual business condition acknowledged in the prospectus prepared for *Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia*’s strikingly successful October I.P.O. “Our business would be adversely affected if: *Martha Stewart*’s public image or reputation were to be tarnished,” the “Risk Factors” section of the prospectus read in part. “*Martha*

Stewart, as well as her name, her image, and the trademarks and other intellectual property rights relating to these, are integral to our marketing efforts and form the core of our brand name. Our continued success and the value of our brand name therefore depends, to a large degree, on the reputation of Martha Stewart.”

The perils of totally identifying a brand with a single living and therefore vulnerable human being were much discussed around the time of the I.P.O., and the question of what would happen to Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia if Martha Stewart were to become ill or die (“the diminution or loss of the services of Martha Stewart,” in the words of the prospectus) remained open. “That was always an issue for us,” Don Logan, the president of Time Inc., told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1997, a few months after Stewart managed to raise enough of what she called “internally generated capital,” \$53.3 million, to buy herself out of Time Warner, which had been resisting expansion of a business built entirely around a single personality. “I think we are now spread very nicely over an area where our information can be trusted,” Stewart herself maintained, and it did seem clear that the very expansion and repetition of the name that had made Time Warner nervous—every “Martha Stewart” item sold, every “Martha Stewart Everyday” commercial aired—was paradoxically serving to insulate the brand from the possible loss of the personality behind it.

The related question, of what would happen if “Martha Stewart’s public image or reputation were to be tarnished,” seemed less worrisome, since in any practical way the question of whether it was possible to tarnish Martha Stewart’s public image or reputation had already been answered, with the 1997 publication and ascension to the *New York Times* best-seller list of “Just Desserts,” an unauthorized biography of Martha Stewart by Jerry Oppenheimer, whose previous books were unauthorized biographies of Rock Hudson, Barbara Walters, and Ethel Kennedy. “My investigative juices began to flow,” Oppenheimer wrote in the preface to “Just Desserts.” “If her stories were true, I foresaw a book about a perfect woman who had brought perfection to the masses. If her stories were not true, I foresaw a book that would shatter myths.”

Investigative juices flowing, Oppenheimer discovered that Martha was “driven.” Martha, moreover, sometimes “didn’t tell the whole story.” Martha

could be “a real screamer” when situations did not go as planned, although the case Oppenheimer makes on this point suggests, at worst, merit on both sides. Martha was said to have “started to shriek,” for example, when a catering partner backed a car over the “picture-perfect” Shaker picnic basket she had just finished packing with her own blueberry pies. Similarly, Martha was said to have been “just totally freaked” when a smokehouse fire interrupted the shooting of a holiday special and she found that the hose she had personally dragged to the smokehouse (“followed by various blasé crew people, faux concerned family members, smirking kitchen assistants, and a macho Brazilian groundskeeper”) was too short to reach the flames. After running back to the house, getting an extension for the hose, and putting out the fire, Martha, many would think understandably, exchanged words with the groundskeeper, “whom she fired on the spot in front of everyone after he talked back to her.”

Other divined faults include idealizing her early family life (p. 34), embellishing “everything” (p. 42), omitting a key ingredient when a rival preteen caterer asked for her chocolate-cake recipe (p. 43), telling readers of *Martha Stewart Living* that she had as a young girl “sought to discover the key to good literature” even though “a close friend” reported that she had “passionately devoured” the Nancy Drew and Cherry Ames novels (p. 48), misspelling “villainous” in a review of William Makepeace Thackeray’s “Vanity Fair” for the Nutley High School literary magazine (p. 51), having to ask what Kwanzaa was during a 1995 appearance on “Larry King Live” (p. 71), and not only wanting a larger engagement diamond than the one Andy had picked out for her at Harry Winston but obtaining it, at a better price, in the diamond district (p. 101). “That incident should have set off an alarm,” a “lifelong friend” told Oppenheimer. “How many women would do something like that? It was a bad omen.”

This lumping together of insignificant immaturities and economies for conversion into character flaws (a former assistant in the catering business Martha ran in Westport during the nineteen-seventies presents the damning charge “Nothing went to waste. . . . Martha’s philosophy was like someone at a restaurant who had eaten half his steak and tells the waiter ‘Oh, wrap it up, and I’ll take it home’ ”) continues for four hundred and fourteen pages, at which point Oppenheimer, in full myth-shattering mode, reveals his trump card, “an eerie corporate manifesto” that “somehow slipped out of Martha’s

offices and made its way from one Time Inc. executive's desk to another and eventually from a Xerox machine to the outside world. . . . The white paper, replete with what was described as an incomprehensible flow chart, declared, in part":

In Martha's vision, the shared value of the MSL enterprises are highly personal—reflecting her individual goals, beliefs, values and aspirations. . . . "Martha's Way" can be obtained because she puts us in direct touch with everything we need to know, and tells/shows us exactly what we have to do. . . . MSL enterprises are founded on the proposition that Martha herself is both leader and teacher. . . . While the ranks of "teaching disciples" within MSL may grow and extend, their authority rests upon their direct association with Martha; their work emanates from her approach and philosophies; and their techniques, and products and results meet her test. . . . The magazine, books, television series, and other distribution sources are only vehicles to enable personal communication with Martha. . . . She is not, and won't allow herself to be, an institutional image and fiction like Betty Crocker. . . . She is the creative and driving center. . . . By listening to Martha and following her lead, we can achieve real results in our homes too—ourselves—just like she has. . . . It is easy to do. Martha has already "figured it out." She will personally take us by the hand and show us how to do it.

Oppenheimer construes this purloined memo or mission statement as sinister, of a piece with the Guyana Kool-Aid massacre ("From its wording, some wondered whether Martha's world was more gentrified Jonestown than happy homemaker"), but in fact it remains an unexceptionable, and quite accurate, assessment of what makes the enterprise go. Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia L.L.C. connects on a level that transcends the absurdly labor-intensive and in many cases prohibitively expensive table settings and decorating touches (the "poinsettia wreath made entirely of ribbon" featured on one December show would require of even a diligent maker, Martha herself allowed, "a couple of hours" and, "if you use the very best ribbon, two or three hundred dollars") over which its chairman toils six mornings a week on CBS. Nor is the connection about her recipes, which are the recipes of Sunbelt Junior League cookbooks (Grapefruit Mimosas, Apple Cheddar Turnovers, and Southwestern Style S'Mores are a few from the most recent

issue of *Martha Stewart Entertaining*), reflecting American middle-class home cooking as it has existed pretty much through the postwar years. There is in a Martha Stewart recipe none of, say, Elizabeth David's transforming logic and assurance, none of Julia Child's mastery of technique.

What there is instead is "Martha," full focus, establishing "personal communication" with the viewer or reader, showing, telling, leading, teaching, "loving it" when the simplest possible shaken-in-a-jar vinaigrette emulsifies right there onscreen. She presents herself not as an authority but as the friend who has "figured it out," the enterprising if occasionally manic neighbor who will waste no opportunity to share an educational footnote. "True," or "Ceylon," cinnamon, the reader of *Martha Stewart Living* will learn, "originally came from the island now called Sri Lanka," and "by the time of the Roman Empire . . . was valued at fifteen times its weight in silver." In a television segment about how to serve champagne, Martha will advise her viewers that the largest champagne bottle, the Balthazar, was named after the king of Babylon, "555 to 539 B.C." While explaining how to decorate the house for the holidays around the theme "The Twelve Days of Christmas," Martha will slip in this doubtful but nonetheless useful gloss, a way for the decorator to perceive herself as doing something more significant than painting pressed-paper eggs with two or three coats of white semi-gloss acrylic paint, followed by another two or three coats of yellow-tinted acrylic varnish, and finishing the result with ribbon and beads: "With the egg so clearly associated with new life, it is not surprising that the six geese a-laying represented the six days of Creation in the carol."

The message Martha is actually sending, the reason large numbers of American women count watching her a comforting and obscurely inspirational experience, seems not very well understood. There has been a flurry of academic work done on the cultural meaning of her success (in the summer of 1998, the *New York Times* reported that "about two dozen scholars across the United States and Canada" were producing such studies as "A Look at Linen Closets: Liminality, Structure and Anti-Structure in *Martha Stewart Living*" and locating "the fear of transgression" in the magazine's "recurrent images of fences, hedges and garden walls"), but there remains, both in the bond she makes and in the outrage she provokes, something unaddressed, something pitched, like a dog whistle, too high for traditional textual analysis. The outrage, which reaches sometimes startling

levels, centers on the misconception that she has somehow tricked her admirers into not noticing the ambition that brought her to their attention. To her critics, she seems to represent a fraud to be exposed, a wrong to be righted. “She’s a shark,” one declares in *Salon*. “However much she’s got, Martha wants more. And she wants it her way and in her world, not in the balls-out boys’ club realms of real estate or technology, but in the delicate land of doily hearts and wedding cakes.”

“I can’t believe people don’t see the irony in the fact that this ‘ultimate homemaker’ has made a multi-million dollar empire out of baking cookies and selling bed sheets,” a posting reads in *Salon*’s “ongoing discussion” of Martha. “I read an interview in *Wired* where she said she gets home at 11pm most days, which means she’s obviously too busy to be the perfect mom/wife/homemaker—a role which many women feel like they have to live up to because of the image MS projects.” Another reader cuts to the chase: “Wasn’t there some buzz a while back about Martha stealing her daughter’s BF?” The answer: “I thought that was Erica Kane. You know, when she stole Kendra’s BF. I think you’re getting them confused. Actually, why would any man want to date MS? She is so frigid looking that my television actually gets cold when she’s on.” “The trouble is that Stewart is about as genuine as Hollywood,” a writer in *The Scotsman* charges. “Hers may seem to be a nostalgic siren call for a return to Fifties-style homemaking with an updated elegance, but is she in fact sending out a fraudulent message—putting pressure on American women to achieve impossible perfection in yet another sphere, one in which, unlike ordinary women, Stewart herself has legions of helpers?”

This entire notion of “the perfect mom/wife/homemaker,” of the “nostalgic siren call for a return to Fifties-style homemaking,” is a considerable misunderstanding of what Martha Stewart actually transmits, the promise she makes her readers and viewers, which is that know-how in the house will translate to can-do outside it. What she offers, and what more strictly professional shelter and food magazines and shows do not, is the promise of transferred manna, transferred luck. She projects a level of taste that transforms the often pointlessly ornamented details of what she is actually doing. The possibility of moving out of the perfected house and into the headier ether of executive action, of doing as Martha does, is clearly presented: “Now I, as a single human being, have six personal fax numbers,

fourteen personal phone numbers, seven car-phone numbers, and two cell-phone numbers," as she told readers of *Martha Stewart Living*. On October 19th, the evening of her triumphant I.P.O., she explained, on "The Charlie Rose Show," the genesis of the enterprise. "I was serving a desire—not only mine, but every homemaker's desire, to elevate that job of homemaker," she said. "It was floundering, I think. And we all wanted to escape it, to get out of the house, get that high-paying job and pay somebody else to do everything that we didn't think was really worthy of our attention. And all of a sudden I realized: it was terribly worthy of our attention."

Think about this. Here was a woman who had elevated "that job of homemaker" to a level where even her G.M.C. Suburban came equipped with a Sony MZ-B3 Minidisc Recorder for dictation and a Sony ICD-50 Recorder for short messages and a Watchman FDL-PT22 TV set, plus phones, plus PowerBook. Here was a woman whose idea of how to dress for "that job of homemaker" involved Jil Sander. "Jil's responded to the needs of people like me," she is quoted as having said on "The *UNOFFICIAL* Site!" "I'm busy; I travel a lot; I want to look great in a picture." Here was a woman who had that very October morning been driven down to the big board to dispense brioches and fresh-squeezed orange juice from a striped tent while Morgan Stanley Dean Witter and Merrill Lynch and Bear, Stearns and Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette and Banc of America Securities increased the value of her personal stock in the company she personally invented to \$614 million. This does not play into any "nostalgic siren call" for a return to the kind of "homemaking" that seized America during those postwar years when the conversion of industry to peacetime production mandated the creation of a market for Kelvinators, yet Martha was the first to share the moment with her readers.

"The mood was festive, the business community receptive, and the stock began trading with the new symbol MSO," she confided in her "Letter from Martha" in the December *Martha Stewart Living*, and there between the lines was the promise from the mission statement: *It is easy to do. Martha has already "figured it out." She will personally take us by the hand and show us how to do it.* What she will show us how to do, it turns out, is a little more invigorating than your average poinsettia-wreath project: "The process was extremely interesting, from deciding exactly what the company was (an 'integrated multimedia company' with promising internet capabilities) to

creating a complicated and lengthy prospectus that was vetted and revetted (only to be vetted again by the Securities and Exchange Commission) to selling the company with a road show that took us to more than twenty cities in fourteen days (as far off as Europe).” This is getting out of the house with a vengeance, and on your own terms, the secret dream of any woman who has ever made a success of a PTA cake sale. “You could bottle that chili sauce,” neighbors say to home cooks all over America. “You could make a fortune on those date bars.” You could bottle it, you could sell it, you can survive when all else fails: I myself believed for most of my adult life that I could support myself and my family, in the catastrophic absence of all other income sources, by catering.

The “cultural meaning” of Martha Stewart’s success, in other words, lies deep in the success itself, which is why even her troubles and strivings are part of the message, not detrimental but integral to the brand. She has branded herself not as Superwoman but as Everywoman, a distinction that seems to remain unclear to her critics. Martha herself gets it, and talks about herself in print as if catching up her oldest friend. “I sacrificed family, husband,” she said in a 1996 *Fortune* conversation with Charlotte Beers, the former C.E.O. of Ogilvy & Mather and a member of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia’s board of directors, and Darla Moore, the president of Richard Rainwater’s investment firm and the inventor of “debtor in possession” financing for companies in bankruptcy. The tone of this conversation was odd, considerably more confessional than the average dialogue among senior executives who know they are being taped by *Fortune*. “Not my choice,” Martha confided about her divorce. “His choice. Now, I’m so happy that it happened. It took a long time for me to realize that it freed me to do more things. I don’t think I would have accomplished what I have if I had stayed married. No way. And it allowed me to make friends that I know I never would have had.”

Martha’s readers understand her divorce, both its pain and its upside. They saw her through it, just as they saw her through her dealings with the S.E.C., her twenty-city road show, her triumph on Wall Street. This relationship between Martha and her readers is a good deal more complicated than the many parodies of and jokes about it would allow. “While fans don’t grow on fruit trees (well, some do), they can be found all over America: in malls, and K-marts, in tract houses and trailer parks, in raised ranches, Tudor condos

and Winnebagos," the parody Martha is made to say in HarperCollins' "Martha Stuart's Better Than You at Entertaining." "Wherever there are women dissatisfied with how they live, with who they are and who they are not, that is where you'll find potential fans of mine." These parodies are themselves interesting: too broad, misogynistic in a cartoon way (stripping Martha to her underwear has been a reliable motif of countless on-line parodies), curiously nervous ("Keeping Razors Circumcision-Sharp" is one feature in "Martha Stuart's Better Than You at Entertaining"), oddly uncomfortable, a little too intent on marginalizing a rather considerable number of women by making light of their situations and their aspirations.

Something here is perceived as threatening, and a glance at "The *UNOFFICIAL* Site!," the subliminal focus of which is somewhere other than on homemaking skills, suggests what it is. What makes Martha "a good role model in many ways," one contributor writes, is that "she's a strong woman who's in charge, and she has indeed changed the way our country, if not the world, views what used to be called 'women's work.'" From an eleven-year-old: "Being successful is important in life. . . . It is fun to say 'When I become Martha Stewart I'm going to have all the things Martha has.'" Even a contributor who admits to an "essentially anti-Martha persona" admires her "intelligence" and "drive," the way in which this "supreme chef, baker, gardener, decorator, artist, and entrepreneur" showed what it took "to get where she is, where most men aren't and can't. . . . She owns her own corporation in her own name, her own magazine, her own show."

A keen interest in and admiration for business acumen pervades the site. "I know people are threatened by Martha and Time Warner Inc. is going to blow a very 'good thing' if they let Martha and her empire walk in the near future," a contributor to "The *UNOFFICIAL* Site!" wrote at the time Stewart was trying to buy herself out of Time Warner. "I support Martha in everything she does and I would bet if a man wanted to attach his name to all he did . . . this wouldn't be a question." Their own words tell the story these readers and viewers take from Martha: Martha is *in charge*, Martha is *where most men aren't and can't*, Martha has *her own magazine*, Martha has *her own show*, Martha not only has *her own corporation* but has it *in her own name*.

This is not a story about a woman who made the best of traditional skills. This is a story about a woman who did her own I.P.O. This is the “woman’s pluck” story, the dust-bowl story, the burying-your-child-on-the-trail story, the I-will-never-go-hungry-again story, the Mildred Pierce story, the story about how the sheer nerve of even professionally unskilled women can prevail, show the men; the story that has historically encouraged women in this country, even as it has threatened men. The dreams and the fears into which Martha Stewart taps are not of “feminine” domesticity but of female power, of the woman who sits down at the table with the men and, still in her apron, walks away with the chips. ♦

By [Nat Hentoff](#)

By [Hilton Als](#)

# **Annals of Gastronomy**

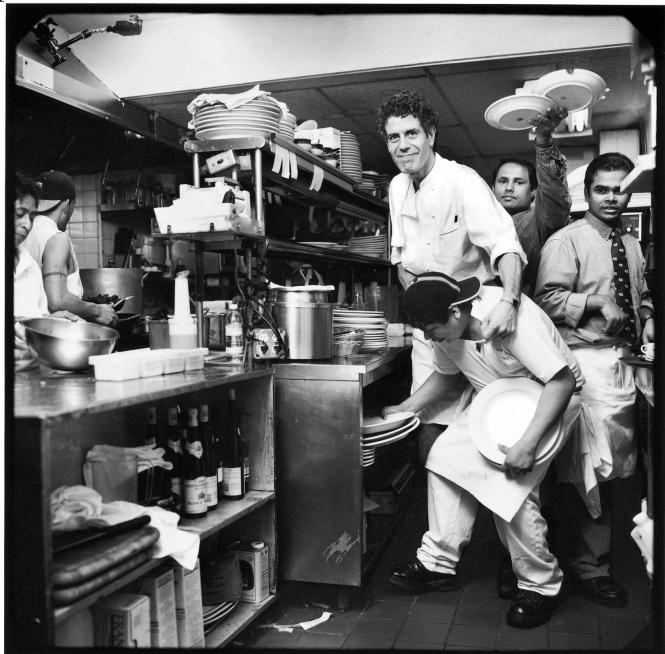
- [One Day—and One Night—in the Kitchen at Les Halles](#)

# One Day—and One Night—in the Kitchen at Les Halles

From 2000: For weekenders at the restaurant on Park Avenue South where I work as the chef, a saddle of wild hare stuffed with foie gras is not a good special.

By [Anthony Bourdain](#)

April 9, 2000



## Content

On Friday morning, I wake up at five-fifty-five. While I brush my teeth, and take my first aspirins of the day, I'm thinking about weekend specials. The grill station will be too busy for elaborate presentations, so I need things that are quick, simple, and easily plated. The people who will be coming tonight and tomorrow night to Les Halles, a restaurant on Park Avenue South where I work as the chef, aren't like the people who come during the week. For the weekenders, a saddle of wild hare stuffed with foie gras is not a good special. Nor is any kind of fish with an exotic name.

Climbing into a taxi on Broadway, I decide that the fish special will be grilled tuna livornaise with roasted potatoes and grilled asparagus. It's a layup. My overworked grill man can heat the already cooked spuds and the blanched asparagus on a sizzle platter; the tuna will get a quick walk across the grill; and all he'll have to do is heat up the sauce at the last minute. For the appetizer special, I'm thinking cockles steamed with chorizo, leeks, tomatoes, and white wine—a one-pan wonder. The meat special is more problematic. The tuna will be taking up most of the grill's time, so the meat will have to be prepared at the sauté station. Not easy. Les Halles features classic French bistro food, and at any one time the sauté station has to be ready to turn out *moules à la marinière*, *boudin noir* with caramelized apples, *filet au poivre*, *steak au poivre*, *steak tartare*, calf's liver *persillé*, cassoulet Toulousain, *magret de moulard* with quince and *sauce miel*, the ridiculously popular mignon of pork, *pieds de cochon*, and a *navarin* of lamb that comes with baby carrots, pearl onions, niçoise olives, garlic confit, tomato *concassée*, fava beans, and chopped fresh herbs. But I've got a leg of venison and twelve pheasants coming in. I decide on the pheasant. I can par-roast it ahead of time, so that all my sous-chef will have to do is take it off the bone and sling it into the oven to finish, then heat up the sauce and the garnishes before serving.

*Published in the print edition of the [April 9, 2000](#), issue.*

As usual when I arrive, Jaimé, the night porter, has his boom box blasting salsa from behind the bar. I check the reservation book—eighty for tonight. I flip through the manager's log—the notebook in which the night guy tells the day guy about customer complaints, repair requirements, employee misbehavior, and important phone calls. I learn that last night my grill man called one of the waiters a cocksucker and pounded his fist on his cutting board in a “menacing way” when five diners came into the restaurant at three minutes before the midnight closing hour and ordered five *côtes de bœuf*, medium-well (cooking time: forty-five minutes). Jaimé grins at me from the stairs. He's covered with grime as a result of hauling hundreds of pounds of garbage out onto the street.

I go down into the cellar to my office, and change into chef's jacket, apron, and kitchen clogs, which are the preferred footwear for chefs because they “breathe” well and give good back support. I find my knife kit, stuff a thick

stack of hand towels into it, and clip a pen into my jacket—sidewise, so it doesn't fall out when I bend over. Taking a ring of keys from my desk, I open the locks on the drygoods-storage room, the walk-in refrigerator, the reach-in coolers, the pastry box, and the freezers. I push back the plastic curtains to the refrigerated *boucherie*—a cool room where the butchers do their cutting—and take the assistant butcher's boom box from the worktable. Then I go back up to the kitchen. While I take cheese, garnishes, mussels, and sauces out of the reach-in at my sauté station, I'm listening to the Dead Boys playing "Sonic Reducer."

Carlos, my daytime grill man, comes in. He has a pierced eyebrow and a body by Michelangelo, and he considers himself a master soupmaker. He asks if I've got any red-snapper bones on the way. Yes. Carlos loves any soup he can jack with Ricard or Pernod, and today's *soupe de poisson* with rouille is one of his favorites. Omar, who works the cold station for appetizers and salads, and has a thick barbed-wire tattoo on one upper arm, is the next to arrive, and he's followed by the rest of the day team: Segundo, the prep centurion; Ramòn, the dishwasher; Janine, the pastry chef; and Camélia, the general manager. (Some of their names have been changed.)

Before noon, I cut and pepper *pavées* and filets; skin and slice calf's liver; caramelize apples; blanch baby carrots; make garlic confit; produce a livornaise sauce for the tuna and start a currant sauce for the pheasant; and assemble the *navarin*. Then I write up the specials so that Camélia can enter them into the computer and set the prices. At eight-thirty, my butcher, Hubert, arrives, looking as if he's woken up under a bridge. He unloads the meat order—*côtes de bœuf*, entrecôtes, rump steaks, racks of lamb, lamb-stew meat, *merguez* sausages, saucisson de Toulouse, *rosette*, pork belly, *onglets*, scraps, meat for steak tartare, pork tenderloins larded with bacon and garlic, pâtés, rillettes, galantines, and chickens.

Every few minutes, I hear the bell ring, as more stuff arrives. Segundo, the prep man, is downstairs checking off the orders as they leave the delivery ramp. Segundo's a mean-looking guy. He's from Mexico, and the other Mexicans at the restaurant claim that he carries a gun and sniffs paint thinner, and that he's done time. But he's the greatest prep cook I've ever had; he uses a full-sized butcher's scimitar to chop parsley, filament-fine.

The last cook to show up is Miguel, our French-fry master. This is a full-time job at Les Halles, where we are justifiably famous for our *frites*. Miguel, who looks like the descendant of an Aztec king, spends his day peeling potatoes, cutting potatoes, blanching potatoes, and then dropping them into three-hundred-and-seventy-five-degree peanut oil, tossing them with salt, and stacking the sizzling-hot fries on plates with his bare hands. I've had to do this a few times, and it requires serious calluses.

I work on a six-burner Garland. There's another range next to it, which is taken up with a bain-marie for sauces, with onion soup, and with stocks—veal, chicken, lamb, and pork—that have been reducing at a slow simmer during the previous day and night. When we're serving meals, one of my burners will be occupied by a pot of boiling water for Omar to dunk ravioli in. On another burner he'll sauté lardons for *frisée* salads, sear tidbits of hanger steak for *onglet* salad, or sauté diced potatoes in duck fat for the *confit de canard*. This leaves me with just four burners on which to prepare most of the orders.

While I'm reducing gastrite—sugar and vinegar—for the currant sauce, I make room next to me for Janine, the pastry chef, so she can melt chocolate over the simmering pasta water. Janine is an ex-waitress from Queens, and although she's right out of cooking school, she's tough. Already, she's had to endure the unwanted attentions of a leering French sous-chef and the usual chick-friendly Mexicans. I admire strong women in busy kitchens. They have a lot to put up with in our high-testosterone locker-room environment.

At eleven-thirty, I convene a meeting of the day waiters and run through the specials, speaking as slowly as I can, so that none of them describes my beautiful pheasant special as tasting “kind of like chicken.” Today's lineup is not too bad: there's Morgan, the part-time underwear model; Rick, who's everyone's first choice for Waiter Most Likely to Shave His Head, Climb a Tower, and Start Shooting Strangers; and a new waiter, who doesn't know what prosciutto is, and who won't be around very long, I suspect. There are also two busboys—a taciturn workaholic from Portugal and a moody Bengali. My runner, whose job is to shout out the orders and shuttle food to the dining room, is the awesome Mohammed, who is capable of carrying five plates without a tray.

It's noon, and already customers are pouring in. Immediately, I get an order for pork mignon, two *boudins*, one calf's liver, and one pheasant, all for one table. The *boudins*—blood sausages—take the longest, so they have to go in the oven instantly. First, I prick their skins with a cocktail fork so that they don't explode; then I grab a fistful of caramelized apple sections and throw them into a sauté pan with some butter. I heat butter and oil for the pork in another sauté pan, throw a slab of liver into a pan of flour after salting and peppering it, and in another pan heat some more butter and oil. I take half a pheasant off the bone and place it on a sizzle platter for the oven, then spin around to pour currant sauce into a small saucepan to reduce. Pans ready, I sear the pork, sauté the liver, and slide the pork straight into the oven on another sizzler. I deglaze the pork pan with wine and stock, add sauce and some garlic confit, then put the pan aside; I'll finish the reducing later. The liver, half-cooked, goes on another sizzler. I sauté some chopped shallots, deglaze the pan with red-wine vinegar, give it a shot of demiglace, season it, and put that aside, too. An order for mussels comes in, followed by one for breast of duck. I heat up a pan for the duck and load up a cold pan with mussels, tomato coulis, garlic, shallots, white wine, and seasoning. It's getting to be boogie time.

The key to staying on top of a busy station is to move on a dish as soon as Mohammed yells its name—set up the pan, do the pre-searing, get it into the oven quickly—so that later, when the whole order board is fluttering with dups, I can tell which dishes I have working and which ones I have waiting, without having to read the actual tickets again.

“Ready on Table Twelve!” says Carlos, who’s got a load of steaks and chops and a few tunas coming up. He wants to know if I’m close on my end. “Let’s go on Twelve!” I say. Miguel starts dunking spuds. I call for mashed potatoes for the *boudins* from Omar; give the apples a few tosses over the flame; heat and swirl butter into the liver’s shallot sauce; pull the pork mignons from the oven; heat potatoes and vegetables for the pheasant; squeeze the sauce for the pheasant between pots onto a back burner; move the mussels off the heat and into a bowl; then spin and bend to check on how my duck is doing.

The intercom buzzes. “Line One for the chef,” says the hostess, who’s out front. It’s a salesman, wanting to sell me some smoked fish. I start off all

sweetness and light, and he goes into his pitch. He's halfway through it when I cut him off: "So what the fuck are you doing calling me in the middle of the lunch rush?" I hang up before I can hear his reply.

I catch the duck just in time, roll it over, skin side down, and pull it out of the oven. Mohammed yells out another pasta order. I pour extra-virgin into a pan and sauté some paper-thin garlic slices with crushed red pepper, add artichoke hearts, roasted vegetables, some olives. Whenever I do pasta, I start humming Tony Bennett or Dino (today it's "Ain't That a Kick in the Head?"). I really love doing that final squirt of emulsifying extra-virgin, just after the basil goes in.



Bourdain became the executive chef at Les Halles in 1998.

"Chef," Omar says, "*no hay más tomates*." Wait a minute—I ordered tomatoes, didn't I? I call Segundo on the intercom. "What the fuck is going on?" I say, as Omar slouches in the doorway like a convict in the exercise yard. "No Baldor," he says. Although Baldor is a superb produce purveyor, this is the second time in recent weeks it's failed me. I call Baldor, and say, "What kind of glue-sniffing, crackhead mesomorphs you got working for you? You don't have an order for me? What?" I hang up, pull a few pans off the flame, load up some more mussels, sauce another duck, arrange a few pheasants, and check my orders clipboard. I'm in the middle of telling Mohammed to run across the street and ask the chef at Park Bistro if we can

borrow some of his tomatoes when I see, from the columns of checked-off items on my clipboard, that I did order tomatoes—not from Baldor but from a different company. After screaming at the blameless Baldor, my anger is used up, so when I call the guilty company I can barely summon a serious tone. It turns out that my order has been routed to another restaurant—Layla, instead of Les Halles. I call Philippe, the chef at Park Bistro, to ask for a few tomatoes to get me through until my order arrives.

The guys from D'Artagnan, my specialty purveyor, arrive bearing foie gras, duck legs, and an entire two-hundred-pound free-range pig, which my boss, José, one of the owners of Les Halles, has ordered to be used in pâtés and *tête de porc*. The butcher, the charcutier, the dishwasher, and I wrestle the beast down the stairs to the *boucherie* in the cellar. My knees are hurting and a familiar pain in my feet is getting worse.

José stops by after lunch—he wants to take me to the Greenmarket in Union Square. We walk to the market, about eleven blocks south, where we sniff and squeeze a hundred different fruits and vegetables. We return to the restaurant with pears, lemon verbena, baby fennel, baby turnips with greens, and fingerling potatoes—the kind of expensive exotica that José likes to surprise me with, for new specials.

Dinner tasting for the floor staff is at five-thirty, which is when the veteran waiters—the lifers—arrive. This ritual is conducted in the kitchen, since there are usually a few lunch customers who insist on exercising squatters' rights straight into the dinner hour. Watching waiters eat is never pretty. They tear at the specials like starving refugees, ripping apart the pheasant with their bare hands, nearly spearing one another with forks as they go after the tuna, dragging the cockles off their shells with their fingers. After fifteen minutes, everything is devoured, and the waiters perch on milk crates, folding napkins, as they smoke and talk: Who got drunk last night? Who got thrown out of a Mob-run after-hours club, then woke up on the sidewalk outside their apartment? Who thinks the new maître d' is going to lose it when the room fills up and the customers start screaming for their tables? Who's going to win the World Cup?

As usual, dinner is oversubscribed, and two tables for twelve have been booked for prime time. I stay in the kitchen to expedite, hoping that maybe

things will slow down enough by ten so that I can have a couple of cocktails and get home by eleven. But I know that the two big tables will hold up seatings by at least an hour, and that I probably won't get out of here until midnight, at the earliest.

By eight-thirty, the order board is full. To my right, plates of appetizers are lined up, waiting to be delivered; the counter is full of sauté pans; the worktable near the fry station, with its pile of raw steaks, looks like the floor of a slaughterhouse. Mohammed ferries the plates out by hand, four or five at a time. The hot food is getting cold, and I'm losing my voice as a result of calling out orders over the dishwasher, the hum of the exhaust, and the roar from the dining room. I make a hand gesture to a friendly waiter, who knows what I want, and he returns with an Industrial—a beer stein filled with a Margarita. The tequila takes the edge off my adrenaline, and goes down surprisingly nicely after three double espressos, two beers, three cranberry juices, eight aspirins, and a hastily gobbled hunk of *merguez* sausage, squeezed into a heel of bread, that I've consumed since lunchtime.

Angel, my night man at the cold station, whose chest is tattooed with a skull impaled by a dagger wrapped in barbed wire, is falling behind; he's got three raviolis, two duck confits, five green salads, two escargots, two Belgian-endive-and-Stilton salads, two cockles, a smoked salmon and blini, two foie gras, and a pâté working—and the sauté and grill stations are calling urgently for vegetable sides and mashed potatoes. A steak order comes back for refiring, and Isidoro, the night grill man, is not happy; as far as he's concerned, the steak was cooked to perfection the first time around. He throws it back on the grill. Then a whole roasted fish comes back. "The customer wants it deboned," the waiter says. Anticipating decapitation, he whines, "I told them it comes on the bone."

The orders are arriving non-stop. My left hand grabs tickets, separates white ones for the grill man, yellow ones for the sauté man, and pink master copies, which I use to time and generally oversee the production. My right hand wipes plates, inserts rosemary sprigs into mashed potatoes. I'm yelling full time, trying to hold it all together. If there is an unforeseeable mishap—say, one of the big tables' orders was prematurely sent out, only to be returned—the whole process could come to a full stop. "Where's that fucking confit?" I yell at Angel, who's struggling to make blinis for smoked

salmon, to brown ravioli under the salamander, to lay out plates of pâté, and to do five endive salads, all more or less at once. A hot escargot explodes in front of me, spattering me with boiling garlic butter and snail guts.

“*Platos!*” Isidoro screams at the guy who’s washing dishes. He’s buried up to his shoulders in the pot sink, and his prewash area is stacked with plates of unscraped leftovers and haphazardly dumped silver. I grab the Bengali busboy, Dinesh, by an arm. “*Scrape!*” I hiss, pointing to the mess of plates heaped with gnawed bones and half-eaten vegetables.

Directly behind me, the Portuguese busboy, David, is making espressos and cappuccinos. He’s extremely graceful, and by now we know each other’s every move in the narrow space—when to move laterally, when to make way for incoming dishes, outgoing food, or the fry guy returning from downstairs with a hundred pounds of freshly cut spuds. I feel only an occasional light tap on the shoulder as David squeezes through with another tray of coffee and petits fours, whispering “*Cuidado*”—“watch out.”

Finally, the orders start slowing down, and I can see by the thinning crowd at the bar that the last seating is under way. I go to the cellar, where I check the stocks cooling in iced plastic buckets outside the walk-in, the gauze-wrapped pigs’ feet, which will have to be painstakingly deboned tomorrow, the soaking *tarbais* beans, which will have to be blanched, the salt-rubbed duck legs, which will have to be conserved in duck fat. I make a final check of the drygoods room and note that I’ll soon be needing more peanut oil, more peppercorns, more sherry-wine vinegar. I look at a list for tomorrow: I’ve already called for the striped bass, but I mustn’t forget about the baby octopus. José loves black mission figs—he saw some at the market this afternoon—so I’ll tell Janine to start thinking about figs for a dessert special. Tomorrow is Saturday, which means that I’ll have to do the weekly inventory: weigh every scrap of meat and fish and cheese that’s in storage; tally up every can, bottle, case, and box. I peel off my whites and struggle into my jeans. I’m on my way out the door when I’m stopped by Isidoro: he wants a raise. I tell him, “*Mañana.*” Outside, the fresh air is a jolt. I look at my watch—12:25 a.m.—and wave for a taxi.

At Fiftieth and Broadway, I head into a subway entrance. Downstairs, in the arcade, I enter the Siberia Bar. It’s a grungy little underground rumpus room

where the drinks are served in plastic cups. Seated at the bar are a few cooks from the Hilton and a couple of strippers from a nearby club. I spot Tracy, the Siberia's owner: tonight I won't be paying for drinks. From the jukebox, the Velvets are singing "Pale Blue Eyes." That first rush of beer tastes good. I'm not going anywhere. ♦

## Checking In

- Same Old, Same Old: Pandemic Déjà Vu

[September 6, 2021 Issue](#)

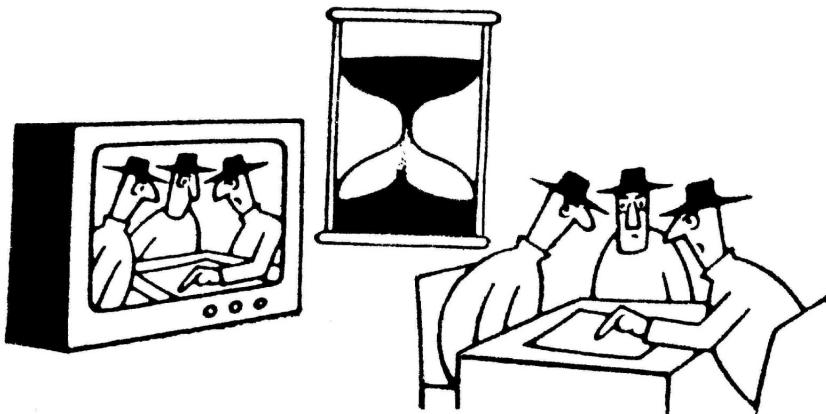
# Same Old, Same Old: Pandemic Déjà Vu

Remember last summer, when we all wore masks and everyone was adopting a pet? Wait! That's this summer, too.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

August 30, 2021

Observations made on the fourth Monday of August:



2020—*COVID* cases, New York City: 297; *COVID* deaths: 8. Vaccines authorized, worldwide: zero.

2021—*COVID* cases, N.Y.C.: 1,536; *COVID* deaths: 9. Vaccines authorized, worldwide: 12.

2020—Number of plays, “I Got You Babe,” by Sonny and Cher, Spotify: 72,000. Monthly sales, “[White Fragility](#),” by [Robin DiAngelo, McNally](#)

Jackson bookstores: 56. Flour shipped, King Arthur Baking (gross pounds): 2,836,156. Head count, Animal Care Centers of N.Y.C. shelters: 2 birds, 5 marsupials, 8 guinea pigs, 167 dogs, 316 cats.

2021—Number of plays, “I Got You Babe”: 73,000. Monthly sales, “White Fragility”: zero. Flour shipped, King Arthur Baking (gross pounds): 3,095,586. Head count, Animal Care Centers: 3 reptiles, 7 unspecified mammals, 38 rabbits, including one “Rabbit Deniro,” 90 guinea pigs, 220 dogs, 413 cats not named Mr. Bigglesworth, 1 cat named Mr. Bigglesworth.

2020—Tweet, President of the United States: “Incredible that @CNN & MSDNC aren’t covering the Roll Call of States. Fake News! This is what the Republican Party is up against.”

2021—Tweet, President of the United States: “If you haven’t gotten vaccinated, please do it now.”

2020—Sales, Astor Wines & Spirits (gallons): wine—791, bourbon—27, gin—20, vodka—31, tequila—22. Dinner parties at Steve and Jennifer’s apartment, where they always invite too many people, and you get stuck talking to Carol, but actually it turns out she’s O.K., that was kind of nice, we should do that more often: zero.

2021—Sales, Astor Wines & Spirits (gallons): wine—356, bourbon—17, gin—17, vodka—27, tequila—16. That eye-contact-and-half-smirk thing you do when unavoidably touching thighs with a fellow F-train rider because three more passengers just squeezed on, even though it’s a hundred degrees, but the human commiseration is sort of affirming: still a no.

2020—Percentage of OpenTable reservations for outdoor tables, N.Y.C.: 50. Percentage of OpenTable reservations for outdoor tables, Palm Beach, Florida: 2. Monthly average home-sale price, Westchester: \$1,082,268. Median rent, Brooklyn: \$2,649. Playdates, Ella, age four, Upper West Side, week: zero.

2021—Percentage of OpenTable reservations for outdoor tables, N.Y.C.: 18. Percentage of OpenTable reservations for outdoor tables, Palm Beach: 8. Monthly average home-sale price, Westchester: \$1,145,016. Median rent,

Brooklyn: \$2,650. Playdates, Ella, age five, Upper West Side, week: 7, including yoga with B.F.F. Caroline.

2020—Public remarks, governor of New York: “We’ve been doing a great job keeping control of this virus. Congratulations to the people of New York. It wasn’t rocket science, it just took the nation a long time to understand that we’re dealing with a virus. It’s a question of science, not politics.”

2021—Public remarks, governor of New York: “I’m stepping aside as your governor. . . . Kathy Hochul will become governor, and I believe she will step up to the challenge.”

2020—Hope: Waxing. Mask wearing, Seventh Avenue and Union Street, Brooklyn: 97%. Broadway shows: zero.

2021—Hope: Waning. Mask wearing, Seventh Avenue and Union Street, Brooklyn: 18%. Broadway shows: 2.

2020—Headline, *USA Today*: “Americans are buying Mace, RVs, bulk foods as *COVID-19* pandemic drags on.” Murders, N.Y.C., previous week: 16. Masks sold by WeShield, Flatiron: 200,000. Hazard-pay rate, Eddie Q., grocery worker: 10% extra. Pot-and-pan banging: occasional.

2021—Headline, *USA Today*: “ ‘You are not a horse.’ FDA warns against use of animal dewormer as *COVID-19* treatment, prevention.” Murders, N.Y.C., previous week: 6. Masks sold by WeShield: 600,000. Hazard-pay rate, Eddie Q., grocery worker: 0% extra. Pot-and-pan banging: only while cooking dinner.

2020—E-mails sent to superintendent of schools, Mineola, Long Island, about *COVID* protocols, week: 8. Remark from teacher before school-board meeting, Anoka-Hennepin district, Minnesota: “People of color are at a higher risk for contracting *COVID*, they’re at a higher risk for dying from the virus, and so I definitely worry about that.” P.C.R. tests, Elmhurst Hospital, Queens: 710. Percentage of increase, from last year, in flat tires fixed, Kickstand Bicycles, midtown: 67.

2021—E-mails sent to superintendent of schools, Mineola, about *COVID* protocols, week: 15. Remark from parent at school-board meeting, Anoka-Hennepin district: “I have written you all an email on June 28 on why I oppose Critical Race Theory. . . . As for masks . . . it is irrational, unscientific child abuse!” P.C.R. tests, Elmhurst Hospital, Queens: 1,369. Percentage of increase, from last year, in flat tires fixed, Kickstand Bicycles: zero.

2020—Return-to-office date, Amazon employees: 1/8/21. Total moves originating in N.Y.C., terminating elsewhere, Dumbo Moving & Storage: 59. Google searches for “Groundhog Day,” month: 246,000.

2021—Return-to-office date, Amazon: 1/3/22. Total moves originating in N.Y.C., terminating elsewhere, Dumbo Moving & Storage: 22. Google searches for “Groundhog Day,” month: 368,000. ♦

# **Comment**

- [California's Recall Is a Blow to Democratic Change](#)

[September 6, 2021 Issue](#)

# California's Recall Is a Blow to Democratic Change

The challenge to Governor Gavin Newsom strains election norms and institutions that are already dangerously frayed.

By [Nathan Heller](#)

August 29, 2021

Since 1911, when a recall amendment was voted into the California Constitution, there have been a hundred and seventy-nine attempted recalls of elected politicians, with eleven earning the signatures required to make it to the ballot. Of those eleven, six have successfully removed officials from office, and of the six just one removed a governor. That was in 2003, when Gray Davis was bounced from his seat in favor of [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) —the first but not the last orange-colored strongman to rise on fulminant political winds, and a guy whose candidacy seemed a buff embodiment of the question Well, why not? In his acceptance speech, the Governor-elect was reverent. “Thank you very much to all the people of California for giving me their great trust,” he said. “It’s very important that we need to bring back trust in the government itself.”



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

It was a nice thought while it lasted. September 14th brings the spectre of California's second gubernatorial recall election, and the man in the barrel this time is [Gavin Newsom](#), elected three short years (O.K., long years) ago, and now applying for the job he holds, with the reward of being able to apply again in 2022, when he's up for reelection. Being a governor hasn't looked like much fun lately, and the stakes out West run high. Not only is California the most populous state in the Union, it has the fifth-largest economy in the world, ahead of the United Kingdom's, and in recent years it has become the epicenter of what could be called the country's intellectual mood, being home to such enduring points of interest as [Facebook](#), epidemiology, Netflix, and the [Kardashians](#). "As goes California, so goes the nation" runs the adage (invoked, it's bittersweet to note, by Newsom, in 2008, when cheering on same-sex marriage as the mayor of San Francisco). The risk now is of that being true. The recall puts alarming strain on democratic norms that already, nationwide, are dangerously frayed.

Newsom's odds of holding his seat in September's special election have been narrow: recent polling has the Governor ahead, 50.6 per cent to 46.3 per cent, according to a late-August analysis by FiveThirtyEight. The offenses that necessitate his removal, as the recall's mostly Republican ringmasters tell it, are various and somewhat vague. Newsom is said to have been insufficiently supportive of business during the pandemic. Many

residents find California's taxes and unemployment too high and its housing supply too small. Some consider his wildfire response weak; some resent his decision to release state prisoners at the tail end of their terms or with serious health risks, to stem the spread of *COVID-19* in overcrowded facilities. And there's *l'affaire French Laundry*, in which, last fall, the Governor ignored his own pandemic guidelines and went to a birthday party at a super-fancy Napa restaurant. (Let them eat ramps!) These are formidable complaints—the kind that accrue to every official at the end of every term, when citizens choose whether to vote the bums back in or boot them out.

What they aren't is a leadership emergency. We know, more than ever now, what gross incompetence or personal abuse looks like in executive roles. Newsom displays no evidence of either, and his tenure hasn't been empty of feats. He finally put a moratorium on death-row executions in California, and committed an unprecedented twelve billion dollars to homelessness-alleviation projects (with another ten billion for affordable housing tacked on). In the earliest days of the pandemic, California dodged the fate of states such as New York, in part because Newsom was the first governor to declare shelter-in-place. The business costs of such restrictions? In a bad year nationally, it's hard to claim they were inordinate, given the nearly seventy-six-billion-dollar budget surplus Newsom says California pulled in this year, much of it from taxes. Even at its worst, his record has been the best a politician can hope for: mixed.

So—to the booth. Voters this month face two questions. First: recall Newsom, yea or nay? Then: if he's out (the recall needs a majority of the vote, at which point the incumbent is eliminated from the running), who should replace him? Forty-six candidates, including Caitlyn Jenner, aspire, but the front-runner is Larry Elder, a conservative talk-radio host and outspoken Donald Trump supporter, who believes it is unfair to hold the former President responsible for the events of January 6th. His proposals reject statewide mask and testing requirements, renewable-energy programs, and criminal-justice reform. Elder is not insensible to homelessness, and proposes to solve it by waiving California's Environmental Quality Act, which mandates disclosure about the environmental impact of most housing developments. He has the rare distinction of being both anti-welfare and anti-wage, explaining to the McClatchy news agency this summer that "the

ideal minimum wage is \$0.00.” And he leads the field by about ten points after having raised nearly five million dollars in the first several weeks of his campaign—pretty generous, from folks who start at zero bucks an hour. With the recall split into two questions, Elder doesn’t need more votes than Newsom to sail to victory; if Newsom is out, Elder is likely to be in.

Dive-bomb the governorship, take the biggest vote-getter out of the running, and jam your candidate into the vacuum: it is hard to conceive of a more cynical plan from extreme conservatives trying to control Sacramento, or a scheme more damaging to the premises on which democracy runs. If the recall works, it will be because those premises are weak already, anti-institutionalism having become something of an institution in itself. Whether raiding the Capitol because we don’t like an election result or demanding a vote *now* because we can’t fathom waiting until next year, we are approaching a point at which there’s just one button left in politics, the big red one that says “*EJECT*.” We press it; things move; we begin from scratch again.

As far as change goes, this is the most impoverished kind, because it builds on nothing and leads nowhere, and it clears no space for an enduring public voice. The central tenet of our public institutions is that our fellow-citizens are in the game for the same reasons we are. There are voters we’d hope never to meet at a picnic, but, if their chosen voices prevail on Election Day, we give them their full term, because we want the same when our time comes around. A vote against the recall strengthens democratic norms and institutions, but it also preserves the possibility of real change. And that includes the right of challengers to return next fall and vie against the Governor. May the best candidate win. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, August 30, 2021](#)

[September 6, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Crossword: Monday, August 30, 2021

A challenging puzzle.

By [Patrick Berry](#)

August 30, 2021

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

By [Robyn Weintraub](#)

# **Dept. of Gastronomy**

- [Save the Planet, Eat a Bug](#)

# Save the Planet, Eat a Bug

From 2011: Plentiful and protein-rich, insects are food in much of the world. Why not here?

By [Dana Goodyear](#)

August 8, 2011



## Content

Florence Dunkel, an entomologist at Montana State University, lives in a red saltbox house at the edge of the woods outside Bozeman, with her husband, Bob, whose nickname for her is Ladybug, and, until recently, with Gertrude, a fine-limbed grass-green katydid she rescued from an airplane. The walls of her kitchen are covered with pictures of her eight grandchildren, who call her Oma, or, in the case of one grandson, the Beetle Oma. In a bay window overlooking a vegetable garden, dried flowers hang next to a stained-glass dragonfly.

One freezing night at the end of February, Dunkel, who is petite, with fluffy gray curls and rosebud lips, was puttering around her kitchen, a large pair of glasses suspended from a sparkly chain around her neck and an apron tied at her waist. She pulled out her old Betty Crocker recipe binder—she has had it

since 1962—and put on her glasses. She opened it to a page, yellow with use, for chocolate-chip Toll House cookies. Like many cooks, Dunkel likes to make a recipe her own. Betty Crocker called for half a cup of chopped walnuts. In the margin, in a loopy hand—the penmanship of a girl who grew up on a farm in Wisconsin in the nineteen-fifties—Dunkel had suggested a substitution: “or fresh roasted crickets.”

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The crickets were presenting something of a problem. Her usual supplier, in California, had run out of large ones, and instead had sent her a thousand live pinheads—babies—which she’d had to supplement with a hundred and twenty-five expensive subadults from PetSmart. Before checking her recipe, Dunkel had picked up a pinhead. “I’ve never used these for food,” she said, kneading it between her index finger and thumb, a chef inspecting an unfamiliar piece of meat. “I’m not even sure I’ll take the head off.” She’d decided to put the pinheads in the freezer to kill them—another of her nicknames, inspired by her work as an insect pathologist, is Dr. Death—and set the oven to 225 degrees for the PetSmart subadults.

“Meanwhile, we need to get the wax worms separated,” she said. They were for “land shrimp cocktail,” which Dunkel would serve to her Insects and Human Society class the next day, accompanied by cocktail sauce made by Bob, using horseradish from their garden. “They’re going to want to wander as they get warm.” She opened a plastic container secured with red tape that read “*WORMS ALIVE*” and dumped the worms—the larvae of the wax moth, which were plump and white and had come from a bait shop in Minnesota—onto a brown plate. They were covered in cedar shavings. My job was to separate the worms from the shavings, picking out the black ones (blackness is a sign of necrosis) and dismantling the cocoons of the ones that had started to pupate, while making sure none got away. The worms were chubby and firm, with the springiness of clementine segments. They swayed deliriously, testing the air. I got to work sorting, de-silking, herding.

“Oh! I can smell the crickets now,” Dunkel said, as the aroma of toasted nuts filled the kitchen. She took them out of the oven, and started to pull off the ovipositors and the legs, which can stick in the throat. When I finished with the wax worms, she said, “The next species we’re going to deal with is

*Tenebrio molitor*, which is a beetle. We're going to wash them, and then we're going to fry them in butter." She handed me a container full of bran and beetle larvae—skinny, crusty, yellowish—commonly known as mealworms. I shook the mixture through a sieve; as I rinsed off the last of the bran, the worms clung to the side like sailors on a capsized ship. Dunkel dumped them in a buttery frying pan, where they hissed and squirmed before going suddenly still. They smelled of wild mushrooms, and tasted, spooned hot into my hand, like sunflower seeds.

Dunkel stayed up baking until three. The next day, at Insects and Human Society, she had her students do a honey tasting, reminding them that honey is, of course, the vomit of a bee. Then Ky-Phuong Luong, the T.A., stirred a wok full of vegetables and soy-marinated crickets, and Dunkel passed a plate of fritters with yellowish wax worms protruding from their centers. "We left out the bacon," she said, smiling sweetly. The students talked about ethnocentrism (eighty per cent of the world eats insects with pleasure), sustainability, and the earth's diminishing resources. After a while, they started, tentatively, to eat. A young man in a green wool ski cap said that he would be more enthusiastic if he had some beer to wash the insects down. Standing before a plate of brownies fortified with a mash of the sautéed mealworms, he said despondently, "This is the future! You'll eat worms and like it. You gotta eat *something*."

Insects were among the original specialty foods in the American gourmet marketplace—inspired, impractical provocations that, like runway styles in retail clothing, drove the sales of more basic goods. In the early nineteen-forties, Max Ries, a German-Jewish textile manufacturer, came to Chicago and established himself as a purveyor of imported cheese to an American public that was beginning to be fascinated by exotic food. Ries was slim and dashing; he wore handmade suits and twirled his cigars. Alongside tinned tiger and elephant meat—culled from zoos and sold at department stores—he presented "French-fried ants" from Venezuela and baby bees from Japan, conversation pieces that lent glamour to his company, Reese Finer Foods, which actually made its money selling canned water chestnuts, artichoke hearts, and baby corn. Like fashionistas, gourmets have a sense of theatre. Excluded from the first Fancy Food Show, at the Sheraton-Astor, in New York, in 1955, Ries hired a limousine to shuttle buyers to a nearby hotel, where he had set up his own show, exhibiting only Reese products. (After

that, the New Yorkers relented and gave him a booth, which became a mainstay.) When Reese had overstock of its Spooky Foods gift set—chocolate-covered ants, roasted butterflies, barbecue bees—it hired Bela Lugosi to appear in his Dracula costume with the product, which promptly sold out.

Insects—part delicacy, part gag—are chic again. Once a staple on “Fear Factor,” they were featured on “Top Chef Masters” this season. (The winning dish: tempura-fried crickets with sunchoke-carrot purée and blood-orange vinaigrette.) At John Rivera Sedlar’s ambitious Latin restaurant Rivera, in Los Angeles, where the tasting menu includes Atlantic Cod in the Spirit of New World Discoveries, the cocktail list features the Donaji, a fourteen-dollar drink named after a Zapotec princess, which is made with artisanal Oaxacan mescal and house-made grasshopper salt. (On its own, the salt tastes like Jane’s Krazy Mixed-Up Salt, crushed Bac-Os, and fish-food flakes; the bartender recommends it as a rub for grilled meat.)

Bricia Lopez supplies the bugs for Sedlar’s drinks; at Guelaguetza, the Oaxacan restaurant that her parents opened in Los Angeles in 1994, she serves a scrumptious plate of *chapulines a la Mexicana*—grasshoppers sautéed with onions, jalapeños, and tomatoes, and topped with avocado and Oaxacan string cheese. Lopez, who is twenty-six and a glamorous fixture of the L.A. food scene, says that more and more Anglo hipsters are coming in to order them. “Eating grasshoppers is a thing you do here,” she said. “Like, ‘Oh, my God, I ate a grasshopper, woo.’ ” She went on, “There’s more of a cool factor involved. It’s not just ‘Let’s go get a burrito.’ It’s ‘Let’s get a *mole*’ or ‘Let’s get a grasshopper.’ ”

The current vogue reflects not only the American obsession with novelty and the upper-middle-class hunger for authenticity but also deep anxiety about the meat we already eat—which is its own kind of fashion. José Andrés, who this year won the James Beard Foundation’s Outstanding Chef award, makes a very popular *chapulín* taco—sautéed shallots, deglazed in tequila; chipotle paste; and Oaxacan grasshoppers, in a hand-made tortilla—at his Washington, D.C., restaurant Oyamel. He sees bug-eating as both a gastronomic experience (he recommends the mouthfeel of a small, young, crispy *chapulín*) and a matter of survival. “We need to feed humanity in a sustainable way,” he says. “Those who know how to produce protein will

have an edge over everyone else. World War Three will be over control of water and food, and the insects may be an answer.”

Demographers have projected that by 2050 the world’s population will have increased to nine billion, and the demand for meat will grow with it, particularly in dense, industrializing countries like China and India. Last year—a year in which, according to the United Nations, nearly a billion people suffered from chronic hunger—the journal *Science* published a special issue on “food security,” and included a piece on entomophagy, the unappealing name by which insect-eating properly goes. Acknowledging that the notion might be “unappetizing to many,” the editors wrote: “The quest for food security may require us all to reconsider our eating habits, particularly in view of the energy consumption and environmental costs that sustain those habits.”

From an ecological perspective, insects have a lot to recommend them. They are renowned for their small “footprint”; being cold-blooded, they are about four times as efficient at converting feed to meat as are cattle, which waste energy keeping themselves warm. Ounce for ounce, many have the same amount of protein as beef—fried grasshoppers have three times as much—and are rich in micronutrients like iron and zinc. Genetically, they are so distant from humans that there is little likelihood of diseases jumping species, as swine flu did. They are natural recyclers, capable of eating old cardboard, manure, and by-products from food manufacturing. And insect husbandry is humane: bugs *like* teeming, and thrive in filthy, crowded conditions.



*In one part of Oaxaca, grasshoppers are popular snacks, but shrimp are shunned.*

In December, a group of scientists at Wageningen University, in the Netherlands, published a paper concluding that insects reared for human consumption produce significantly lower quantities of greenhouse gases than do cattle and pigs. “This study therefore indicates that insects could serve as a more environmentally friendly alternative for the production of animal protein,” the paper said. One of its authors was Arnold van Huis, an entomologist who is working to establish a market for insect-based products in the Netherlands, with funding from the Dutch government; the agriculture ministry recently gave him a million euros to research insect husbandry. “We have a food crisis, especially a meat crisis, and people are starting to realize that we need alternatives, and insects are just an excellent alternative,” van Huis said.

On a trip to Africa, in 1995, when van Huis was on sabbatical, he travelled to a dozen countries, interviewing locals about their relationship with insects. Half the people he spoke with talked about eating them, and he finally overcame their reluctance—born of centuries of colonial opprobrium—to share some with him. “I had termites, which were roasted, and they were excellent,” he said. When he got home, he offered a bag of termites to Marcel Dicke, the head of his department—he liked them—and the two started a popular lecture series that addressed insects’ potential as a food source. After van Huis and Dicke organized an insect festival that drew

twenty thousand people, they were approached by several mealworm and cricket farmers who had been serving the pet-food industry but were interested in diversifying. “We know that Western peoples have some difficulties psychologically with ingesting insects, so we are looking at some ways of introducing them into food so that people will no longer recognize them,” van Huis said. Insect flour was one option. “Another possibility is that you can grind insects and make them into a hot dog or a fish stick,” he said. Together, van Huis and Dicke have helped get mealworms and processed snacks like Bugs Nuggets into the Dutch grocery chain Sligro.

The Dutch are, for reasons of geography, especially concerned about the effects of global warming; they are also progressive when it comes to food development. But entrepreneurs in the United States are starting to explore edible insects, too. Matthew Krisiloff, who just finished his freshman year at the University of Chicago, recently started a company called Entom Foods, which is working on de-shelling insects using pressurization technology—trade secret—in the hope of selling the meat in cutlet form. “The problem is the *ick* factor—the eyes, the wings, the legs,” he said. “It’s not as simple as hiding it in a bug nugget. People won’t accept it beyond the novelty. When you think of a chicken you think of a chicken breast, not the eyes, wings, and beak. We’re trying to do the same thing with insects, create a stepping-stone, so that when you get a bug nugget you think of the bug steak, not the whole animal.” If he can overcome some of the technical challenges—like the fact that insect protein does not take the form of muscle, but is, as he put it, “goopy”—he plans to have a product out next year.

In Dicke’s opinion, simply changing the language surrounding food insects could go a long way toward solving the problem that Westerners have with them. “Maybe we should stop telling people they’re eating insects,” he said. “If you say it’s mealworms, it makes people think of ringworm. So stop saying ‘worm.’ If we use the Latin names, say it’s a *Tenebrio* quiche, it sounds much more fancy, and it’s part of the marketing.” (There’s a precedent for this: in the nineteenth century, English members of the Society for the Propagation of Horse Flesh as an Article of Food had French chefs prepare banquets of the meat they called *chevaline*.) The other option, Dicke said, is to cover the bugs in chocolate, because people will eat anything covered in chocolate.

The practice of ethical entomophagy started haphazardly. In 1974, Gene DeFoliart, who was the chair of entomology at the University of Wisconsin, was asked by a colleague to recommend someone who could talk about edible insects as part of a symposium on unconventional protein sources. Then, as now, entomology was more concerned with insect eradication than cultivation, and, not finding a willing participant, DeFoliart decided to take on the project himself. He began his talk—and the paper he eventually published—with a startling statement: “C. F. Hodge (1911) calculated that a pair of houseflies beginning operations in April could produce enough flies, if all survived, to cover the earth forty-seven feet deep by August,” he said. “If one can reverse for a moment the usual focus on insects as enemies of man, Hodge’s layer of flies represents an impressive pile of animal protein.”

DeFoliart envisioned a place for edible insects as a luxury item. The larvae of the wax moth (*Galleria mellonella*) seemed to him to be poised to become the next escargot, which in the late eighties represented a three-hundred-million-dollar-a-year business in the United States. “Given a choice, New York diners looking for adventure and willing to pay \$22 for half a roasted free-range chicken accompanied by a large pile of shoestring potatoes might well prefer a smaller pile of *Galleria* at the same price,” he wrote. He and a handful of colleagues, including Dunkel, began to study and promote the potential of what they called “mini-livestock,” and, in *The Food Insects Newsletter*, they reported the results of nutritional analyses and assessed the efficiency of insects like crickets—the most delectable of which, entomophagists are fond of pointing out, belong to the genus *Gryllus*.

In December, a group of DeFoliart’s disciples gathered at a resort in San Diego for a symposium on entomophagy at the annual conference of the Entomological Society of America. Because there is no significant funding available for entomophagy research, it has never been taken seriously by most professional entomologists. Dunkel, who in her half century in academia has many times heard colleagues discourage interested graduate students, often finds herself at odds with others in her field. It was a relief, then, to be among the like-minded. “Your soap-moth-pupae chutney—I’ll never forget how that tasted!” she said, introducing a colleague from the Insectarium, in Montreal, which holds a bug banquet every other year. The entomophagists hoped to capitalize on the momentum they perceived. “We don’t have to be the kooky, nerdy entomologists who eat bugs because we’re

crazy,” an entomologist from the University of Georgia said. “Twenty years ago, sushi was the *eww* factor; you did not see sushi in grocery stores. Now it’s the cultural norm.”

At the conference, Dunkel talked about her frustration working in West Africa, where for decades European and American entomologists, through programs like U.S.A.I.D. and British Locust Control, have killed grasshoppers and locusts, which are complete proteins, in order to preserve the incomplete proteins in millet, wheat, barley, sorghum, and maize. Her field work in Mali focusses on the role of grasshoppers in the diets of children, who, for cultural reasons, do not eat chicken or eggs. Grasshoppers contain essential amino acids and serve as a crucial buffer against kwashiorkor, a protein deficiency that impedes physical and neurological development. In the village where Dunkel works, kwashiorkor is on the rise; in recent years, nearby fields have been planted with cotton, and pesticide use has intensified. Mothers now warn their children not to collect the grasshoppers, which they rightly fear may be contaminated.

Mainly, the entomophagists bemoaned the prejudice against insects. “In our minds, they’re associated with filth,” Heather Looy, a psychologist who has studied food aversions, said over dinner after the symposium. “They go dirty places, but so do fungi, and we eat those all the time. And you don’t want to know about crabs and shrimp and lobster.” Crabs, shrimp, and lobster are, like insects, arthropods—but instead of eating fresh lettuces and flowers, as many insects do, they scavenge debris from the ocean floor.

This injustice—lobster is a delicacy, while vegetarian crustaceans like wood lice are unfit for civilized man—is a centerpiece of the literature of entomophagy. “Why Not Eat Insects?,” an 1885 manifesto by Vincent M. Holt, which is the founding document of the movement, expounds upon the vile habits of the insects of the sea. “The lobster, a creature consumed in incredible quantities at all the highest tables in the land, is such a foul feeder that, for its sure capture, the experienced fisherman will bait his lobster-pot with putrid flesh or fish which is too far gone even to attract a crab,” he writes.

Holt’s compelling, if Swiftian, argument addresses the food problems of his day—“What a pleasant change from the labourer’s unvarying meal of bread,

lard, and bacon, or bread and lard without bacon, would be a good dish of fried cockchafers or grasshoppers”—but he is innocent of the nuances of food marketing. Among the sample menus he supplies are offerings like Boiled Neck of Mutton with Wire-worm Sauce and Moths on Toast. At dinner in San Diego, it occurred to me that this naïveté had carried down. I was sitting next to Lou Sorkin, a forensic entomologist at the American Museum of Natural History who is also an expert on bedbugs, probably the most loathed insect in the United States today. He had arrived at his latest culinary discovery, he said, while experimenting with mediums for preserving maggots collected from murdered corpses. Realizing that citrus juice might denature proteins as effectively as a chemical solution, and might be more readily available in the field, he soaked large sarcophagid maggots in baths of grapefruit, lemon, lime, and pomelo juice, and voilà! Maggot ceviche. “It’s a little chewy,” he said. “But tasty.”

Food preferences are highly local, often irrational, and defining: a Frenchman is a frog because he considers their legs food and the person who calls him one does not. In Santa María Atzompa, a community in Oaxaca where grasshoppers toasted with garlic, chile, and lime are a favorite treat, locals have traditionally found shrimp repulsive. “They would say ‘some people’ eat it, meaning ‘the coastal people,’ ” Ramona Pérez, an anthropologist at San Diego State University, says. When she made scampi for a family there, she told me, they were appalled; the mother, who usually cooked with her, refused to help, and the daughters wouldn’t eat. The coast is less than a hundred miles away.

Most of the world eats bugs. Australian Aborigines like witchetty grubs, which, according to the authors of “Man Eating Bugs,” taste like “nut-flavored scrambled eggs and mild mozzarella, wrapped in a phyllo dough pastry.” *Tenebrio molitor* is factory-farmed in China; in Venezuela, children roast tarantulas. Besides, as any bug-eater will tell you, we are all already eating bugs, whether we mean to or not. According to the F.D.A., which publishes a handbook on “defect levels” acceptable in processed food, frozen or canned spinach is not considered contaminated until it has fifty aphids, thrips, or mites per hundred grams. Peanut butter is allowed to have thirty insect fragments per hundred grams, and chocolate is O.K. up to sixty. In each case, the significance of the contamination is given as “aesthetic.”

In fresh vegetables, insects are inevitable. The other day, cleaning some lettuce, I was surprised by an emerald-green pentagon with antennae: a stinkbug. I got rid of it immediately. But daintiness about insects has true consequences. As Tom Turpin, an entomologist at Purdue University, said, “Attitudes in this country result in more pesticide use, because we’re scared about an aphid wing in our spinach.”

The antipathy that Europeans and their descendants display toward eating insects is stubborn, and mysterious. Insect consumption is in our cultural heritage. The Romans ate beetle grubs reared on flour and wine; ancient Greeks ate grasshoppers. Leviticus, by some interpretations, permits the eating of locusts, grasshoppers, and crickets. (The rest are unkosher.) The manna eaten by Moses on his way out of Egypt is widely believed to have been honeydew, the sweet excrement of scale insects.

Contemporary Westerners tend to associate insects with filth, death, and decay, and, because some insects feed on flesh, their consumption is often seen as cannibalism by proxy. Holt takes pains to stress that the insects he recommends for eating—caterpillars, grasshoppers, slugs—are pure of this taint. “My insects are all vegetable feeders, clean, palatable, wholesome, and decidedly more particular in their feeding than ourselves,” he writes. “While I am confident that they will never condescend to eat *us*, I am equally confident that, on finding out how good they are, we shall some day right gladly cook and eat *them*.<sup>1</sup>”

In the overcoming of resistance to certain foods, Frederick J. Simoons, the author of the classic text on food taboos “Eat Not This Flesh,” says, timing is everything. He cites Emperor Meiji’s consumption of beef—a Buddhist sacrilege—as the dawn of Japan’s embrace of the West. Noritoshi Kanai, the eighty-eight-year-old president of Mutual Trading Company, which imports gold flakes and matsutake essence to sell to high-end sushi restaurants like Masa and Nobu, introduced sushi to the United States in the nineteen-sixties. Because sushi is raw and handled without gloves in front of the customer, everyone told him that the American public would never accept it. The convergence of three factors, he says, changed their minds: the food pyramid, which emphasized fish; the rise of the Japanese car; and “Shogun.”

Promoters of entomophagy may face a bigger obstacle. Unlike sushi, which was seen as an inedible form of an edible substance, most Westerners view insects as inappropriate for eating—the psychological equivalent of wood or paper—or dangerous, like cleaning fluid. (Insect-eaters, correspondingly, are seen as suspect, other, and possibly inhuman, an idea reinforced by countless mass-culture images, including most science fiction.) Some object to the form in which insects are presented—entire—though lobsters, mussels, oysters, clams, and even, increasingly, in this age of whole-animal cookery, pigs come to the table intact. Others locate their disgust in the fact that one has to eat the chitinous exoskeleton, but the same is true for soft-shell crab, which is rarely considered barbarous to eat.

Morphology might be at the root of the problem, however. Processing insects is labor-intensive, and they are not exactly filling. One would have to eat about a thousand grasshoppers to equal the amount of protein in a twelve-ounce steak. According to Larry Peterman, the owner of HotLix, a company that sells tequila-flavored lollipops with mealworms in them and Sour Cream & Onion Crick-ettes (“the other Green Meat”), processed crickets cost hundreds of dollars a pound. Unlike those found in the tropics, European bugs do not grow big enough to make good food, so there is no culinary tradition, and therefore no infrastructure, to support the practice. Tom Turpin told me, “If there were insects out there the size of pigs, I guarantee you we’d be eating them.”

The next stinkbug I came across I ate. It was lightly fried, and presented on a slice of apple, whose flavor it is said to resemble. (I found it a touch medicinal.) This was in a one-story white clapboard house in the West Adams neighborhood of Los Angeles, with a skateboard half-pipe in the back yard, which had been rented by Daniella Martin and Dave Gracer, two advocates of entomophagy. Martin had reserved the place under false pretenses. “We told them we were scientists,” Martin said, giggling. In fact, Martin, who used to be an Internet game-show host, writes a blog called “Girl Meets Bug”; she and Gracer, an English instructor who travels the country lecturing on entomophagy and has been writing an epic poem about insects for the past fourteen years, were in town to compete in a cookery competition at the Natural History Museum’s annual bug fair.

Martin, who is thirty-four, with a heart-shaped face and a telegenic smile, stood at the counter in the small kitchen pulling embryonic drones—bee brood—from honeycomb. They were for bee patties, part of a “Bee L T” sandwich she was going to enter in the competition. But, finding them irresistible, she fried up a few to snack on. “It tastes like bacon,” she said rapturously. “I’m going to eat the whole plate unless someone gets in there.” I did: the drones, dripping in butter and lightly coated with honey from their cells, were fatty and a little bit sweet, and, like everything chitinous, left me with a disturbing aftertaste of dried shrimp.

Gracer opened the freezer and inspected his bugs: housefly pupae, cicadas, and, his favorite, ninety-dollar-a-pound katydids from Uganda. “They’re very rich, almost buttery,” he said. “They almost taste as if they’ve gone around the bend.”

“Dave, where’s the tailless whip scorpion?” Martin said, and Gracer produced an elegantly armored black creature with a foreleg like a calligraphy flourish. “I’m thinking about doing a tempura type of fry and a spicy mayonnaise,” Martin, who also worked for a number of years in a Japanese restaurant, said. First, she flash-fried it to soften the exoskeleton, and then she dipped it in tempura batter. To her knowledge, no one had ever before eaten a tailless whip scorpion. “All right, people, let’s make history,” she said, using a pair of chopsticks to lower it back into the pan, where it sizzled violently.

When the scorpion was finished, she put it on a plate, and she and Gracer sat down on a couch to feast on what looked like far too much bug for me, and yet not nearly enough to satisfy hunger. Gracer pulled off a pincer. “There’s something—that white stuff—that’s meat!” he cried, pointing to a speck of flesh. “That’s meat!” Martin repeated excitedly, and exhorted him to try it. He tasted; she tasted. “Fish,” Gracer said. “It has the consistency of fish.” Martin split a leg apart and nibbled. In a few bites, they had eaten all there was. “That was really good,” she said.

The following morning, in a tent on the front lawn of the Natural History Museum, Gracer faced Zack (the Cajun Bug Chef) Lemann, an established bug cooker from New Orleans, who dazzled the judges—most of them children—with his “odonate hors d’oeuvres,” fried wild-caught dragonflies

served on sautéed mushrooms with Dijon-soy butter. (Children are often seen as the great hope of entomophagy, because of their openness to new foods, but even they are not without prejudices. Gracer, who presented stinkbug-and-kale salad, had neglected to account for the fact that kids don't like kale.) A five-year-old approached Lemann afterward. "Excuse me, can I eat a dragonfly?" he said. Lemann cooked one for him. The boy picked the batter off, to reveal a wing as elaborately paned as a cathedral window, and then bit into it: his first bug. His little brother, who was three, came over and asked for a bite. "Good," he pronounced.

"Who's going to eat the head?" their mother asked.

"I will," the five-year-old said. "Once somebody licks the mustard off."

The last round of the day matched Martin against Gracer. He was making Ugandan-katydid-and-grilled-cheese sandwiches. Drawing on her Japanese-restaurant experience, Martin decided to make a spider roll, using a rose-haired tarantula. She held up the spider and burned off its hair with a lighter, and then removed its abdomen. "The problem with eating an actual spider roll, made with crab, is that they're bottom feeders," she said. "This spider probably ate only crickets, which ate only grass." She whipped up a sauce and added a few slices of cucumber, and then presented her dish to the judges, warning them brightly to "be very careful of the fangs!"

A young girl with curly hair lunged eagerly at the plate. "If it's in sushi, I'll eat it," she said. When she had tried a piece, she declared, "It's sushi. With spiders. It's awesome."

Four-fifths of the animal species on earth are insects, and yet food insects are not particularly easy to find. Home cooks can call Fred Rhyme, of Rainbow Mealworms, who provided the Madagascar hissing cockroaches for "Fear Factor." He sells more than a billion worms a year; the sign at the edge of his farm, a conglomeration of twenty-three trailers, shotgun houses, and former machine shops in South Los Angeles, says, "Welcome to Worm City, Compton, Cal., 90220½. Population: 990,000,000." The farm supplies six hundred thousand worms a week to the San Diego Zoo. "It's mostly animals we feed," Rhyme's wife, Betty, who is the company's president, told me. "The people are something of an oddity."

For the do-it-yourself set, there are rearing and grinding kits, invented by Rosanna Yau, a designer in San Francisco, who has sold insect snacks at the San Francisco Underground Market. The business card for her Web site, [minilivestock.org](http://minilivestock.org), has a packet of dried mealworms attached to the back, and a warning to those with shellfish allergies not to consume them: insects and shellfish are such close cousins that the allergy tends to extend to both.

Most edible insects, though, are wild-harvested and highly seasonal, and not U.S.D.A.-approved. Until a citation from the health department prompted them to set up a certified facility in Oaxaca, the Lopezes got the *chapulines* they served at Guelaguetza from friends and relatives, who packed them in their carry-ons when they visited from Mexico.

Consider the immature *Liometopum apiculatum*, exquisitely subtle, palest beigy-pink, knobbly as a seed pearl, with a current market price of seventy dollars a pound. A delicacy since Aztec times—they were used as tribute to Moctezuma—they are still a prized ingredient in high-end Mexico City restaurants, where they appear on the menu as *escamoles*; they are also known, colloquially, as Mexican caviar, or ant eggs.

Like humans, *Liometopum apiculatum* ants are opportunists; they will eat anything they can overpower, and, because they do not sting, they tear their prey to shreds. (They are also ranchers, tending flocks of aphids and defending them from lady beetles, in exchange for the aphids' surplus honeydew.) They burrow under boulders or at the base of trees, and live in colonies of up to fifty thousand members. Traditionally, they were hunted only by experienced *escamoleros*, but, according to Julieta Ramos-Elorduy, a biologist who studies food insects at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, their desirability has invited poachers, who overharvest and destroy the nests. The ants, which are most readily available in the state of Hidalgo, are also found in the southwestern United States. High prices have inspired North American foragers to get in on the business. “Recently at San Juan market in Mexico City, monopolizers informed us that small airplanes loaded with tons of the product arrived from the United States and sold it to the highest bidders,” Ramos-Elorduy wrote in a 2006 paper.

You can't really buy *escamoles* in America. Joe Raffa, the head chef at Oyamel, who gets his *chapulines* sent from Oaxaca in kilo bags (“It all

sounds very covert and druglike,” he said), has scoured D.C. markets for them without success, though once, on a tip from a lady who overheard him complaining to his barber about their unavailability, he discovered some frozen Thai ant larvae (labelled as “puffed rice”) in an Asian grocery store in Virginia. Raffa’s boss, José Andrés, told me that he considers *escamoles* a delicacy, and if he could get them he’d put them on the menu at Minibar, his acclaimed six-seat restaurant in Washington, D.C.

In April, I called Laurent Quenioux, a French-born chef based in Los Angeles, who was a semifinalist for a 2011 award from the James Beard Foundation and is the only chef I know of in this country who has *escamoles* on the menu. He was trying to get some to serve at Starry Kitchen, where he was going to be chef-in-residence for the summer. “Basically, you need to smuggle them,” he said. His connection, a Mexican living near Hidalgo who brought the eggs in Styrofoam cups in his carry-on luggage, didn’t work anymore; the last two times Quenioux had placed an order, he’d prepaid, only to have his shipment confiscated by customs at LAX.

A week before the soft launch of Quenioux’s residency at Starry Kitchen, I heard that he had a line on some *escamoles*. He knew a guy who knew a guy who would bring them across the border from Tijuana; we simply had to drive down to a meeting place on the U.S. side and escort them back. We set a time, and I went to a street corner in Pasadena, where Quenioux lives; when I arrived, a red Toyota Corolla was waiting. The window came down partway, and I heard someone call my name.

Quenioux is a gentle person, with huge, pale-green eyes, a bald-shaved head, a set of prayer beads around his wrist, and the endearingly antisocial habit of seeing everything he encounters as potential food: the deer near Mt. Wilson, which he hunts with a bow and arrow; the purple blossoms of the jacaranda trees; a neighbor’s chicken, which he killed and cooked when it came into his yard. (Usually, he finds chicken disgusting, and eats it only when he’s home in France.) Certain laws just don’t make sense to him, like the one that prohibits him from serving a dessert made from chocolate hot-boxed with pot smoke. “What’s one gram of marijuana, just to have the smoke infuse the chocolate?” he said. Last year, when his restaurant Bistro LQ was picketed for serving foie gras, he was unperturbed; he says that when the ban on foie gras goes into effect next year in California, he will serve it anyway.

“We are known to be a little bit rebellious,” he told me. “They can fine me every day.”

It is the same with *escamoles*. “We do it for the culinary adventure,” he said. He has made blinis with ant eggs and caviar, and a three-egg dish of *escamoles*, quail eggs, and salmon roe. He has fantasized about making an *escamole* quiche, and, using just the albumen that drains out when the eggs are frozen, meringue. His signature dish is a corn tortilla resting on a nasturtium leaf and topped with *escamoles* sautéed in butter with epazote, shallots, and serrano chilis, served with a shot of Mexican beer and a lime gel. Insects are, to him, like any other ingredient: a challenge and an opportunity. “Let’s do gastronomy with bugs,” he said. “Let’s make something delicious.”

Quenioux talked about *escamoles* all the way down south—their delicate eggy qualities, their wildness, their unexpected appearance (“condensed milk with little pebbles in it”), the responsibility he feels to train the American palate to accept them. “The insects will be the solution to feed all those masses, but how do you get insects on the daily table in America?” he said. “In the last twenty years, we grew here in America from iceberg lettuce to baby frisée, so the time is now.”

After a few hours, we arrived at a strip mall and parked in front of a drugstore, then walked toward the meeting place, a restaurant, where the *escamoles* had been entrusted to a woman named Nadia. “O.K., let’s go talk to Nadia,” Quenioux said, getting out of the car. “I’ve got the cash.”

The front door to the restaurant was open, and an old man with a drooping mustache was mopping the floor. “*Hola, señor,*” Quenioux said. The old man pointed to a Dutch door, which led to the kitchen. Quenioux stuck his head in, and eventually Nadia, a young woman wearing a dirty chef’s coat and a white apron, appeared. “You come for the *escamoles?*” she said. “O.K., I get for you.” She returned a minute later with a plastic shopping bag containing a large ziplock filled with half a kilo of frozen product. Quenioux handed her a hundred-dollar bill.

Getting back in the car, Quenioux opened the bag to examine the goods, a pale-orange slush, scattered with clumps of oblong ant babies. “Ooh!” he

squealed. “We got the loot!”

A week later, he was at Starry Kitchen, a lunch counter downtown owned by Nguyen and Thi Tran, who until recently ran it as an underground supper club out of their apartment. Nguyen was bounding around the kitchen, talking about his role in getting the *escamoles*, which Queniox was going to serve as an *amuse-bouche*. “I called everyone, from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand—all the sources I know got caught,” he said. He was thrilled about the air of the forbidden which the dish would confer. “It’s going to be a great note to start on—not even the taste, just them knowing it was smuggled and it’s ant eggs,” he said.

To complement a menu full of Asian flavors—teriyaki rabbit meatballs in miso broth, veal sweetbreads with shishito peppers and yuzu—Queniox had decided to prepare the *escamoles* with Thai basil and serve them with Sapporo. “These are very spicy,” he said, placing an ample green nasturtium leaf on a plate. “I foraged them from my garden this morning.” There was a light sheen of sweat on his forehead.

Just before the service, the waiters started to panic. “What am I telling them?” one asked. “I can’t just go up to them and say it’s ant eggs.”

“Tell them it’s very exotic, and traditional in Mexico City,” the sous-chef said.

“This is an *amuse* from the chef,” a waiter said, presenting me with the dish, a composition as spare and earthy as a Japanese garden. “It’s smuggled-in ant eggs.” I rolled the leaf around the tortilla and bit: peppery nasturtium, warm, sweet tortilla, and then the light pop of *escamoles* bursting like tiny corn kernels. A whiff of dirt, a sluice of beer, and that was it. They were gone by night’s end. ♦

By [Helen Rosner](#)

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

# Fiction

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- “[Pnin Gives a Party](#)”

# The Year of Spaghetti

By [Haruki Murakami](#)

November 13, 2005



Nineteen-seventy-one was the Year of Spaghetti.

In 1971, I cooked spaghetti to live, and lived to cook spaghetti. Steam rising from the pot was my pride and joy, tomato sauce bubbling up in the saucepan my one great hope in life.

*Published in the print edition of the [November 21, 2005](#), issue.*

I went to a cooking specialty store and bought a kitchen timer and a huge aluminum pot, big enough to bathe a German shepherd in, then went around to all the supermarkets that catered to foreigners, gathering an assortment of odd-sounding spices. I picked up a pasta cookbook at the bookstore, and bought tomatoes by the dozen. I purchased every brand of spaghetti I could lay my hands on, simmered every sauce known to man. Fine particles of garlic, onion, and olive oil swirled in the air, forming a harmonious cloud that penetrated every corner of my tiny apartment, permeating the floor and the ceiling and the walls, my clothes, my books, my records, my tennis

racquet, my bundles of old letters. It was a fragrance one might have smelled on ancient Roman aqueducts.

This is a story from the Year of Spaghetti, 1971 A.D.

As a rule, I cooked spaghetti, and ate it, by myself. I was convinced that spaghetti was a dish best enjoyed alone. I can't really explain why I felt that way, but there it is.

I always drank tea with my spaghetti and ate a simple lettuce-and-cucumber salad. I'd make sure I had plenty of both. I laid everything out neatly on the table and enjoyed a leisurely meal, glancing at the paper as I ate. From Sunday to Saturday, one Spaghetti Day followed another. And each new Sunday started a brand-new Spaghetti Week.

Every time I sat down to a plate of spaghetti—especially on a rainy afternoon—I had the distinct feeling that somebody was about to knock on my door. The person who I imagined was about to visit me was different each time. Sometimes it was a stranger, sometimes someone I knew. Once, it was a girl with slim legs whom I'd dated in high school, and once it was myself, from a few years back, come to pay a visit. Another time, it was William Holden, with Jennifer Jones on his arm.

*William Holden?*

Not one of these people, however, actually ventured into my apartment. They hovered just outside the door, without knocking, like fragments of memory, and then slipped away.

Spring, summer, and fall, I cooked and cooked, as if cooking spaghetti were an act of revenge. Like a lonely, jilted girl throwing old love letters into the fireplace, I tossed one handful of spaghetti after another into the pot.

I'd gather up the trampled-down shadows of time, knead them into the shape of a German shepherd, toss them into the roiling water, and sprinkle them with salt. Then I'd hover over the pot, oversized chopsticks in hand, until the timer dinged its plaintive note.

Spaghetti strands are a crafty bunch, and I couldn't let them out of my sight. If I were to turn my back, they might well slip over the edge of the pot and vanish into the night. The night lay in silent ambush, hoping to waylay the prodigal strands.

Spaghetti alla parmigiana

Spaghetti alla napoletana

Spaghetti al cartoccio

Spaghetti aglio e olio

Spaghetti alla carbonara

Spaghetti della pina

And then there was the pitiful, nameless leftover spaghetti carelessly tossed into the fridge.

Born in heat, the strands of spaghetti washed down the river of 1971 and vanished.

I mourn them all—all the spaghetti of the year 1971.

When the phone rang at 3:20 *p.m.* I was sprawled out on the tatami, staring at the ceiling. A pool of winter sunlight had formed in the place where I lay. Like a dead fly I lay there, vacant, in a December spotlight.

At first, I didn't recognize the sound as the phone ringing. It was more like an unfamiliar memory that had hesitantly slipped in between the layers of air. Finally, though, it began to take shape, and, in the end, a ringing phone was unmistakably what it was. It was one hundred per cent a phone ring in one-hundred-per-cent real air. Still sprawled out, I reached over and picked up the receiver.

On the other end was a girl, a girl so indistinct that, by four-thirty, she might very well have disappeared altogether. She was the ex-girlfriend of a friend of mine. Something had brought them together, this guy and this indistinct

girl, and something had led them to break up. I had, I admit, reluctantly played a role in getting them together in the first place.

“Sorry to bother you,” she said, “but do you know where he is now?”

I looked at the phone, running my eyes along the length of the cord. The cord was, sure enough, attached to the phone. I managed a vague reply. There was something ominous in the girl’s voice, and whatever trouble was brewing I knew that I didn’t want to get involved.

“Nobody will tell me where he is,” she said in a chilly tone. “Everybody’s pretending they don’t know. But there’s something important I have to tell him, so *please*—tell me where he is. I promise I won’t drag you into this. Where is he?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I told her. “I haven’t seen him in a long time.” My voice didn’t sound like my own. I was telling the truth about not having seen him for a long time, but not about the other part—I did know his address and phone number. Whenever I tell a lie, something weird happens to my voice.

No comment from her.

The phone was like a pillar of ice.

Then all the objects around me turned into pillars of ice, as if I were in a J. G. Ballard science-fiction story.

“I really don’t know,” I repeated. “He went away a long time ago, without saying a word.”

The girl laughed. “Give me a break. He’s not that clever. We’re talking about a guy who has to make a lot of noise no matter what he does.”

She was right. The guy really was a bit of a dim bulb.

But I wasn’t about to tell her where he was. Do that, and next I’d have *him* on the phone, giving me an earful. I was through with getting caught up in other people’s messes. I’d already dug a hole in the back yard and buried everything that needed to be buried in it. Nobody could ever dig it up again.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You don’t like me, do you?” she said suddenly.

I had no idea what to say. I didn’t particularly dislike her. I had no real impression of her at all. It’s hard to have a bad impression of somebody you have no impression of.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “But I’m cooking spaghetti right now.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I said I’m cooking spaghetti,” I lied. I had no idea why I said that. But the lie had already become a part of me—so much so that, at that moment at least, it didn’t feel like a lie at all.

I went ahead and filled an imaginary pot with imaginary water, lit an imaginary stove with an imaginary match.

“So?” she asked.

I sprinkled imaginary salt into the boiling water, gently lowered a handful of imaginary spaghetti into the imaginary pot, set the imaginary kitchen timer for eight minutes.

“So I can’t talk. The spaghetti will be ruined.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I’m really sorry, but cooking spaghetti is a delicate operation.”

The girl was silent. The phone in my hand began to freeze again.

“So could you call me back?” I added hurriedly.

“Because you’re in the middle of making spaghetti?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Are you making it for someone, or are you going to eat alone?”

“I’ll eat it by myself,” I said.

She held her breath for a long time, then slowly breathed out. “There’s no way you could know this, but I’m really in trouble. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help you,” I said.

“There’s some money involved, too.”

“I see.”

“He owes me money,” she said. “I lent him some money. I shouldn’t have, but I had to.”

I was quiet for a minute, my thoughts drifting toward spaghetti. “I’m sorry,” I said. “But I’ve got the spaghetti going, so . . .”

She gave a listless laugh. “Goodbye,” she said. “Say hi to your spaghetti for me. I hope it turns out O.K.”

“Bye,” I said.

When I hung up the phone, the circle of light on the floor had shifted an inch or two. I lay down again in that pool of light and resumed staring at the ceiling.

Thinking about spaghetti that boils eternally but is never done is a sad, sad thing.

Now I regret, a little, that I didn’t tell the girl anything. Perhaps I should have. I mean, her ex-boyfriend wasn’t much to start with—an empty shell of a guy with artistic pretensions, a great talker whom nobody trusted. She sounded as if she really were strapped for money, and, no matter what the situation, you’ve got to pay back what you borrow.

Sometimes I wonder what happened to the girl—the thought usually pops into my mind when I’m facing a steaming-hot plate of spaghetti. After she

hung up the phone, did she disappear forever, sucked into the 4:30 *p.m.* shadows? Was I partly to blame?

I want you to understand my position, though. At the time, I didn't want to get involved with anyone. That's why I kept on cooking spaghetti, all by myself. In that huge pot, big enough to hold a German shepherd.

Durum semolina, golden wheat wafting in Italian fields.

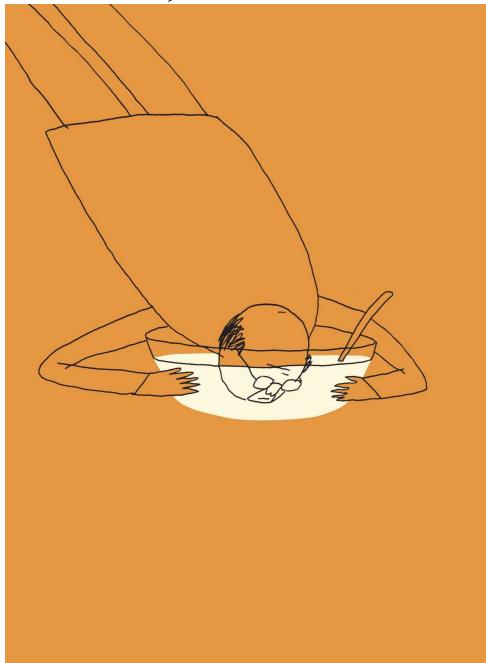
Can you imagine how astonished the Italians would be if they knew that what they were exporting in 1971 was really *loneliness*? ♦

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.)

# Pnin Gives a Party

By [Vladimir Nabokov](#)

November 4, 1955



The 1954 fall term had begun. Again the marble neck of a homely Venus in the vestibule of Humanities Hall, Waindell College, received the vermilion imprint, in applied lipstick, of a mimicked kiss. Again the *Waindell Recorder* discussed the parking problem. Again in the margins of library books earnest freshmen inscribed such helpful glosses as "Description of nature," "Irony," and "How true!" Again autumn gales plastered dead leaves against one side of the latticed gallery leading from Humanities to Frieze Hall. Again, on serene afternoons, huge amber-brown monarch butterflies flapped over asphalt and lawn as they lazily drifted south, their incompletely retracted black legs hanging rather low beneath their polka-dotted bodies.

And still the college creaked on. Hard-working graduates, with pregnant wives, still wrote dissertations on Dostoevski and Simone de Beauvoir. Literary departments still labored under the impression that Stendhal, Galsworthy, Dreiser, and Mann were great writers. Word plastics like "conflict" and "pattern" were still in vogue. As usual, sterile instructors successfully endeavored to "produce" by reviewing the books of more fertile

colleagues, and, as usual, a crop of lucky faculty members were enjoying or about to enjoy various awards received earlier in the year. Thus an amusing little grant was affording the versatile Starr couple—baby-faced Christopher Starr and his child-wife Louise—of the Fine Arts Department, the unique opportunity of recording postwar folk songs in East Germany, into which these amazing young people had somehow obtained permission to penetrate. Tristram W. Thomas (“Tom” to his friends), Professor of Anthropology, had obtained ten thousand dollars from the Mandeville Foundation for a study of the eating habits of Cuban fishermen and palm climbers. And another charitable institution had come to the assistance of Dr. Bodo von Falternfels, to enable him to complete “a bibliography concerned with such published and manuscript material as has been devoted in recent years to a critical appraisal of the influence of Nietzsche’s disciples on Modern Thought.”

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The fall term had begun, and Dr. Hagen, Chairman of the German Department, was faced with a complicated situation. During the summer, he had been informally approached by an old friend about whether he might consider accepting next year a delightfully lucrative professorship at Seaboard University, a far more important seat of learning than Waindell. This part of the problem was comparatively easy to solve—he would accept. On the other hand, there remained the chilling fact that the department he had so lovingly built would be relinquished into the claws of the treacherous Falternfels, whom he, Hagen, had obtained from Austria, and who had turned against him—had actually managed to appropriate by underhand methods the direction of *Europa Nova*, an influential quarterly Hagen had founded in 1945. Hagen’s proposed departure, of which, as yet, he had divulged nothing to his colleagues, would have a still more heart-rending consequence: Assistant Professor Timofey Pnin must be left in the lurch. There had never been any regular Russian Department at Waindell, and my poor friend Pnin’s academic existence had always depended on his being employed by the eclectic German Department in a kind of Comparative Literature extension of one of its branches. Out of pure spite, Bodo von Falternfels, who had grudgingly shared an office with Pnin, was sure to lop off that limb, and Pnin, who was only an Assistant Professor and had no life tenure at Waindell, would be forced to leave—unless some other literature-and-language department agreed to adopt him. The only department that was

flexible enough to do so was that of English. But Jack Cockerell, Chairman of the English Department, disapproved of everything Hagen did, and considered Pnin a joke.

For Pnin, who was totally unaware of his protector's woes, the new term had begun particularly well; he had never had so few students to bother about, or so much time for his own research. This research had long entered the charmed stage when the quest overrides the goal. Index cards were gradually loading a shoe box with their compact weight. The collation of two legends, a precious detail of manners or dress, a reference checked and found to be falsified by incompetence or fraud, the spine thrill of a felicitous guess, and all the other innumerable triumphs of *bezkorïstniy* (disinterested, devoted) scholarship had corrupted Pnin and made of him a happy, footnote-drugged maniac.

On another, more human plane, there was the little brick house that he had rented on Todd Road, at the corner of Cliff Avenue. The sense of living in a discrete building all by himself was to Pnin something singularly delightful, and amazingly satisfying to a weary old want of his innermost self, battered and stunned by thirty-five years of homelessness. One of the sweetest things about the place was the silence—angelic, rural, and perfectly secure, and thus in blissful contrast to the persistent cacophonies that had surrounded him from six sides in the rented room of his former habitations. And the tiny house was so spacious! (With grateful surprise, Pnin thought that had there been no Russian Revolution, no exodus, no expatriation in France, no naturalization in America, everything—at the best, at the best, Timofey—would have been much the same: a professorship, perhaps, in Kharkov or Kazan, a suburban house such as this, old books within, late blooms without.) It was—to be more precise—a two-story house of cherry-red brick, with white shutters and a shingle roof. The green plat on which it stood had a frontage of about fifty arshins and was limited at the back by a vertical stretch of mossy cliff with tawny shrubs on its crest. A rudimentary driveway along the south side of the house led to a small whitewashed garage for the poor man's car Pnin owned. A curious basketlike net, somewhat like a glorified billiard pocket—lacking, however, a bottom—was suspended for some reason above the garage door, upon the white of which it cast a shadow as distinct as its own weave but larger and in a bluer tone. Lilacs—those Russian garden graces, to whose springtime splendor, all

honey and hum, my poor Pnin greatly looked forward—crowded in sapless ranks along one wall of the house. And a tall deciduous tree, which Pnin, a birch-lime-willow-aspen-poplar-oak man, was unable to identify, cast its large, heart-shaped, rust-colored leaves and Indian-summer shadows upon the wooden steps of the open porch.

A cranky-looking oil furnace in the basement did its best to send up its weak, warm breath through registers in the floors. The living room was scantily and dingily furnished, but had a rather attractive bay at one end, harboring a huge old globe, on which Russia was painted a pale blue. In a very small dining room, a pair of crystal candlesticks, with pendants, was responsible in the early mornings for iridescent reflections, which glowed charmingly on the sideboard, reminding my sentimental friend of the stained glass that colored the sunlight orange and green and violet on the verandas of Russian country houses. A china closet, every time he passed by it, went into a rumbling act that also was somehow familiar from dim back rooms of the past. The second floor consisted of two bedrooms, both of which had been the abode of many small children, with incidental adults. The floors had been chafed by tin toys. From the wall of the chamber Pnin had decided to sleep in he had untacked a pennant-shaped piece of red cardboard with the enigmatic word "Cardinals" daubed on it in white, but a tiny rocker for a three-year-old Pnin, painted pink, was allowed to remain in its corner. A disabled sewing machine occupied a passageway leading to the bathroom, where the usual short tub, made for dwarfs by a nation of giants, took as long to fill as the tanks and basins of the arithmetic in Russian schoolbooks.

Timofey was now ready to give a housewarming party. The living room had a sofa that could seat three, and there were a wingback chair, an overstuffed easy chair, two chairs with rush seats, one hassock, and two footstools. He had planned a buffet supper, which he would serve in the dining room. All of a sudden, he experienced an odd feeling of dissatisfaction as he checked, mentally, the little list of his guests—the Clementses, the Hagens, the Thayers, and Betty Bliss. It had body but it lacked bouquet. Of course, he was tremendously fond of the Clementses (real people—not like most of the campus dummies), with whom he had had such exhilarating talks in the days when he was their roomer; of course, he felt very grateful to Herman Hagen for many a good turn, such as that raise Hagen had recently arranged; of course, Mrs. Hagen was, in Waindell parlance, "a lovely person"; of course,

Mrs. Thayer was always so helpful at the library, and her husband, of the English Department, had such a soothing capacity for showing how silent a man could be if he strictly avoided comments on the weather. While visiting a famous grocery between Waindellville and Isola, he had run into Betty Bliss, a former student of his, and had asked her to the party, and she had said she still remembered Turgenev's prose poem about roses, with its refrain "*Kak horoshi, kak svezhi*" ("How fair, how fresh"), and would certainly be delighted to come.

But there was nothing extraordinary, nothing original, about this combination of people, and old Pnin recalled those birthday parties in his boyhood—the half-dozen children invited who were somehow always the same, and the pinching shoes, and the aching temples, and the kind of heavy, unhappy, constraining dullness that would settle on him after all the games had been played and a rowdy cousin had started putting nice new toys to vulgar and stupid uses. And he also recalled the time when, in the course of a protracted hide-and-seek routine, after an hour of uncomfortable concealment he had emerged from a dark and stuffy wardrobe in the maid's chamber only to find that all his playmates had gone home.

Pnin, returning to his unsatisfactory list of guests, decided to invite the celebrated mathematician, Professor Idelson, and his wife, the sculptress. He called them up and they said they would come with joy but later telephoned to say they were tremendously sorry—they had overlooked a previous engagement. He next asked Miller, a young instructor in the German Department, and Charlotte, his pretty, freckled wife, but it turned out she was on the point of having a baby. The party was to be the next day and he was about to ask the Cockerells when a perfectly new and really admirable idea occurred to him.

Pnin and I had long accepted the disturbing but seldom discussed fact that on any given college staff one was likely to find at least one person who was the twin, so far as looks went, of another man within the same professional group. I know, indeed, of a case of triplets at a comparatively small college, and I remember that among the fifty or so faculty members of a wartime "intensive language school" there were as many as six Pnins, besides the genuine and, to me, unique article. It should not be deemed surprising, therefore, that even Pnin, not a very observant man in everyday life, could

not help becoming aware (some time during his ninth year at Waindell) that a lanky, bespectacled old fellow with scholarly strands of steel-gray hair falling over the right side of his small but corrugated brow, and with a deep furrow descending from his sharp nose to each corner of his long upperlip—a person whom Pnin knew as Professor Thomas Wynn, head of the Ornithology Department, having once talked to him at a garden party about golden orioles and other Russian countryside birds—was not always Professor Wynn. At times he graded, as it were, into somebody else, whom Pnin did not know by name but whom he classified, with a bright foreigner's fondness for puns, as "Twynn" or, in Pninian, "Tvin." My friend and compatriot soon realized that he could never be sure whether the owlish, rapidly stalking gentleman whose path he would cross every other day at different points of progress between office and classroom was really his chance acquaintance, the ornithologist, whom he felt bound to greet in passing, or the Wynnlike stranger who acknowledged Pnin's sombre salute with exactly the same degree of automatic politeness that any chance acquaintance would. The moment of meeting would be very brief since both Pnin and Wynn (or Twynn) walked fast; and sometimes Pnin, in order to avoid the exchange of urbane barks, would feign reading a letter on the run, or would manage to dodge his rapidly advancing colleague and tormentor by swerving into a stairway and then continuing along a lower-floor corridor; but no sooner had he begun to rejoice in the smartness of the device than upon using it one day he almost collided with Tvin (or Vin) pounding along the subjacent passage.

By great good luck, on the day of the party, as Pnin was finishing a late lunch in Frieze Hall, Wynn, or his double, neither of whom had ever appeared there before, suddenly sat down beside him and said, "I have long wanted to ask you something—you teach Russian, don't you? Last summer I was reading a magazine article on birds. ["Vin! This is Vin!" said Pnin to himself, and forthwith perceived a decisive course of action.] Well, the author of that article—I don't recall his name; I think it was a Russian one—mentioned that in the Skoff region (I hope I pronounce it right?) a local cake is baked in the form of a bird. Basically, of course, the symbol is phallic, but I was wondering if you knew of such a custom."

"Sir, I am at your service," Pnin said, a note of exultation quivering in his throat, for he now saw his way not only to carry out his brilliant idea but

also to pin down definitely the personality of at least the initial Wynn, who liked birds. "Yes, sir, I know all about those *zhavoronki*, those *alouettes*, those— We must consult a dictionary for the English name. So I take the opportunity to extend a cordial invitation to you to visit me this evening. Half past eight, post meridiem. A little house-heating soirée, nothing more. Bring also your spouse—or perhaps you are a Bachelor of Hearts?" (Oh, punster Pnin!)

His interlocutor said he was not married and he would sure love to come. What was the address?

"It is 999 Todd Rodd—very simple! At the very, very end of the rodd, where it unites with Cliff Ahvne. A little brick house with a big black cliff behind."

That afternoon, Pnin could hardly wait to start culinary operations. He began them soon after five and only interrupted them to don, for the reception of his guests, a sybaritic smoking jacket of blue silk, with tasselled belt and satin lapels, won at an émigré charity bazaar in Paris twenty years ago. (How time flies!) This jacket he wore with a pair of old tuxedo trousers, likewise of European origin. Peering at himself in the cracked mirror of the medicine chest, he put on his heavy tortoise-shell reading glasses, from under the saddle of which his Russian potato nose smoothly bulged. He bared his synthetic teeth. He inspected his cheeks and chin to see if his morning shave still held. It did. With finger and thumb he grasped a long nostril hair, plucked it out after a second hard tug, and sneezed lustily, an "Ah!" of well-being rounding out the explosion.

At half past seven, Betty Bliss arrived to help with the final arrangements. Betty now taught English and History at Isola High School. She had not changed since the days when she was a buxom graduate student. Her pink-rimmed, myopic gray eyes peered at you with the same ingenuous sympathy. She wore the same Gretchenlike coil of thick hair around her head. There was the same scar on her soft throat. But an engagement ring with a diminutive diamond had appeared on her plump hand, and this she displayed with coy pride to Pnin, who vaguely experienced a twinge of sadness. He reflected that there was a time he might have courted her—would have done so, in fact, had she not had a servant maid's mind, which he soon found had

remained unaltered, too. She could still relate a long story on a “she said-I said-she said” basis, and nothing on earth could make her disbelieve in the wisdom and wit of her favorite women’s magazine. She still had the curious trick—shared by two or three other small-town young women within Pnin’s limited ken—of giving you a delayed little tap on the sleeve in acknowledgment of, rather than in retaliation for, any remark reminding her of some minor lapse. You would say, “Betty, you forgot to return that book,” or “I thought, Betty, you said you would never marry,” and before she actually answered, there it would come—that demure gesture, retracted at the very moment her stubby fingers came into contact with your wrist.

“He is a biochemist, and is now in Pittsburgh,” said Betty as she helped Pnin to arrange buttered slices of French bread around a pot of glossy-gray fresh caviar. There was also a large plate of cold cuts, real German pumpernickel, a dish of very special vinaigrette where shrimps hobnobbed with pickles and peas, some miniature sausages in tomato sauce, hot *pirozki* (mushroom tarts, meat tarts, cabbage tarts), various interesting Oriental sweets, and a bowl of fruit and nuts. Drinks were to be represented by whiskey (Betty’s contribution), *ryabinovka* (a rowanberry liqueur), brandy-and-grenadine cocktails, and, of course, Pnin’s Punch, a heady mixture of chilled Château Yquem, grapefruit juice, and maraschino, which the solemn host had already started to stir in a large bowl of brilliant aquamarine glass with a decorative design of swirled ribbing and lily pads.

“My, what a lovely thing!” cried Betty.

Pnin eyed the bowl with pleased surprise, as if seeing it for the first time, and explained that it was a recent present from young Victor, his former wife’s son by a second marriage. Victor was at St. Bartholomew’s, a boarding school at Cranton, near Boston, and Timofey had never met the boy until last spring, when his mother, who lived in California, had arranged to have Victor spend his Easter vacation with Pnin at Waindell. The visit had proved a success and was followed by the arrival of this bowl, enclosed in a box within another box inside a third one, and wrapped up in an extravagant mass of excelsior and paper that had spread all over the kitchen like a carnival storm. The bowl that emerged was one of those gifts whose first impact produces in the recipient’s mind a colored image, a blazoned blur, reflecting with such emblematic force the sweet nature of the donor that the

tangible attributes of the thing are dissolved, as it were, in this pure inner blaze, but suddenly and forever leap into brilliant being when praised by an outsider to whom the true glory of the object is unknown. Timofey was using the precious bowl for the first time tonight, he told Betty.

A musical tinkle reverberated through the small house and the Clementses entered with a bottle of French champagne and a cluster of dahlias.

Dark-eyed, long-limbed, bob-haired Joan Clements wore an old black silk dress that was smarter than anything other faculty wives could devise, and it was always a pleasure to watch good old bald Tim Pnin bend slightly to touch with his lips the light hand that Joan, alone of all the Waindell ladies, knew how to raise to exactly the right level for Russian gentleman to kiss. Her husband, Laurence, a nice fat Professor of Philosophy in a nice gray flannel suit, sank into the easiest chair and immediately grabbed the first book at hand, which happened to be an English-Russian and Russian-English pocket dictionary. Holding his glasses, he looked away, trying to recall something he had always wished to look up, and his attitude accentuated his striking resemblance, somewhat *en jeune*, to Jan van Eyck's ample-jowled, fluff-haloed Canon van der Paele, seized by a fit of abstraction in the presence of the puzzled Virgin to whom a super, rigged up as St. George, is directing the good Canon's attention. Everything was there—the knotty temple, the sad, musing gaze, the folds and furrows of facial flesh, the thin lips, and even the wart on the left cheek.

Hardly had the Clementses settled down when Betty let in the man interested in bird-shaped cakes. Pnin was about to say "Professor Vin" but Joan—rather unfortunately, perhaps—interrupted the introduction with "Oh, we know Thomas! Who doesn't know Tom?" Pnin returned to the kitchen, and Betty handed around some Bulgarian cigarettes.

"I thought, Thomas," remarked Clements, crossing his fat legs, "you were out in Havana interviewing palm-climbing fishermen?"

"Well, I'll be on my way after mid-years," said Professor Thomas. "Of course, most of the actual field work has been done already by others."

"Still, it was nice to get that grant, wasn't it?"

"In our branch," replied Thomas with perfect composure, "we have to undertake many difficult journeys. In fact, I may push on to the Windward Islands. If," he added, with a hollow laugh, "Senator McCarthy does not crack down on foreign travel."

"Tom received a grant of ten thousand dollars," said Joan to Betty, whose face dropped a curtsy as she made that special grimace consisting of a slow half bow and a tensing of chin and lower lip that automatically conveys, on the part of Bettys, a respectful, congratulatory, and slightly awed recognition of such grand things as dining with one's boss, being in *Who's Who*, or meeting a duchess.

The last to arrive were the Thayers, who came in a new station wagon and presented their host with an elegant box of mints, and Dr. Hagen, who came on foot, and now triumphantly held aloft a bottle of vodka.

"Good evening, good evening," said the hearty Hagen.

"Dr. Hagen," said Thomas as he shook hands with him. "I hope the Senator did not see you walking about with that stuff."

The good Doctor, a square-shouldered, aging man, explained that Mrs. Hagen had been prevented from coming, alas, at the very last moment, by a dreadful migraine.

Pnin served the cocktails. "Or better to say flamingo tails—specially for ornithologists," he slyly quipped, looking, as he supposed, at his friend Vin.

"Thank you!" chanted Mrs. Thayer as she received her glass, raising her eyebrows on that bright note of genteel inquiry that is meant to combine the notions of surprise, unworthiness, and pleasure. An attractive, prim, pink-faced lady of forty or so, with pearly dentures and wavy goldenized hair, she was the provincial cousin of the smart, relaxed Joan Clements, who had been all over the world and was married to the most original and least liked scholar on the Waindell campus. A good word should be also put in at this point for Margaret Thayer's husband, Roy, a mournful and mute member of the Department of English, which, except for its ebullient chairman, Cockerell, was an aerie of hypochondriacs. Outwardly, Roy was an obvious

figure. If you drew a pair of old brown loafers, two beige elbow patches, a black pipe, and two baggy eyes under hoary eyebrows, the rest was easy to fill out. Somewhere in the middle distance hung an obscure liver ailment, and somewhere in the background there was "Eighteenth Century Poetry," Roy's particular field, an overgrazed pasture, with the trickle of a brook and a clump of initialled trees; a barbed-wire arrangement on either side of this field separated it from Professor Stowe's domain, the preceding century, where the lambs were whiter, the turf softer, the rills purlier, and from Dr. Shapiro's early nineteenth century, with its glen mists, sea fogs, and imported grapes. Roy Thayer always avoided talking of his subject, and kept a detailed diary, in cryptogrammed verse, which he hoped posterity would someday decipher and, in sober backcast, proclaim the greatest literary achievement of our time.

When everybody was comfortably lapping and lauding the cocktails, Professor Pnin sat down on the wheezy hassock near his newest friend and said, "I have to report, sir, on the skylark—'zhavoronok,' in Russian—about which you made me the honor to interrogate me. Take this with you to your home. I have here tapped on the typewriting machine a condensed account with bibliography. . . . I think we will now transport ourselves to the other room, where a supper *à la fourchette* is, I think, awaiting us."

Presently, guests with full plates drifted back into the parlor. The punch was brought in.

"Gracious, Timofey, where on earth did you get that perfectly divine bowl!" exclaimed Joan.

"Victor presented it to me."

"But where did he *get* it?"

"Antiquaire store in Cranton, I think."

"Gosh, it must have cost a fortune!"

"One dollar? Ten dollars? Less, maybe?"

“Ten dollars—nonsense! Two hundred, I should say. *Look at it!* Look at this writhing pattern. You know, you should show it to the Cockerells. They know everything about old glass. In fact, they have a Lake Dunmore pitcher that looks like a poor relation of this.”

Margaret Thayer admired the bowl in her turn, and said that when she was a child, she imagined Cinderella’s glass shoes to be exactly of that greenish-blue tint, whereupon Professor Pnin remarked that, *primo*, he would like everybody to say whether contents was as good as container, and, *secundo*, Cendrillon’s shoes were not made of glass but of Russian squirrel fur—*vair*, in French. It was, he said, an obvious case of the survival of the fittest among words, “*verre*” being more evocative than “*vair*,” which, he submitted, came not from “*varius*,” variegated, but from “*veveritsa*,” Slavic for a certain beautiful, pale winter squirrel fur, having a bluish, or better say *siziy*—columbine—shade. “So you see, Mrs. Fire,” he concluded, “you were, in general, correct.”

“The contents are fine,” said Laurence Clements.

“This beverage is certainly delicious,” said Margaret Thayer.

By ten o’clock, Pnin’s Punch and Betty’s Scotch were causing some of the guests to talk louder than they thought they did. A carmine flush had spread over one side of Mrs. Thayer’s neck, under the little blue star of her left earring, and, sitting very straight, she regaled her host with an account of the feud between two of her co-workers at the library. It was a simple office story, but her changes of tone from Miss Shrill to Mr. Basso, and the consciousness of the soiree’s going so nicely, made Pnin bend his head and guffaw ecstatically behind his hand. Mrs. Thayer’s husband was weakly twinkling to himself as he looked into his punch, down his gray, porous nose, and politely listened to Joan Clements, who, when she was a little high, as she was now, had a fetching way of rapidly blinking or even completely closing her black-eyelashed blue eyes. Betty remained her controlled little self, and expertly looked after the refreshments. In the bay end of the room, Clements kept morosely revolving the slow globe as Hagen told him and the grinning Thomas a bit of campus gossip.

At a still later stage of the party, certain rearrangements had again taken place. In a corner of the davenport, Clements was now flipping through an album of "Flemish Masterpieces," which Victor had been given by his mother and had left with Pnin. Joan sat on a footstool at her husband's knee, a plate of grapes in the lap of her wide skirt. The others were listening to Hagen discussing modern education.

"You may laugh," he said, casting a sharp glance at Clements, who shook his head, denying the charge, and then passed the album to his wife, pointing out something in it that had suddenly provoked his glee. "You may laugh," he continued to the others, "but I affirm that the only way to escape from the morass—just a drop, Timofey; that will do—is to lock up the student in a soundproof cell and eliminate the lecture room."

"Yes, that's it," said Joan to her husband under her breath, handing the album back to him.

"I am glad you agree, Joan," said Hagen, and went on, "I have been called an *enfant terrible* for expounding this theory, and perhaps you will not go on agreeing quite as lightly when you hear me out. Phonograph records on every possible subject will be at the isolated student's disposal—"

"But the personality of the lecturer," said Margaret Thayer. "Surely that counts for something."

"It does not!" shouted Hagen. "That is the tragedy. Who, for example, wants *him*?" He pointed to the radiant Pnin. "Who wants his personality? Nobody! They will reject Timofey's wonderful personality without a quaver. The world wants a machine, not a Timofey."

"Why, Timofey is good enough to be televised," said Clements.

"Oh, I'd love that," said Joan, beaming at her host, and Betty nodded vigorously. Pnin bowed deeply to them with an "I-am-disarmed" spreading of both hands.

"And what do *you* think of my controversial plan?" asked Hagen of Thomas.

"I can tell you what Tom thinks," said Laurence, still contemplating the same picture in the book that lay open on his knees. "Tom thinks that the best method of teaching anything is to take it easy and rely on discussion in class, which means letting twenty young blockheads and two cocky neurotics discuss for fifty minutes something that neither their teacher nor they know. Now, for the last three months," he went on, without any logical transition, "I have been looking for this picture, and here it is. The publisher of my new book on the Philosophy of Gesture wants a portrait of me, and Joan and I knew we had seen somewhere a stunning likeness by an Old Master but could not even recall his period. Well, here it is. The only retouching needed would be the addition of a sports shirt and the deletion of this warrior's hand."

"I must really protest—" began Thomas.

Clements passed the open book to Margaret Thayer, and she burst out laughing.

"I must protest, Laurence," said Tom. "A relaxed discussion in an atmosphere of broad generalizations is a more realistic approach to education than the old-fashioned formal lecture."

"Sure, sure," said Clements.

At this point, Joan scrambled up to her feet and Mrs. Thayer looked at her wristwatch, and then at her husband. Betty asked Thomas whether he knew a man called Fogelman, an expert on bats who lived in Santa Clara, Cuba. A soft yawn distended Laurence Clements' mouth. The party was drawing to a close.

The setting of the final scene was the hallway. Hagen could not find the cane he had come with; it had fallen behind the umbrella stand.

"And I think I left my purse where I was sitting," said Mrs. Thayer, pushing her husband ever so slightly toward the living room.

Pnin and Clements, in last-minute discourse, stood on either side of the living-room doorway, like two well-fed caryatids, and drew in their

abdomens to let the silent Thayer pass. In the middle of the room, Professor Thomas and Miss Bliss—he with his hands behind his back and rising up every now and then on his toes, she holding a tray—were standing and talking of Cuba, where a cousin of Betty's fiancé had lived for quite a while, Betty understood. Thayer blundered from chair to chair, and found himself with a white bag, not knowing really where he picked it up, his mind being occupied by the adumbrations of lines he was to write down in his diary later in the night:

We sat and drank, each with a separate past  
locked up in him, and fate's alarm clocks  
    set  
at unrelated futures—when, at last,  
a wrist was cocked, and eyes of consorts  
    met. . . .

Meanwhile, Pnin asked Joan Clements and Margaret Thayer if they would care to see how he had embellished the upstairs rooms. They were enchanted by the idea, and he led the way upstairs. His so-called *kabinet*, or study, now looked very cozy, its scratched floor snugly covered with the more or less Turkish rug that Pnin had once acquired for his office in Humanities Hall and had recently removed in drastic silence from under the feet of the surprised Falternfels. A tartan lap robe, under which Pnin had crossed the ocean from Europe in 1940, and some endemic cushions had disguised the unremovable bed. The pink shelves, which he had found supporting several generations of children's books, were now loaded with three hundred and sixty-five items from the Waindell College Library.

"And to think I have stamped all these," sighed Mrs. Thayer, rolling up her eyes in mock dismay.

"Some stamped by Mrs. Miller," said Pnin, a stickler for historical truth.

What struck the visitors most in the bedroom was a large folding screen that cut off the fourposter bed from insidious drafts, and the view from the four small windows: a dark rock wall rising abruptly some fifty feet away, with a stretch of pale, starry sky above the black growth of its crest. On the back lawn, across a reflection of a window, Laurence strolled into the shadows.

"At last you are really comfortable," said Joan.

"And you know what I will say to you," replied Pnin in a confidential undertone vibrating with triumph. "Tomorrow morning, under the curtain of mysteree, I will see a gentleman who is wanting to help me to buy this house!"

They came down again. Roy Thayer handed his wife Betty's bag. Herman Hagen found his cane. Laurence Clements reappeared.

"Goodbye, goodbye, Professor Vin!" sang out Pnin, his cheeks ruddy and round in the lamplight of the porch.

"Now, I wonder why he called me that," said T. W. Thomas, Professor of Anthropology, to Laurence and Joan Clements as they walked through blue darkness toward four cars parked under the elms on the other side of the road.

"Our friend employs a nomenclature all his own," answered Clements. "His verbal vagaries add a new thrill to life. His mispronunciations are mythopoeic. His slips of the tongue are oracular. He calls my wife John."

"Still, I find it a little disturbing," said Thomas.

"He probably mistook you for somebody else," said Clements. "And for all I know you *may* be somebody else."

Before they had crossed the street, they were overtaken by Dr. Hagen. Professor Thomas, still looking puzzled, took his leave.

"Well," said Hagen.

It was a fair fall night, velvet below, steel above.

Joan asked, "You're sure you don't want us to give you a lift, Herman?"

"It's only a ten-minute walk," he said. "And a walk is a must on such a wonderful night."

The three of them stood for a moment gazing at the stars. "And all these are worlds," said Hagen.

From the lighted porch came Pnin's rich laughter as he finished recounting to the Thayers and Betty Bliss how he, too, had once retrieved the wrong reticule.

"Come, Laurence, let's be moving," said Joan. "It was so nice to see you, Herman. Give my love to Irmgard. What a delightful party! I have never seen Timofey so happy."

"Yes, thank you," said Hagen absent-mindedly.

"You should have seen his face when he told us he was going to talk to a real-estate man tomorrow about buying that dream house," said Joan.

"He did? You're sure he said that?" Hagen asked sharply.

"Quite sure," said Joan. "And if anybody needs a home, it is certainly Timofey."

"Well, good night," said Hagen. "So glad you could come. Good night."

He waited for them to reach their car, hesitated, and then marched back to the lighted porch, where, standing as on a stage, Pnin was shaking hands a second or third time with the Thayers and Betty.

"I shall not forgive you for not letting me do the dishes," said Betty to her merry host.

"I'll help him," said Hagen, ascending the porch steps and thumping upon them with his cane. "You, children, run along now."

There was a final round of handshakes, and the Thayers and Betty left.

"First," said Hagen as he and Pnin reentered the living room, "I guess I'll have a last cup of wine with you."

"Perfect, perfect!" cried Pnin. "Let us finish my *cruchon*."

They made themselves comfortable and Dr. Hagen said, "You are a wonderful host, Timofey. This is a very delightful moment. My grandfather used to say that a glass of good wine should be always sipped and savored as if it were the last one before the execution. I wonder what you put into this punch. I also wonder if, as our charming Joan affirms, you are really contemplating buying this house."

"Not contemplating—peeping a little at possibilities," replied Pnin with a gurgling laugh.

"I question the wisdom of it," continued Hagen, nursing his goblet.

"Naturally, I am expecting that I will get tenure at last," said Pnin rather slyly. "I am now Assistant Professor nine years. Years run. Soon I will be Assistant Emeritus. Why, Hagen, are you silent?"

"You place me in a very embarrassing position, Timofey. I hoped you would not raise this particular question."

"I do not raise the question. I say that I only expect—oh, not next year, but, example given, at hundredth anniversary of Liberation of Serfs—that Waindell will make me Associate."

"Well, you see, my dear friend, I must tell you a sad secret. It is not official yet, and you must promise not to mention it to anyone."

"I swear," said Pnin, raising his hand.

"You cannot but know with what loving care I have built up our great department," continued Hagen. "I, too, am no longer young. You say, Timofey, you have been here for nine years. But I have been giving my all for *twenty-nine* years to this university! And what happens now? I have nursed this Falternfels, this poltergeist, in my bosom, and he has now worked himself into a key position. I spare you the details of the intrigue."

"Yes," said Pnin with a sigh, "intrigue is horrible, horrible. But, on the other side, honest work will always prove its advantage. You and I will give next year some splendid new courses which I have planned long ago. On Tyranny. On the Boot. On Nicholas the First. On all the precursors of

modern atrocity. Hagen, when we speak of injustice, we forget Armenian massacres, tortures which Tibet invented, colonists in Africa. The history of man is the history of pain!"

"You are a wonderful romantic, Timofey, and under happier circumstances . . . However, I can tell you that in the spring term we are going to do something unusual. We're going to stage a dramatic program—scenes from Kotzebue to Hauptmann. I see it as a sort of apotheosis— But let us not anticipate. I, too, am a romantic, Timofey, and therefore cannot work with people like Bodo von Falternfels, as our trustees wish me to do. Kraft is retiring at Seaboard, and it has been offered me that I replace him there, beginning next fall."

"I congratulate you," said Pnin warmly.

"Thanks, my friend. It is certainly a very fine and very prominent position. I shall apply to a wider field of scholarship and administration the rich experience I have gained here. Of course, my first move was to suggest that you come with me, but they tell me at Seaboard that they have enough Slavists without you. It is hardly necessary to tell you that Bodo won't continue you in the German Department. This is unfortunate, because Waindell feels that it would be too much of a financial burden to establish a special Russian Department and pay you for two or three Russian courses that have ceased to attract students. Political trends in America, as we all know, discourage interest in things Russian."

Pnin cleared his throat and asked, "It signifies that they are firing me?"

"Now, don't take it too hard, Timofey. We shall just go on teaching, you and I, as if nothing had happened, *nicht wahr*? We must be brave, Timofey!"

"So they have fired me," said Pnin, clasping his hands and nodding his head.

"Yes, we are in the same boat," said the jovial Hagen, and he stood up. It was getting very late.

"I go now," said Hagen, who, though a lesser addict of the present tense than Pnin, also held it in favor. "It has been a wonderful party, and I would never

have allowed myself to spoil the merriment if our mutual friend had not informed me of your optimistic intentions. Good night. Oh, by the way, I hope you will participate vitally in the dramatic program in New Hall this spring. I think you should actually play in it. It would distract you from sad thoughts. Now go to bed at once, and put yourself to sleep with a good mystery story."

On the porch, he pumped Pnin's unresponsive hand with enough vigor for two. Then he flourished his cane and marched down the wooden steps.

The screen door banged behind him.

"*Der arme Kerl,*" muttered kindhearted Hagen to himself as he walked homeward. "At least, I have sweetened the pill."

From the sideboard and dining-room table Pnin removed to the kitchen sink the used china and silverware. He put away what food remained into the bright arctic light of the refrigerator. The ham and tongue had all gone, and so had the little pink sausages, but the vinaigrette had not been a success, and enough caviar and meat tarts were left over for a meal or two tomorrow. "Boom-boom-boom," said the china closet as he passed by. He surveyed the living room and started to tidy it up. A last drop of Pnin's Punch glistened in its beautiful bowl. Joan had crooked a lipstick-stained cigarette butt in her saucer; Betty had left no trace and had taken all the glasses back to the kitchen. Mrs. Thayer had forgotten a booklet of pretty multicolored matches on her plate; it lay next to a bit of nougat. Mr. Thayer had crumpled into all kinds of weird shapes half a dozen paper napkins. Hagen had quenched a messy cigar in an uneaten bunchlet of grapes.

In the kitchen, Pnin prepared to wash up the dishes. He removed his silk coat, his tie, and his dentures. To protect his shirt front and tuxedo trousers, he donned a soubrette's dappled apron. He scraped various tidbits off the plates into a brown-paper bag, to be given eventually to a mangy little white dog, with pink patches on its back, that visited him sometimes in the afternoon—there was no reason a human's misfortune should interfere with a canine's pleasure.

He prepared a bubble bath in the sink for the crockery, glass, and silverware, and with infinite care lowered the aquamarine bowl into the tepid foam. Its resonant flint glass emitted a sound full of muffled mellowness as it settled down to soak. He rinsed the amber goblets and the silverware under the tap and submerged them in the same foam. Then he fished out the knives, forks, and spoons, rinsed them, and began to wipe them. He worked very slowly, with a certain vagueness of manner, which might have been taken, in a less methodical man, for a mist of abstraction. He gathered the wiped spoons into a posy, placed them in a pitcher, which he had washed but not dried, and then took them out one by one and wiped them all over again. He groped under the bubbles, around the goblets and under the melodious bowl, for any piece of forgotten silver, and retrieved a nutcracker. Fastidious Pnin rinsed it, and was wiping it, when the leggy thing somehow slipped out of the towel and fell like a man from a roof. He almost caught it—his fingertips actually came into contact with it in midair, but this only helped to propel it into the treasure-concealing foam of the sink, where an excruciating crack of broken glass followed upon the plunge.

Pnin hurled the towel into a corner and, turning away, stood for a moment staring at the blackness beyond the threshold of the open back door. A quiet, lacy-winged little green insect circled in the glare of a naked lamp above Pnin's glossy bald head. He looked very old, with his toothless mouth half open and a film of tears dimming his blank, unblinking eyes. Then, with a moan of anguished anticipation, he went back to the sink and, bracing himself, dipped his hand deep into the foam. A jagger of glass stung him. Gently he removed a broken goblet. Victor's beautiful bowl was intact. Pnin rubbed it dry with a fresh towel, working the cloth very tenderly over the recurrent design of the docile glass. Then, with both hands, in a statuesque gesture, he raised the bowl and placed it on a high, safe shelf. The sense of its security there communicated itself to his own state of mind, and he felt that "losing one's job" dwindled to a meaningless echo in the rich, round inner world where none could really hurt him. ♦

# First Tastes

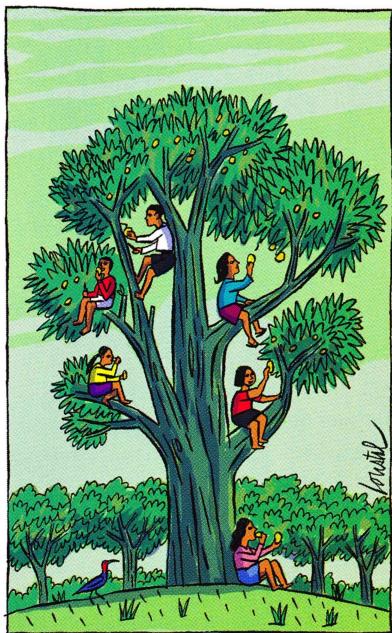
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# The Flavor of Memory

From 2002: I was left with honey on my palate and in my soul.

By [Madhur Jaffrey](#)

August 11, 2002



I was born in my grandparents' sprawling house by the Yamuna River in Delhi. When I was a few minutes old, Grandmother welcomed me into the world by writing "Om," which means "I am" in Sanskrit, on my tongue with a little finger dipped in honey. Perhaps that moment was reinforced in my tiny mind days later when the family priest arrived to draw up my horoscope. As he scribbled astrological symbols on a long scroll, my father named me Madhur, which means "sweet as honey." My grandfather teased my father, saying that he should have named me Manbhari ("am sated"), since I was the fifth child and the third daughter. But my father continued to procreate, and I was left with honey on my palate and in my soul.

My sweet tooth stayed firmly in control until the age of four, when, emulating the appetites of grownups, I began to explore the hot and the sour. My grandfather had built his house in what was once a thriving orchard of jujubes, tamarinds, and mangoes. His numerous grandchildren, like hungry flocks of birds, attacked the mangoes while they were still green and sour.

As the grownups snored through the hot summer afternoons in rooms cooled with dampened, sweet-smelling vetiver shades, we climbed up the mango trees, armed with a ground mixture of salt, pepper, red chilies, and roasted cumin. The older children, on the higher branches, peeled and sliced the mangoes with penknives and passed the pieces down to the smaller ones on the lower branches. We dipped them into the spices and ate, our tingling mouths telling us that we had ceased to be babies.

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In winter, the vegetable garden came into its own. Around eleven each morning, we were served fresh tomato juice made from our own tomatoes. At about the same time, the gardener offered the ladies sunning themselves on the veranda a basket full of fresh peas, small kohlrabies, white radishes, and feathery chickpea shoots. Some of these we ate raw, and the rest were sent off to the kitchen after a studied appraisal—"Radishes sweeter than last year, no?" As this was the season when the men went hunting, the kitchen was stocked with mallards, geese, quail, partridge, and venison. At dinner, thirty or more family members sat down to venison kebabs spiced with cardamom, tiny quail with hints of cinnamon, chickpea shoots stir-fried with green chilies and ginger, and tiny new potatoes browned with flecks of cumin and mango powder.

Winter was also the season of weddings. My father was in charge of the caterers, and I was his sidekick. In those days, caterers had to cook under family supervision. A dozen of them arrived a few days before the wedding and set up their tent under a tamarind tree. My father examined the raw ingredients. Were the spices wormy? Were there broken grains in the basmati rice? Were the cauliflower heads taut and young? His dark suspicions and the caterers' obsequious reassurances were a dutifully played game. In reality, we loved the caterers, who could conjure up with equal ease the lamb meatballs of our Mogul emperors and the tamarind chutneys of the street. One of their special dishes was made with cauliflower stems. They slit them into quarters and stir-fried them in giant woklike *karhais* with sprinklings of cumin, coriander, chilies, ginger, and lots of sour mango powder. All we had to do was place a stem in our mouths, clamp down with our teeth, and pull. As with artichoke leaves, the spicy flesh remained on our tongues as the coarse skin was drawn away and discarded.

Years later, in New York, I helped my ailing neighbor James Beard teach some of his last classes. One of them was about taste. The students were instructed to sample nine types of caviar and a variety of olive oils, and do a blind identification of meats that had had their fat removed. Toward the end of the class, this big, frail man, who was confined to a high director's chair, said to the students, "Do you think there is such a thing as taste memory?"

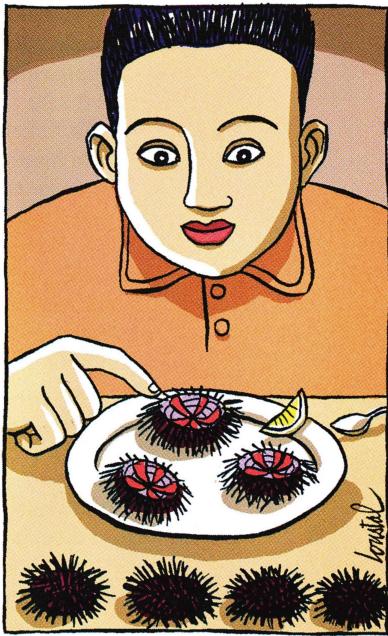
This set me thinking. A few years earlier, my husband, a violinist, had been studying the score of Bach's "Chaconne" when a friend asked him, "Can you hear the music as you read it?" It was the same question in a different form. When I left India to study in England, I did not know how to cook, but my palate had recorded hundreds of flavors. From cumin to tamarind, they were all in my head, waiting to be called into service. Rather like my husband, I could hear the honey on my tongue. ♦

# How Sea Urchin Tastes

From 2002: I point to a bin and say that's what I want—those split spiny spheres, like cracked-open meteorites.

By [Chang-rae Lee](#)

August 11, 2002



## Content

*Audio:* Listen to this audio.

July, 1980. I'm about to turn fifteen and our family is in Seoul, the first time since we left, twelve years earlier. I don't know if it's different. My parents can't really say. They just repeat the equivalent of "How in the world?" whenever we venture into another part of the city, or meet one of their old friends. "Look at that—how in the world?" "This hot spell, yes, yes—how in the world?" My younger sister is very quiet in the astounding heat. We all are. It's the first time I notice how I stink. You can't help smelling like everything else. And in the heat everything smells of ferment and rot and rankness. In my grandfather's old neighborhood, where the two- and three-room houses stand barely head-high, the smell is staggering. "What's that?" I ask. My cousin says, "Shit."

“Shit? What shit?”

“Yours,” he says, laughing. “Mine.”

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On the wide streets near the city center, there are student demonstrations; my cousin says they’re a response to a massacre of citizens by the military down south in Kwangju. After the riot troops clear the avenues, the air is laden with tear gas—“spicy,” in the idiom. Whenever we’re in a taxi, moving through there, I open the window and stick out my tongue, trying to taste the poison, the human repellent. My mother wonders what’s wrong with me.

I don’t know what’s wrong. Or maybe I do. I’m bored. Maybe I’m craving a girl. I can’t help staring at them, the ones clearing dishes in their parents’ eateries, the uniformed schoolgirls walking hand in hand, the slim young women who work in the Lotte department store, smelling of fried kimchi and L’Air du Temps. They’re all stunning to me, even with their bad teeth. I let myself drift near them, hoping for the scantest touch.

But there’s nothing. I’m too obviously desperate, utterly hopeless. Instead, it seems, I can eat. I’ve always liked food, but now I’m bent on trying everything. As it is, the days are made up of meals, formal and impromptu, meals between meals and within meals; the streets are a continuous outdoor buffet of braised crabs, cold buckwheat noodles, shaved ice with sweet red beans on top. In Itaewon, the district near the United States Army base, where you can get anything you want, culinary or otherwise, we stop at a seafood stand for dinner. Basically, it’s a tent diner, a long bar with stools, a camp stove and fish tank behind the proprietor, an elderly woman with a low, hoarse voice. The roof is a stretch of blue poly-tarp. My father is excited; it’s like the old days. He wants raw fish, but my mother shakes her head. I can see why: in plastic bins of speckled, bloody ice sit semi-alive cockles, abalones, eels, conchs, sea cucumbers, porgies, shrimps. “Get something fried,” she tells him, not caring what the woman might think. “Get something cooked.”

A young couple sitting at the end of the bar order live octopus. The old woman nods and hooks one in the tank. It’s fairly small, the size of a hand.

She lays it on a board and quickly slices off the head with her cleaver. She chops the tentacles and gathers them up onto a plate, dressing them with sesame oil and a spicy bean sauce. “You have to be careful,” my father whispers, “or one of the suction cups can stick inside your throat. You could die.” The lovers blithely feed each other the sectioned tentacles, taking sips of soju in between. My mother immediately orders a scallion-and-seafood pancake for us, then a spicy cod-head stew; my father murmurs that he still wants something live, fresh. I point to a bin and say that’s what I want—those split spiny spheres, like cracked-open meteorites, their rusty centers layered with shiny crenellations. I bend down and smell them, and my eyes almost water from the intense ocean tang. “They’re sea urchins,” the woman says to my father. “He won’t like them.” My mother is telling my father he’s crazy, that I’ll get sick from food poisoning, but he nods to the woman, and she picks up a half and cuts out the soft flesh.

What does it taste like? I’m not sure, because I’ve never had anything like it. All I know is that it tastes alive, something alive at the undragged bottom of the sea; it tastes the way flesh would taste if flesh were a mineral. And I’m half gagging, though still chewing; it’s as if I had another tongue in my mouth, this blind, self-satisfied creature. That night I throw up, my mother scolding us, my father chuckling through his concern. The next day, my uncles joke that they’ll take me out for some more, and the suggestion is enough to make me retch again.

But a week later I’m better, and I go back by myself. The woman is there, and so are the sea urchins, glistening in the hot sun. “I know what you want,” she says. I sit, my mouth slick with anticipation and revulsion, not yet knowing why. ♦

# A Sandwich

From 2002: It's soft but crispy, tender but chewy, peppery but sour, smoky but tangy. It's a symphony orchestra.

By [Nora Ephron](#)

August 11, 2002



The hot pastrami sandwich served at Langer's Delicatessen in downtown Los Angeles is the finest hot pastrami sandwich in the world. This is not just my opinion, although most people who know about Langer's will simply say it's the finest hot pastrami sandwich in Los Angeles because they don't dare to claim that something like a hot pastrami sandwich could possibly be the best version of itself in a city where until recently you couldn't get anything resembling a New York bagel, and the only reason you can get one now is that New York bagels have deteriorated.

Langer's is a medium-sized place—it seats a hundred and thirty-five people—and it is decorated, although “decorated” is probably not the word that applies, in tufted brown vinyl. The view out the windows is of the intersection of Seventh and Alvarado and the bright-red-and-yellow signage of a Hispanic neighborhood—bodegas, check-cashing storefronts, and pawnshops. Just down the block is a spot notorious for being the place to go

in L.A. if you need a fake I.D. The Rampart division's main police station, the headquarters of the city's second-most-recent police scandal, is a mile away. Even in 1947, when Langer's opened, the neighborhood was not an obvious place for an old-style Jewish delicatessen, but in the early nineties things got worse. Gangs moved in. The crime rate rose. The Langers—the founder, Al, now eighty-nine, and his son Norm, fifty-seven—were forced to cut the number of employees, close the restaurant nights and Sundays, and put coin-operated locks on the restroom doors. The opening of the Los Angeles subway system—one of its stops is half a block from the restaurant—has helped business slightly, as has the option of having your sandwich brought out to your car. But Langer's always seems to be just barely hanging on. If it were in New York, it would be a shrine, with lines around the block and tour buses standing double-parked outside. Pilgrims would come—as they do, for example, to Arthur Bryant's in Kansas City and Sonny Bryan's in Dallas—and they would report on their conversion. But in Los Angeles a surprising number of people don't even know about Langer's, and many of those who do wouldn't be caught dead at the corner of Seventh and Alvarado, even though it's not a particularly dangerous intersection during daytime hours.

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Pastrami, I should point out for the uninitiated, is made from a cut of beef that is brined like corned beef, coated with pepper and an assortment of spices, and then smoked. It is characterized by two things. The first is that it is not something anyone's mother whips up and serves at home; it's strictly restaurant fare, and it's served exclusively as a sandwich, usually on Russian rye bread with mustard. The second crucial thing about pastrami is that it is almost never good. In fact, it usually tastes like a bunch of smoked rubber bands.

The Langers buy their pastrami from a supplier in Burbank. "When we get it, it's edible," Norm Langer says, "but it's like eating a racquetball. It's hard as a rock. What do we do with it? What makes us such wizards? The average delicatessen will take this piece of meat and put it into a steamer for thirty to forty-five minutes and warm it. But you've still got a hard piece of rubber. You haven't broken down the tissues. You haven't made it tender. We take that same piece of pastrami, put it into our steamer, and steam it for almost

three hours. It will shrink twenty-five to thirty per cent, but it's now tender—so tender it can't be sliced thin in a machine because it will fall apart. It has to be hand-sliced."

So: tender and hand-sliced. That's half the secret of the Langer's sandwich. The other secret is the bread. The bread is hot. Years ago, in the nineteen-thirties, Al Langer owned a delicatessen in Palm Springs, and, because there were no Jewish bakers in the vicinity, he was forced to bus in the rye bread. "I was serving day-old bread," Al Langer says, "so I put it into the oven to make it fresher. Hot crispy bread. Juicy soft pastrami. How can you lose?"

Today, Langer's buys its rye bread from a bakery called Fred's, on South Robertson, which bakes it on bricks until it's ten minutes from being done. Langer's bakes the loaf the rest of the way, before slicing it hot for sandwiches. The rye bread, faintly sour, perfumed with caraway seeds, lightly dusted with cornmeal, is as good as any rye bread on the planet, and Langer's puts about seven ounces of pastrami on it, the proper proportion of meat to bread. The resulting sandwich, slathered with Gulden's mustard, is an exquisite combination of textures and tastes. It's soft but crispy, tender but chewy, peppery but sour, smoky but tangy. It's a symphony orchestra, different instruments brought together to play one perfect chord. It costs eight-fifty and is, in short, a work of art. ♦

# Gastronomy Recalled

- [Notes on Cravings](#)

# Notes on Cravings

From 1968: There is, in fantasizing about food, no saturation point, no moment at which the body must cry Help!

By [M. F. K. Fisher](#)

August 31, 1968



There is a mistaken idea, ancient but still with us, that an overdose of anything from fornication to hot chocolate will teach restraint by the very results of its abuse. A righteous and worried father, feeling broadminded and full of manly understanding, will urge a rich cigar upon his fledgling and almost force him to be sick, to show him how to smoke properly. Another, learning that his sons have been nipping dago red, will chain them psychologically to the dinner table and drink them under it, to teach them how to handle their liquor like gentlemen. Such methods are drastic and of dubious worth, I think. People continue to smoke and to drink, and to be excessive or moderate according to their own needs. Their good manners are a matter more of innate taste than of outward training.

Craving—the actual and continued need for something—is another matter. Sometimes it lasts for one's lifetime. There is no satisfying it, except temporarily, and that can spell death or ruin. At least three people I know

very well, children of alcoholic parents, were literally born drunk, and after sad experience they face the hideous fact that one more nip will destroy them. But they dream of it. Another of my friends dreams of chocolate, and is haunted by sensory fantasies of the taste and smell of chocolate, and occasionally talks of chocolate the way some people talk of their mistresses, but one Hershey bar would damn him and his liver, too. (Members of A.A. pray to God daily to keep them from taking that First Drink. A first candy bar can be as dangerous.) These people choose to live, no matter how cautiously, because they know that they can never be satisfied. For them real satiety, the inner spiritual kind, is impossible. They are, although in a noble way, cheating: an *honest* satyr will risk death from exhaustion, still happily aware that there will always be more women in the world than he can possibly accommodate.

*Published in the print edition of the [September 7, 1968](#), issue.*

Somewhere between the extremes of putative training in self-control and unflagging discipline against wild cravings lie the sensual and voluptuous gastronomical favorites-of-a-lifetime, the nostalgic yearnings for flavors once met in early days—the smell or taste of a gooseberry pie on a summer noon at Peachblow Farm, the whiff of anise from a Marseille bar. Old or moderately young, of any sex, most of us can forgo the analyst's couch at will and call up some such flavors. It is better thus. Kept verbal, there is small danger of indigestion, and, in truth, a gooseberry pie can be a horror (those pale beady acid fruits, the sugar never masking their mean acidity, the crust sogging . . . my father rhapsodized occasionally about the ones at Peachblow and we tried to recapture their magic for him, but it was impossible). And a glass of *pastis* at the wrong time and with the wrong people can turn into a first-class emetic, no matter how it used to make the mind and body rejoice in Provence. Most people like to talk, once steered onto the right track, about their lifetime favorites in food. It does not matter if they have only dreamed of them for the past countless decades: favorites remain, and mankind is basically a faithful bunch of fellows. If you loved Gaby Deslys or Fanny Brice, from no matter how far afar, you still can and do. And why not? There is, in this happily insatiable fantasizing, no saturation point, no moment at which the body must cry *Help!*

Of course, the average person has not actually possessed a famous beauty, and it is there that gastronomy serves as a kind of surrogate, to ease our longings. One does not need to be a king or mogul to indulge most, if not all, of his senses with the heady enjoyment of a dish—speaking in culinary terms, that is. I myself, to come right down to it, have never been in love from afar, except perhaps for a handful of fleeting moments when a flickering shot of Wallace Reid driving over a cliff would make me feel queer. I know of women who have really mooned, and for years, over some such glamorous shadow, and it is highly possible that my own immunity is due to my sensual satisfaction, even vicarious, in such things as potato chips and Beluga caviar. This realization is cruelly matter-of-fact to anyone of romantic sensitivity, and I feel vaguely apologetic about it. At the same time, I am relieved. I know that even though I eat potato chips perhaps once every three years, I can, whenever I wish to, tap an almost unlimited fountain of them not five hundred feet from my own door. It is not quite the same thing with caviar, of course, and I have smiled upon a one-pound tin of it, fresh and pearly gray, not more than eight or nine times in my life. But I know that for a time longer the acipensers of the Black and Caspian Seas will be able to carry out their fertility rites and that I may even partake again of their delectable fruits. Meanwhile, stern about potato chips on the one hand and optimistic about Beluga on the other, I can savor with my mind's palate their strange familiarity.

It is said that a few connoisseurs, such as old George Saintsbury, can recall *physically* the bouquet of certain great vintages a half century after tasting them. I am a mouse among elephants now, but I can say just as surely that this minute, in a northern California valley, I can taste-smell-hear-see and then feel between my teeth the potato chips I ate slowly one November afternoon in 1936, in the bar of the Lausanne Palace. They were uneven in both thickness and color, probably made by a new apprentice in the hotel kitchen, and almost surely they smelled faintly of either chicken or fish, for that was always the case there. They were a little too salty, to encourage me to drink. They were ineffable. I am still nourished by them. That is probably why I can be so firm about not eating my way through barrels, tunnels, mountains more of them here in the land where they hang like square cellophane fruit on wire trees in all the grocery stores, to tempt me sharply every time I pass them.

As for the caviar, I can wait. I know I cannot possibly, *ever*, eat enough of it to satisfy my hunger, my unreasonable lust, so I think back with what is almost placidity upon the times I could dig into a tub of it and take five minutes or so for every small voluptuous mouthful. Again, why not? Being carnal, such dreams are perforce sinful in some vocabularies. Other ways of thinking might call them merely foolish, or Freudian “substitutes.” That is all right; I know that I can cultivate restraint, or accept it patiently when it is thrust upon me—just as I know that I can walk right down Main Street this minute and buy almost as many Macadamia nuts as I would like to eat, and certainly enough to make me feel very sick for a time, but that I shan’t do so.

I have some of the same twinges of basic craving for those salty gnarled little nuts from Hawaii as the ones I keep ruthlessly at bay for the vulgar fried potatoes and the costly fish eggs. Just writing of my small steady passion for them makes my mouth water in a reassuringly controlled way, and I am glad there are dozens of jars of them in the local goodies shoppe, for me not to buy. I cannot remember when I first ate a Macadamia, but I was hooked from that moment. I think it was about thirty years ago. The Prince of Wales was said to have invested in a ranch in Hawaii which raised them in small quantities, so that the name stuck in my mind because *he* did, but I doubt that royal business cunning had much to do with my immediate delectation. The last time I ate one was about four months ago, in New York. I surprised my *belle-soeur* and almost embarrassed myself by letting a small moan escape me when she put a bowl of them beside my chair; they were beautiful—so lumpy, Macadamian, salty, golden! And I ate one, to save face. One. I can still sense its peculiar crispness and its complete Macadamianity. How fortunate I am!

Many of the things we batten on in our fantasies are part of our childhoods, although none of mine have been, so far in this list. I was perhaps twenty-three when I first ate almost enough caviar—not to mention any caviar at all that I can now remember. It was one of the best, brightest days of my whole life with my parents, and lunching in the quiet back room at the Café de la Paix was only a part of the luminous whole. My mother ate fresh foie gras, sternly forbidden to her liver, but she loved the cathedral at Strasbourg enough to risk almost any kind of attack, and this truffled slab was so plainly the best of her lifetime that we all agreed it could do her nothing but good, which it did. My father and I ate caviar, probably Sevruga, with green-black

smallish beads and a superb challenge of flavor for the iced grassy vodka we used to cleanse our happy palates. We ate three portions apiece, tacitly knowing it could never happen again that anything would be quite so mysteriously perfect in both time and space. The headwaiter sensed all this, which is, of course, why he was world-known, and the portions got larger, and at our third blissful command he simply put the tin in its ice bowl upon our table. It was a regal gesture, like being tapped on the shoulder with a sword. We bowed, served ourselves exactly as he would have done, grain for grain, and had no need for any more. It was reward enough to sit in the almost empty room, chaste rococo in the slanting June sunlight, with the generous tub of pure delight between us, Mother purring there, the vodka seeping slyly through our veins, and real wood strawberries to come, to make us feel like children again and not near-gods. That was a fine introduction to what I hope is a reasonably long life of such occasional bliss.

As for potato chips, I do not remember them earlier than my twenty-first year, when I once ate stupidly and well of them in a small, stylish restaurant in Germany, where we had to wait downstairs in the tavern while our meal was being readied to eat upstairs. Beside me on a table was a bowl of exquisitely fresh and delicate chips, and when we finally sat down I could not face the heavily excellent dinner we had ordered. I was ashamed of my gluttony, for it is never commendable, even when based on ignorance. Perhaps *that* is why I am so stern today about not eating any of the devilish temptations?

There is one other thing I know I shall never get enough of—champagne. I cannot say when I drank my first prickly, delicious glass of it. I was raised in Prohibition, which meant that my father was very careful about his bootleggers, but the general adult drinking stayed around pinch-bottle Scotch as safest in those days, and I think I probably started my lifelong affair with Dom Pérignon's discovery in 1929, when I first went to France. It does not matter. I would gladly ask for the end of even a poor peasant there, who is given a glass of champagne on his deathbed to cheer him on his way.

I used to think, in my Russian-novel days, that I would cherish a lover who managed through thick and thin, snow and sleet, to have a bunch of Parma violets on my breakfast tray each morning—also rain or shine, Christmas or August, and onward into complete Neverland. Later, I shifted my dream

plan—a split of cold champagne one half hour *before* the tray! Violets, sparkling wine, and trays themselves were as nonexistent as the lover(s), of course, but once again, Why not? By now, I sip a mug of vegetable broth and count myself fortunate, while my mind's nose and eyes feast on the pungency of the purple blossoms, and the champagne stings my sleepy tongue . . . and on feast days I drink a little glass of California "Dry Sauterne" from the icebox . . . and it is much easier to get out of bed to go to work if there is not that silly tray there.

Mayonnaise, real mayonnaise, good mayonnaise, is something I can dream of any time, almost, and not because I ate it when I was little but because I did not. My maternal grandmother, whose Victorian neuroses dictated our family table-tastes until I was about twelve, found salads generally suspect, but would tolerate the occasional serving of some watery lettuce in a dish beside each plate (those crescents one still sees now and then in English and Swiss boarding houses and the mansions of American Anglophiles). On it would be a dab or lump or blob, depending on the current cook, of what was quietly referred to as Boiled Dressing. It seemed dreadful stuff—enough to harm one's soul.

I do not have my grandmother's own recipe, although I am sure she seared it into many an illiterate mind in her kitchens, but I have found an approximation, which I feel strangely forced to give. It is from Miss Parloa's "New Cook Book," copyrighted in Boston in 1880 by Estes and Lauriat:

Three eggs, one tablespoonful each of sugar, oil and salt, a scant tablespoonful of mustard, a cupful of milk and one of vinegar. Stir oil, mustard, salt and sugar in a bowl until perfectly smooth. Add the eggs, and beat well; then add the vinegar, and finally the milk. Place the bowl in a basin of boiling water, and stir the dressing until it thickens like soft custard. . . . The dressing will keep two weeks if bottled tightly and put in a cool place.

On second thought, I think Grandmother's receipt, as I am sure it was called, may have used one egg instead of three, skimped on the sugar and oil, left out the mustard, and perhaps eliminated the milk as well. It was a kind of sour whitish gravy and . . . Yes! Patience is its own reward; I have looked in dozens of cookbooks without finding her abysmal secret, and now I have it:

she did not use eggs at all, but *flour*. That is it. Flour thickened the vinegar—no need to waste eggs and sugar . . . Battle Creek frowned on oil, and she spent yearly periods at that health resort . . . mustard was a heathen spice . . . salt was cheap, and good cider vinegar came by the gallon. . . . And (here I can hear words as clearly as I can see the limp wet lettuce under its load of Boiled Dressing) “Salad is roughage and a French idea.”

As proof of the strange hold childhood remembrance has on us, I think I am justified to print once, and only once, my considered analysis of the reason I must live for the rest of my life with an almost painful craving for mayonnaise made with fresh eggs and lemon juice and good olive oil:

#### GRANDMOTHER’S BOILED DRESSING

1 cup cider vinegar.

Enough flour to make thin paste.

Salt to taste.

Mix well, boil slowly fifteen minutes or until done, and serve with wet shredded lettuce.

Unlike any recipe I have ever given, this one has not been tested and never shall be, nor is it recommended for anything but passing thought.

Some of the foods that are of passionate interest in childhood, as potently desirable as drink to a toper, with time lose everything but a cool intellectuality. For about three years, when I was around six, we sometimes ate hot milk toast for Sunday-night supper, but made with rich cocoa, and I would start waiting for the next time as soon as I had swallowed the last crumbly buttery brown spoonful of it. I am thankful I need have no real fear of ever being faced with another bowl of the stuff, but equally happy that I can still understand how its warmth and savor satisfied my senses then. I feel much the same grateful relief when I conjure, no matter how seldom, the four or five years when I was in boarding schools and existed—sensually, at least—from one private slow orgy of saltines and Hershey bars to the next.

There is one concoction, or whatever it should be called, that I was never allowed to eat, and that I dreamed of almost viciously for perhaps seventeen

years, until I was about twenty-two and married. I made it then and ate every bit of it and enjoyed it enormously and have never tasted it since, except in the happy reaches of my gastronomical mind. And not long ago, when I found a distinctly literary reference to it, I beamed and glowed. I love the reality of Mark Twain almost as much as I love the dream-image of this dish, and when he included it, just as I myself would have, in a list of American foods he planned to eat—"a modest, private affair," all to himself—I could hardly believe the miraculous coincidence: my ambrosia, my god's!

In "A Tramp Abroad," Twain grousing about the food he found in Europe in 1878 (even a god can sound a little limited at times), and makes a list of the foods he has missed the most and most poignantly awaits on his return. It starts out "Radishes," which is indeed either blind or chauvinistic, since I myself always seem to eat five times as many of them when I am a tramp abroad as when I am home. He then names eighty separate dishes, and ends, "All sorts of American pastry. Fresh American Fruits . . . Ice water." Love is *not* blind, and I do feel sorry about a certain lack of divinity in this utterance, but my faith and loyalty are forever strengthened by items 57 and 58: "Mashed Potatoes. Catsup."

These two things were printed on the same line, and I feel—in fact, I *know*—that he meant "Mashed potatoes *and* Catsup," or perhaps "Mashed potatoes *with* Catsup." This certainly springs from the fact that there is, in my own mind, and plainly in his, an affinity there. The two belong together. I have known this since I was about five, or perhaps even younger. I have proved it—only once, but very thoroughly. I am willing to try to again, preferably in a "modest, private affair, all to myself," but in public if I should ever be challenged.

We often ate mashed potatoes at home. Grandmother liked what my mother secretly scoffed at as "slip-and-go-easies": custards, junkets, strained stewed tomatoes, things like that, with mashed potatoes, of course, at the head of the list of necessity alongside any decent cut of meat. But—and here is the secret, perhaps, of my lifelong craving—we were never allowed to taste catsup. Never. It was spicy and bad for us, and "common" in bottles. (This is an odd fact, chronologically, for all the housekeepers of my beldam's

vintage prided themselves on their special receipts for “ketchups,” made of everything from oysters to walnuts and including the plentiful love apple.)

I remember that once when Grandmother was gone off to a religious convention, Mother asked each of us what we would most like to eat before the awesome Nervous Stomach took over our menus again. My father immediately said he would pick a large salad of watercress from the Rio Hondo and make a dressing of olive oil and wine vinegar—a double cock-snoot, since olive oil was an exotic smelly stuff kept only to rub on the navels of the new babies that seemed to arrive fairly often, and watercress grew along the banks of a stream that might well be . . . er . . . *used* by cows. When my turn came, I said, “Mashed potatoes and catsup.” I forget exactly what went on next, except that Father was for letting me eat all I wanted of the crazy mixture and I never did get to. Ah, well . . . I loved watercress, too, and whatever other forbidden fruits we bit into during that and similar gastric respites, and I did not need to stop dreaming.

My one deliberate challenge to myself was delicious. I was alone, which seems to be indicated for many such sensual rites. The potatoes were light, whipped to a firm cloud with rich hot milk, faintly yellow from ample butter. I put them in a big warmed bowl, made a dent about the size of a respectable coffee cup, and filled it to the brim with catsup from a large, full, *vulgar* bottle that stood beside my table mat where a wineglass would be at an ordinary, commonplace, everyday banquet. Mine was, as I have said, delicious. I would, as I have also said, gladly do it again if I were dared to. But I prefer to nourish myself with the knowledge that it is not impossible (potato chips), not too improbable (fresh Beluga caviar). And now I am sharing it with a friend. I could not manage to serve forth to Mark Twain the “Sheep-head and croakers, from New Orleans,” or the “Prairie hens, from Illinois,” that he dreamed of in European boarding houses ninety years ago, but mashed potatoes *with* catsup are ready to hand when he says the word. ♦

By [Hilton Als](#)

By [H. L. Mencken](#)

# **Letter from Islay**

- [Reinventing Scotch Whisky](#)

# Reinventing Scotch Whisky

From 2013: The brash owner of a historic distillery works to make an old spirit new again.

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

February 3, 2013



## Content

One day in 1989, a man on a bicycle arrived at the gates of a whisky distillery called Bruichladdich. The distillery sits across the road from the North Atlantic Ocean, on a wild and blustery Scottish island called Islay. The man was Mark Reynier, a third-generation wine dealer from London, who was on vacation with his brother. Their primary objective would have been clear to any passing driver: each bicycle had, strapped to its handlebars, a bundle of golf clubs. At the distillery, Reynier was hoping to achieve his secondary objective. He had grown obsessed with Bruichladdich whisky, an unheralded product known, to those who knew about it, for its unusual delicacy and complexity. He says, “It had the elegance, balance, finesse, harmony—everything I’d been brought up to look for in a great wine, and there it was in a spirit.” In his London wine shops, Reynier persuaded customers to take a chance on a distillery whose name they probably didn’t

recognize, and surely couldn't pronounce. (The locals say, more or less, "Brook-laddy." Also, "Eye-lah.")

Reynier was hoping to have a vineyardeque experience: a friendly proprietor, an extended tour, plenty of opportunities for firsthand research. Instead, he was greeted by a padlocked gate, a welter of hazardous-chemicals warnings, and a sign with a brusque message: "*PLANT CLOSED. NO VISITORS.*" He saw a worker in the courtyard and made his plea. "Look," he said. "I'm your best customer, I've come from London—I've come all this way, and I'd love to have a look around."

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The worker's response was even brusquer than the sign: "Fuck off."

Reynier understood his mistake: he wasn't a guest at a vineyard; he was a trespasser at a factory. He went back to London, and set about getting rid of his last bottles of Bruichladdich. "The illusion was gone," he says.

Unable to visit Bruichladdich—unable, anymore, even to enjoy its whisky—Reynier devised a modest plan to save his favorite spirit: he would buy the distillery. Every year, he wrote to the parent company, and every year he was told that it wasn't for sale. In 1994, the distillery was shut down—the industry term is "mothballed"—but the answer didn't change until 2000. By then, Bruichladdich belonged to Jim Beam Brands, which was willing to violate the Scottish taboo against inviting outsiders into the whisky business. Reynier put together fifty investors, who paid six and a half million pounds for a remote distillery that was almost defunct. On December 19, 2000, Reynier became the chief executive officer.

Having finally penetrated the industry, Reynier embraced the role of gadfly. "The whisky industry, being Scottish, is desperately serious—up its own backside," he says. The new Bruichladdich was cheeky, and it often promoted itself by disparaging the competition—for instance, lampooning the cartoonish imagery that whisky companies often use to make their Scotch seem Scottish. "No massive publicity budget expounding on the 'tartan and bagpipes,'" the company promised. "No faux heritage or 'where the eagle soars,' 'monarch of the glen' bollocks."

Scotland is the undisputed whisky capital of the world, producing nearly two-thirds of the global supply, and Islay is the highly disputed capital of Scottish whisky. The island has thirty-five hundred residents and eight working distilleries; there is surely no place that produces more great whisky per capita, and possibly no place that produces more great whisky, full stop. To rebuild Bruichladdich, Reynier recruited a native Ileach: Jim McEwan, a whisky celebrity who had spent his career at Bowmore, a venerable distillery that faces Bruichladdich from across a coastal inlet. Bowmore makes whisky that bears smoky traces of burning peat, which was once Islay's main fuel source and is now the signature flavor of Islay whisky. The island's best-known distillery is probably Laphroaig, whose flagship dram is pungently smoky and startlingly medicinal, with a flavor that is sometimes compared to TCP, a European antiseptic. In reasonable doses and proper circumstances, Laphroaig can be delicious, but its popularity is a mixed blessing for the industry, because whisky neophytes who try Laphroaig and hate it may never return.

Bruichladdich is nearly smoke-free, which is a big reason that Reynier fell for it. "Coming from a wine background, peat is an alien flavor," he says. As far as anyone can tell, the distillery stopped peating its whisky in the nineteen-sixties, in an effort to expand into peat-averse territories like America. Unlike Reynier, McEwan loves peat, but he also loved the challenge of changing Bruichladdich's reputation. "Bruichladdich was the most misunderstood distillery on Islay," he says. "It was regarded as some kind of outcast distillery: you're not a true Islay, you're not making peated whisky." McEwan had worked for Bowmore for thirty-eight years, which meant that he was two years away from retirement, and a comfortable pension. He saw his decision to come to Bruichladdich as an act of conscience. "It's like the story of the Good Samaritan," McEwan says. "The guy's lying in the ditch, and everybody walks past him. But he's still alive."

By the time Reynier and McEwan were able to inspect the premises, in early 2001, the distillery had been mothballed for seven years. Even if all the old machinery coöperated, the spirit they made would need time to mature in wooden casks: the standard minimum age for a fine Scottish whisky is ten years. A revivified and independent Bruichladdich would have a new version of its ten-year-old whisky sometime in 2011—but only if it survived

that long. And it might not have, if Reynier and McEwan hadn't figured out something to sell in the meantime.

Although Islay is devoted to Scotch, the island has a complicated relationship to Scotland. Islay was settled by the Gaels and then the Norse, who ceded the "islands of the Sodors"—now known as the Hebrides—to Scotland only as recently as 1266. Even then, Islay still wasn't quite Scottish: it became the seat of the Lordship of the Isles, a semi-autonomous archipelago that was reabsorbed into Scotland in the fifteenth century. Officially, there is a Lord of the Isles today, but he doesn't seem likely to cause much trouble: his name is Charles, and his mother is the Queen.

Islay is one of the southernmost Scottish islands: it sits about twenty miles from Ireland, whence the practice of distilling malted barley may have spread. (The word "whisky" comes from the Gaelic *uisge*, which means "water"; in Scotland, unlike most other places, it is spelled without an "e.") For modern distillers, Islay's inaccessibility may seem like a drawback, but for their eighteenth-century ancestors it was an advantage. According to local lore, tax collectors from the mainland were easily spotted, and easily repelled. In 1794, a minister named Archibald Robertson wrote, "We have not an excise officer in the whole island. The quantity therefore of whisky made here is very great; and the evil, that follows drinking to excess of this liquor, is very visible."

Eventually, Islay's distillers were forced to pay tax, and whisky became a key export, produced more for mainlanders than for locals. But the island's isolation helped the industry in a different way. With the rise of railroads, in the nineteenth century, most distillers found it cheaper to power their plants with coal; Islay stuck with peat, which is how the local whisky developed its reputation for smokiness, as well as for excellence. According to a report from 1863, Glasgow taverns often divided their whisky into four categories of ascending quality, priced accordingly: "middling," "good," "Islay," and "undiluted Islay."

Most Islay distilleries, though, didn't sell their own whisky; they were factories, producing alcohol for others to blend and sell. By the end of the nineteenth century, the industry was dominated by three blending companies: Johnnie Walker, Dewar's, and Buchanan's. Then as now, the

mass-market blends were mixtures of two different products: relatively expensive malt whisky, made from malted barley, and absolutely inexpensive grain whisky, made from whatever grain happened to be cheapest. (In America, whiskey generally means bourbon, a term reserved for an aged spirit whose main ingredient is corn.) Connoisseurs of fine Scottish whisky often call their drink malt, not whisky, to distinguish it from the bland but effective blended brown liquid that is generally meant to be mixed or guzzled.

When McEwan was growing up, in the nineteen-fifties, the island's main export was impossible to ignore. "You could smell the peat smoke coming from the distillery if you opened your window in the morning," he says. "And it was every kid's ambition to get a job in a distillery—that was where you wanted to be." He began by sweeping the floors at Bowmore, and was eventually promoted to cooper, and to cellar master, in charge of storing and monitoring casks; then, in 1973, at the age of twenty-five, he was dispatched to Glasgow, where he learned how to blend. Bowmore swapped stocks of malt whisky with other distilleries, and McEwan's job was to sample them all and combine them with grain whisky to create consistent and accessible blends; he worked on an American blend called Duggan's Dew, and another, popular in South Africa, called Three Ships. By the time he was recalled to Islay, to run Bowmore, he was well acquainted with just about every whisky in Scotland.

Even cheap whisky needs time to mature: by law, whisky can't be sold in the United Kingdom until it has been aged for three years. This means that distilleries often find themselves selling spirit in circumstances that have changed since the spirit was distilled. In the British recession of the mid-nineteen-seventies, a number of distilleries were mothballed; there was a similar slump a decade later. As a result, a lot of great whisky was orphaned, and scrappy companies known as independent bottlers bought some of it, to resell to connoisseurs, usually in small editions and at high prices. The spirit they sold was known as single-malt whisky, meaning whisky from a single distillery.

Before Reynier came to Bruichladdich, he co-founded an independent bottling company called Murray McDavid (named for two of his Scottish grandparents), which aimed to improve upon the distilleries' own products,

sometimes by rematuring the whisky in higher-quality casks. One of his first offerings was a bottling of whisky from Laphroaig, meant to highlight its infamous piquancy, which Reynier thought was missing from the distillery's recent bottlings. Laphroaig filed suit, arguing that Murray McDavid's description of the product—"Islay single malt Scotch whisky from the Laphroaig Distillery"—constituted trademark infringement. Reynier won the suit, but decided to rethink his packaging anyway. He created new labels, which read, "Owing to recent litigation, we are unable to reveal the name of this distillery." It wasn't hard to guess, though: Murray McDavid called its product Leapfrog, which prompted another lawsuit.

If Reynier sees his career in whisky as one long fight against dim corporations and bland drams, McEwan is more conciliatory. "Blends are extremely important, because they provide the flight path for the malt drinkers of the future," he says. Single malt accounts for about ten per cent of the Scotch-whisky market. "Nobody comes to malt direct. Or very, very few. They'll come in with a good blend, and then they will be intrigued, and they will move up: 'Oh, I've got to try a malt sometime.'" Newcomers often start with an agreeable, widely available malt like Macallan or Glenlivet, and then branch out into more esoteric fare. McEwan loves great whisky, but he loves Islay more, which means that he isn't inclined to disparage the industry that keeps it alive. "This is a very fragile economy," he says. "I mean, if it wasn't for whisky, this island would be a bird sanctuary."

Bruichladdich was a state-of-the-art distillery when it opened, in 1881. Its original owners were three brothers, the Harveys, whose family also owned a pair of industrial distilleries on the mainland. Many island distilleries were converted barns; Bruichladdich was built for the purpose of turning malted barley into ethanol, and constructed from modern concrete. (The Harveys' contractor, based in Glasgow, held the local patent.) Bruichladdich still looks much the same, with whitewashed two-story buildings surrounding a stone courtyard, which is now used as a parking lot. The new Bruichladdich chose aquamarine as its signature color, because it evoked the way the ocean looked on sunny days. Even on an entirely cloudy Sunday this past autumn, Bruichladdich seemed like a cheerful place—nothing like the forbidding factory of 1989. Islay is only about seventy miles west of Glasgow, but getting there by car requires a three-hour drive and a two-hour ferry ride. (It also has a small airport.) More than ten thousand customers make the trip

every year, driving vigilantly along narrow island roads that they must sometimes share with stray sheep. Whisky tourism creates nearly as many jobs on Islay as whisky production, and on this day the distillery was closed but the gift shop was full of visitors, who seemed to be sampling rashly and buying carefully.

In a cramped and creaky second-floor office, Reynier was dressed in work clothes: olive army jacket, brown army shirt, and unhemmed trousers, reinforced at the knees. He is fifty-one, and the culture shock he felt when he first moved to Islay has never quite subsided. “I’m everything that this island isn’t: privately educated, Roman Catholic upbringing, London, wine trade, and businessman,” he said. “Here it’s state-controlled, socialist, Protestant.” He speaks at length and in bursts, with a fidgety impatience that can convey irritation or enthusiasm or, more often, a bit of both. And while some islanders never quite warmed to him (one described him as “aloof”), they immediately appreciated that his venture would create jobs if it succeeded.

Bruichladdich’s ten-year problem was partly a marketing problem: malt drinkers have come to view age as a proxy for quality, and the industry has played along, using age statements to justify high prices. In Reynier’s view, this constrains distillers and misleads consumers. “Age doesn’t matter,” he said. “Who the fuck thinks that a ten-year-old is better than a nine-and-a-half, or inferior to an eleven-and-three-quarters? It’s totally arbitrary!” Generally speaking, aging in wood makes whisky richer and mellower, but age is only one of many variables to consider. (Once it has been bottled, whisky should remain more or less stable.) In any case, Bruichladdich couldn’t afford to indulge in age snobbery, because the last of the old regime’s spirit was turning ten in 2004. So Reynier and McEwan found ingenious ways to make young whisky delicious—and to sell it for old-whisky prices.

In 2006, Bruichladdich started releasing a wide variety of limited-edition whisky experiments, many of them bottled at six years old, or even younger. McEwan launched a new line, Port Charlotte, devoted to peated whisky, in the Islay tradition; then he launched another, Octomore, which claimed to be “the world’s peatiest whisky.” In 2009, the distillery began producing a line of gin called the Botanist, using local herbs and flowers. This was a

particularly canny decision, because gin doesn't need time to mature. "Instant cash," McEwan says. "You make it today, you sell it one week from today." Most Scottish distilleries age their spirit in used bourbon casks, but Bruichladdich often supplements these with wine casks, which impart flavor, color, and cachet. McEwan mixed and matched spirits to create new expressions like Laddie Classic, a mid-priced introductory Scotch, and Black Art, a mysterious and expensive multi-vintage release. Not long after Bruichladdich was reborn, *Whisky Magazine* named McEwan its distiller of the year. And, partly because Bruichladdich released so many different whiskies, it became a fixture in the review sections of whisky magazines and blogs. Some reviewers grumbled about the profusion, but most applauded the company's curiosity, and some bigger companies began expanding their ranges, too.

McEwan is sixty-four, and for much of his career he has been, in addition to a master distiller, a global whisky ambassador. His speaking voice is warm and resonant, and he rolls his "r"s with a craftsman's precision. Where Reynier is ironic and astringent, McEwan is theatrical and sometimes ostentatious. "I'm still chasing rainbows," he says, by way of explaining his open-ended quest to discover exactly how delicious a whisky can be.

One Monday, McEwan was seated at his desk, dressed in high-end business casual: sharply creased gray wool slacks, crisply ironed shirt, blue tie with matching cufflinks. The walls were tiled with awards and citations, and next to his computer sat a tatty thesaurus, which he uses to write the digressive essays that form the basis for the company's official tasting notes. One Bruichladdich whisky—the "classic" twenty-two-year-old expression—promises to deliver a dizzying chain of sensations: "sweet yellow fruits, drizzled with honey and crushed almonds"; "freshly picked summer flowers"; "custard cream and toasted barley"; "banana bread and vanilla fudge"; "marzipan"; "Abernethy biscuit"; "marine citrus meringue." To enjoy a dram of Bruichladdich, sip it neat, and then add a splash or more of mineral water, which helps release volatile compounds that bring out notes of fruit and spice. (Adding ice can dull the taste, and may also make the whisky taste like whatever is in your freezer.) It's a simple process, but consumers hoping to reproduce McEwan's results at home will find, no doubt, that some variant of the uncertainty principle applies: the more research you conduct, the less reliable your data become.

That afternoon, McEwan led a tour, starting with the warehouse, where different vintages of whisky were maturing in thirty-five thousand wooden casks, some of which bore the names of the wines they once held: d'Yquem, Pétrus, Le Pin. Adam Hannett, the young warehouse manager, scrambled up to a cask in the third row from the bottom, popped out the bung, and dropped in a long metal tube, called a valinch, which he used to transfer a pint of copper-colored liquid into a glass pitcher. "Eighteen years in bourbon cask," McEwan said. "Four years in Château Latour."

In the damp and often chilly Bruichladdich warehouse, alcohol evaporates more quickly than water, which means that the whisky gets less potent as it ages. This one brought to mind some of the characteristics of a cognac: it had a warm, round sweetness, with hints of cinnamon toast and marshmallow and possibly grape jelly. Or possibly not. Luckily, McEwan wasn't in the mood to conduct a pop quiz. He sipped, and his face took on an expression of great gravity. "This," he said, "is what you'd describe as a very, very sexy whisky."

No one knows why Bruichladdich whisky tastes the way it does, but plenty of people think they do. In Reynier's view, the distillery's proximity to a shallow bay makes a difference. (Bruichladdich is Gaelic for "raised beach.") When the tide goes out, across the road, algae are exposed to the air, which influences the spirit as it matures, giving it a maritime tang.

Officially, the company also credits its distinctive tall, narrow pot stills, the oldest of which has been in use since 1881. But McEwan differs sharply. "The shape of the pot is not significant, in terms of flavor—this is a kind of fairy story," he says. "It's the artisanal skills of the whisky-maker."

Whisky begins with barley that has been malted—soaked in warm water, so that the grain begins to germinate, producing enzymes, and then dried with hot air, so that the germination stops. At Bruichladdich, the malted barley is mixed with water from Bruichladdich loch, up the hill, and heated in huge cast-iron vessels known as mash tuns. The heat and the enzymes convert the barley's starch into sugar, resulting in a sweet, slightly grainy liquid known as wort. In a set of wooden vessels, the wort is mixed with yeast and left to ferment into a honey-colored ale, known as wash, which has an alcohol content of about seven per cent. Finally, the wash is piped into the stillhouse,

where one of Bruichladdich's stillmen is always posted. The senior stillman is Duncan MacFadyen, known as Budgie, who has worked at Bruichladdich since around the time Reynier visited on his bicycle. (During the six years that the distillery was closed, MacFadyen served as a night watchman.) The stillhouse, with its two-story copper stills and gleaming pipes, is the highlight of every distillery tour. It was nearly lunchtime, and MacFadyen was trying to finish a container of strawberry yogurt before the next group arrived.

Alcohol—that is, ethanol—boils at a hundred and seventy-three degrees Fahrenheit, which means that if you apply heat to a mildly alcoholic solution the alcohol will turn to vapor before the water does. As the onion-shaped belly of the still heats up, alcohol vapor travels up the thin neck, slowed by the microscopic striations on the surface of the copper. Then the vapor wafts through a gently descending pipe known as a lyne arm, and through a series of cooling condensers, which turn the vapor back into liquid. MacFadyen was flanked by four stills, two of which were distilling wash into what's known as low wine (about forty per cent alcohol) and two of which were redistilling low wine into clear spirit, which is essentially moonshine. One of his most important jobs is to monitor this second distillation, insuring that only the most desirable spirit, known as the middle cut, winds up in the barrel, at between sixty-five and seventy per cent alcohol. The first part of the distillate, known as the foreshot, contains methanol, which can be toxic in large quantities—although the same could be said of whisky. The last part, known as the feints, contains all sorts of volatile and unappetizing compounds. The feints have a distinctive odor, which MacFadyen compared to a smelly sneaker. Part of a stillman's job is to determine how wide the middle cut should be—how close to get to that sneakerlike funk.

To help him decide, MacFadyen had a set of small glass hydrometers that measure density; by indexing density and temperature, using a crumbling reference book from 1978, he could identify the percentage of alcohol in a sample. He opened a brass case marked "spirit safe," inside of which there was a constant stream of spirit, pouring from a metal spout. He dipped a glass into the stream. What he caught didn't taste like whisky at all—it was slightly smoky and sweet, with a faintly unpleasant sharpness, like fermented NutraSweet. It would be inaccurate to call this clear spirit undrinkable; up until the nineteen-seventies, distillery workers were

customarily given drams of clear spirit before, after, and sometimes during their shifts.

Many whiskeys are purer than Scottish malts. Irish whiskey is customarily distilled three times, instead of two; grain whisky, like vodka and gin, is often produced using a reflux still, which can turn wash into a distillate that is about ninety-five per cent alcohol. But impurity is what gives whisky its flavor: all sorts of chemicals, known as congeners, survive the still. “Malted barley, distilled, is the most complex spirit in the world,” Reynier says. “It’s got *too much* flavor.” Whereas American bourbon, by law, must age in new oak casks, Scotch distillers prefer used casks (typically bourbon), partly because they are less reactive—vanillin and other oaky compounds don’t overpower the spirit. The purpose of maturing Scotch is to enhance the strong flavors that remain after its relatively tolerant distillation process, and tame them, too. Even Reynier agrees that some taming is required; he just doesn’t believe that tamer is always better.

In 1703, a Scottish writer named Martin Martin published “A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland.” In his discussion of Lewis and Harris, the northernmost island in the Hebrides, he made tantalizing reference to a whisky-like beverage, made from oats and quadruple-distilled, which he called usquebaugh-baul: “usquebaugh” means “water of life,” or “eau de vie”; “baul” may have referred to its potency. Martin concluded his description with a firm prescription: “Two spoonfuls of this last Liquor is a sufficient Dose; and if any Man exceed this, it would presently stop his Breath, and endanger his Life.” To Reynier and McEwan, Martin’s prescription seemed like a dare, and they set out to create their own version of usquebaugh-baul, a name they translated as “the perilous whisky.” Bruichladdich put out a press release announcing the “most alcoholic single malt ever made”—the unmatured spirit was about ninety per cent alcohol. Within a few days, the story of the death-defying whisky was in newspapers around the world. The Scotch Whisky Association—a powerful trade group, which Reynier refused to join—issued a statement saying, “Undue emphasis on high alcohol content is irresponsible and should not be used as the principal basis of any product’s appeal to the consumer.” Bruichladdich’s Web site defiantly reminded visitors of the S.W.A.’s verdict: “irresponsible.” Oz Clarke, the wine critic, tasted the unmatured spirit on a BBC program. He delivered his verdict with eyes closed and shoulders hunched: “Oh! Oh.”

James May, from the beloved automobile show “Top Gear,” used it to fuel a racing car. By the time the spirit had matured, it wasn’t quite so radical: Bruichladdich aged it in bourbon casks for three years, and then sold a few thousand bottles, at a strength of sixty-three and a half per cent alcohol—not quite perilous but still strong.

Throughout the aughts, Bruichladdich was both more and less old-fashioned than its competitors. It refused to artificially color its whisky, or to chill-filter it; chill-filtration removes oils that can cause cloudiness but which also impart flavor. As part of its program to emphasize ingredients over age, it released a series of barley-specific whiskies: one was made solely from organic barley; another was made from bere, an ancient cultivar that could have been brought to Scotland by Vikings in the first millennium. The distillery persuaded some local farmers to start growing barley, so that, for the first time since the First World War, consumers could buy Islay whisky made from Islay barley. Bruichladdich never figured out a cost-effective way to malt barley on the island—all its barley is sent to a huge malting plant in Inverness, in the Scottish Highlands, which returns malt imbued with a specified amount of peat smoke. (McEwan says, “You’d need malt barns the size of Terminal 5, Heathrow Airport, to supply a modern distillery.”) But just about everything else is as local as possible. The distillery even runs its own bottling hall: all year long, bottles are shipped in by ferry from the Kintyre Peninsula, filled and labelled, and then shipped back out.

All this localism has helped make a rather small distillery the biggest private employer on the island: out of Islay’s thirty-five hundred residents, about fifty of them work for Bruichladdich. The island is an appealing place to vacation; its part-time residents include Sir John Mactaggart, the Scottish real-estate mogul, and Bruno Schroder, the banking billionaire. (Both of them invested in Bruichladdich.) But the trickle of retirees from the mainland has not kept pace with the exodus of islanders looking for work; the population is barely half what it was fifty years ago. Most farmers on the island supplement their earnings with government subsidies, paid to follow various environmental strictures or merely to maintain farms in such an inaccessible place.

One of Bruichladdich’s most valuable local assets is a burly and charismatic gadabout named James Brown, widely known as Farmer Brown. He is sixty

years old and vigorous: an ex-lighthouse keeper, a former special constable, a passable bagpiper, and, by all accounts, a pretty good tosser of hammers. His farm, a few miles down the road, sits on the site of a long-gone distillery called Octomore, for which Bruichladdich's ultra-peated whisky is named. Some of Bruichladdich's barley comes from Brown's farms, and although, like most islanders, he is no connoisseur, he has amassed an impressive collection of Bruichladdich whisky—unopened bottles accrue in his house, shoved in filing cabinets and stacked precariously in corners. "If we're drinking whisky up here," he says, "we take the cork off the bottle, and it's —*pfft*. And get another bottle. None of that nonsense of wee sips."

Brown is also the de-facto administrator of Dirty Dotty's spring, the source of the water that Bruichladdich uses to bring its whisky down from cask strength to bottling strength, which is generally forty-six per cent alcohol. Brown remembers the day when Reynier and a few other Bruichladdich executives arrived on his property with wineglasses, to evaluate the water from his spring. They liked it, and asked for six barrels, leaving Brown to figure out how to get it to the distillery.

One autumn morning, Brown was preparing his weekly delivery. The weather was typical: about forty-five degrees and almost raining. "Couldn't be nicer, eh?" Brown said. He had driven his tractor half a mile up a dirt road; from where he parked, you could see his Highland cows grazing on the sloping fields and, beyond that, the gray stucco of the North Atlantic. Brown grabbed one end of a hose and scrambled down the hill toward a tiny shack, recently built from unpainted pine, that stood next to a stream. "That water there is black," he said, pointing to the stream. Then he opened a trapdoor in the floor of the shack and lowered a cup on a string; when he brought it back up, it was full of clear water that bore no trace of peat or salt. "That water *there* comes out of the ground," he said. "The second-oldest rocks in Europe." Jerking hard on a starter cord, he coaxed a gas-powered pump to life; it takes him about an hour to fill a thousand-litre plastic tank, and Bruichladdich was expecting six of them.

It's not clear whether even the most refined palate could correctly judge the age of gneiss rock by sampling the springwater that flows through it, but Bruichladdich isn't inclined to let any superlative go to waste. One of the company's most popular whiskies is its cheapest, Bruichladdich Rocks,

which promises to let consumers commune with “the oldest rocks in the whisky world!” Bruichladdich Rocks doesn’t carry an age statement, but it is about six years old, and it spends its final few months of maturation in red-wine casks, which give the spirit a sprightly, pleasantly acidic taste. McEwan speaks fondly of it, but he doesn’t deny its purpose. “Rocks—that was just a young, non-aged whisky that we put on the market, that was kind of taking the heat off the older stocks,” he says. “People said, ‘Ah, Bruichladdich are doing so many different things.’ Yeah, well, we had to! If we didn’t, we’d have been sitting there starving—the company would never, ever have got off the ground.”

In 2011, the new Bruichladdich turned ten, and so did the oldest batch of new whisky in the warehouse. The distillery finally had a flagship ten-year-old, which it called the Laddie Ten: a definitive name for a definitive dram. Bruichladdich even allowed itself to gloat, with a slogan: “The first ten years are the toughest!” Reviews were generally enthusiastic. *Whisky Advocate* named the Laddie Ten the year’s best Islay whisky, above bottles that sell for more than ten times the price. (In the U.S., a bottle of the Laddie Ten costs about fifty-five dollars.) And, for the first time, Bruichladdich appeared on the shelves of duty-free shops in airports worldwide.

The success of the Laddie Ten seemed to mark Bruichladdich’s transformation from scrappy upstart into successful mainstay, and the impression was confirmed last summer, when the company made a startling announcement: it was selling out to Rémy Cointreau, the French liquor conglomerate, whose products include Rémy Martin cognac and Cointreau liqueur. (The price was fifty-eight million pounds, including ten million pounds of assumed debt.) Out of Bruichladdich’s eight board members, only one voted against the sale: Reynier. Once the deal was struck, Reynier was asked to leave, and was replaced by his longtime business partner Simon Coughlin. Reynier announced his departure on Twitter: “Over & out.” In his next post, he filled in a few details: “(it’s) over & (I’m) out (of here).”

Reynier now lives in Edinburgh, where his son goes to school, but this fall he was back on Islay for a few days. In his old office, he seemed slightly disoriented—he still thinks the sale came too soon, and he hasn’t shed his habit of talking about Bruichladdich in the first-person plural. “Just being in this office is strange,” he said. “This is where I’ve lived for the last eleven

years.” All around the distillery, nothing had changed, with one small exception. On the antique Ford pickup truck in the courtyard, a wooden sign above the windshield read “1881 Bruichladdich 1881.” In recent months, someone had added a new wooden sign, above the old one: “2012 Rémy Martin 2012.”

Simon Coughlin, the new chief, says that Rémy is an ideal parent company, because it allows subsidiaries to operate with relative independence. “We’re the experts about Bruichladdich,” he says. “And they’re bloody good listeners.” During Bruichladdich’s first decade, it didn’t have the marketing budget or the distribution power to find a place in any but the most ambitious bars; it had to rely on its bright-colored tins and daunting variety to stand out on liquor-store shelves. Now the company will have access to Rémy’s international distribution network; in the U.S., Rémy distributes Macallan, which is ubiquitous. With money from Rémy, Bruichladdich plans to add an overnight shift, and double production, to one and a half million litres a year.

Coughlin wants to streamline Bruichladdich’s offerings, but not in the way many industry observers would have predicted. He now describes the grand celebration of the Laddie Ten as, in some ways, a distraction from the company’s true strength. “I think that we got drawn, a little bit against our true feelings, into age statements,” he says. “So there’s going to be less emphasis on age statement. And there’s going to be more emphasis on the barley than there’s ever been.” In other words, the new new Bruichladdich will be much like the old new Bruichladdich—only more so.

Anyone considering the future of whisky on Islay should visit Caol Ila (“Cull-ee-lah”), which produces six million litres of liquor per year—more than any other Islay distillery—with only eleven full-time employees. At the depopulated stillhouse, in a preposterously scenic spot on the coast, the gift shop sells bottles of twelve-year-old Caol Ila, described as a “secret malt,” produced “in a remote cove.” The only hint of the distillery’s true identity can be found on the tote bags for sale, which include its e-mail address: [caolila.distillery@diageo.com](mailto:caolila.distillery@diageo.com). Diageo is the dominant player in the Scotch industry: it owns twenty-eight distilleries and makes dozens of blended whiskies. The most important of these is Johnnie Walker, which accounts for about twenty-two per cent of the whisky sold worldwide. The main reason

that Caol Ila remains “secret” is that most of what it produces ends up in Johnnie Walker and other blends; less than five per cent is sold as single malt.

In an economic sense, Caol Ila’s picturesque location is mostly wasted, especially since its whisky is shipped back to the mainland to mature. Malted barley can be distilled anywhere: Japan has a thriving single-malt industry, and a number of distillers in the U.S. are making Scottish-style whisky. Distillers in Japan and America can’t call their products Scotch, but there’s nothing stopping a company like Diageo from closing down its Islay operations and moving them to Glasgow or some other, more convenient location. (Just about any location would be more convenient than Islay.) In 2010, Diageo opened a large-scale distillery called Roseisle, in northern Scotland, which produces about ten million litres of alcohol per year, all of it for blend.

Reynier thinks he knows where this is leading. He imagines an accountant at a big liquor conglomerate suddenly wondering, “Why do we have distilleries on these remote Hebridean islands?” The Scotch Whisky Association recognizes five kinds of Scotch, one of which is “blended malt”—that is, a blend of malt whiskies from two or more distilleries. To Reynier, this seems intended to make it easier for big companies to do away with small distilleries, while still claiming to sell malt. “The distilleries that are left will be façades—for marketing,” Reynier says. “And the actual spirit will all be distilled somewhere else. No doubt.”

McEwan is less worried; he thinks that rising demand, particularly from Asia, will only make great malt more valuable. “I can rest easy in my chair,” he says, “knowing that I have helped to provide a secure future for generations, possibly.” Because single-malt whisky is a luxury product, its makers can afford to ignore some of the demands of efficiency—in fact, Bruichladdich has proved that some whisky drinkers will pay a premium for whisky made in unusually inefficient ways. For the purpose of keeping far-flung distilleries afloat, Bruichladdich’s business model might be the only one that makes sense. By making the Islay *terroir* a central part of its brand, Bruichladdich has made itself essentially immovable.

Already, there are signs in the industry that Bruichladdich has been influential—or, at the very least, prescient. More companies now sell whisky that is uncolored and un-chill-filtered, and some now offer whisky aged in a variety of casks. Demand is rising faster than distillers had predicted; as aged stocks deplete, a growing number of distilleries are promoting whisky with no age attached. Last year, Macallan announced that all its malt younger than eighteen years old would be sold not by age but according to a four-color system, ranging from gold to ruby. By law, age statements must reflect the age of the youngest spirit in the bottle; forgoing them gives distillers more flexibility, allowing them to combine malts of different vintages, some of which might be recent. This approach also demands a certain amount of faith from consumers, who have learned to be skeptical of vague claims on whisky bottles. But, then, for anyone who loves malt, there is no alternative to faith: if you don't trust the distiller, nothing written on the bottle will guarantee you a great dram.

It was late afternoon in the Bruichladdich gift shop, and McEwan was waxing ambassadorial. Some guests were in town from Japan—bar and restaurant owners, all current or potential customers—and tables had been set up for a formal tasting: white tablecloths, rows of glasses, and a handsome bound book of tasting notes.

Few of the guests spoke English, and so McEwan had to pause between phrases for the translator, which made him sound even more theatrical than usual. Assistants poured out small drams of the Laddie Sixteen, which was made from spirit distilled by the previous regime. McEwan said, “If I was asked, ‘What was the last whisky in the world, before you die, which one would you have?’” He slapped his hands together. “Sixteen.” As the guests sipped, he supplied some real-time tasting notes. “It’s a little bit spicy,” he said. “If you add a little bit of water, then you get the apricot, the peach, the pear—maybe a little bit of gooseberry.” There was some stammering from the translator as she tried to summon the Japanese word for “gooseberry.”

When he introduced a recent bottling of peaty Octomore, he mentioned that it had matured in Château d’Yquem casks. The visitors, being beverage professionals, nodded sagely, and one murmured, “Sauternes.” McEwan also wanted to emphasize the connection between the whisky and the place. “Very distinctive minty note,” he said. “You’re getting the heather fields of

Islay—the flavor of wild plants. And there's a lovely oily flavor, from the seas.”

He saved the most important whisky for last: the Laddie Ten. “We've been waiting a long time,” he said. “So, please—I won't say anything. Just enjoy it.”

The Laddie Ten, marketed as the definitive Bruichladdich, is actually something of an anomaly. It is classified as unpeated, but all of Bruichladdich's “unpeated” whisky is made from lightly peated barley, with phenols—a rough proxy for smokiness—measured at about three to five parts per million. (Laphroaig and Bruichladdich's Port Charlotte line are made from barley with phenol levels around forty p.p.m.) During its first reopened year, in 2001, Bruichladdich used barley with a phenol level closer to ten p.p.m. So the first release of the Laddie Ten has a mild but distinct smokiness, alongside the expected floral flavors and the breakfast-cereal sweetness. This characteristic has been conspicuously absent from the official tasting notes, and, perhaps as a consequence, absent from most of the reviews, too. (Serious malt drinkers have remarkable palates, but that doesn't mean they're not suggestible.) Later this year, when the second version of the Laddie Ten arrives, the smoke will be muted, and the definitive Bruichladdich will be redefined. Of course, no malt is ever quite definitive: while distillers promise consistency, their product is always changing. And part of what Bruichladdich proved is that customers don't necessarily mind an unpredictable malt, so long as they feel as if they know what's going on.

McEwan didn't explain the peatiness, but he did do plenty of explaining—he had broken his vow of silence not long after making it. He was almost shouting now: “It's made by Islay people, and not goddam computers, you understand?” He paused and took a breath; this was shtick, though the visitors may not have realized it. “If I sound a little passionate, that's just the way we are,” he said. “We are Celtic people—we're not Scottish. We're different.” ♦

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

# Poems

- “[Refrigerator, 1957](#)”
- “[The Lazy Susan](#)”

July 28, 1997 Issue

# Refrigerator, 1957

By [Thomas Lux](#)

July 20, 1997

More like a vault: you pull the handle out  
and on the shelves not a lot,  
and what there is (a boiled potato  
in a bag, a chicken carcass  
under foil) looking dispirited,  
drained, mugged. This is not  
a place to go in hope or hunger.  
But, just to the right of the middle  
of the middle door shelf, on fire, a lit-from-within red,  
heart-red, sexual-red, wet neon-red,  
shining red in their liquid, exotic,  
aloof, slumming  
in such company: a jar  
of maraschino cherries. Three-quarters  
full, fiery globes, like strippers  
at a church social. Maraschino cherries, “maraschino”  
the only foreign word I knew. Not once  
did I see these cherries employed: not  
in a drink, nor on top  
of a glob of ice cream,  
or just pop one in your mouth. Not once.  
The same jar there through an entire  
childhood of dull dinners—bald meat,  
pocked peas, and, see above,  
boiled potatoes. Maybe  
they came over from the old country,  
family heirlooms, or were status symbols  
bought with a piece of the first paycheck  
from a sweatshop,  
which beat the pig farm in Bohemia,

handed down from my grandparents  
to my parents  
to be someday mine,  
then my child's?  
They were beautiful  
and if I never ate one  
it was because I knew it might be missed  
or because I knew it would not be replaced  
and because you do not eat  
that which rips your heart with joy.

[November 7, 2016 Issue](#)

# The Lazy Susan

By [Adrienne Su](#)

October 31, 2016

## Content

*Audio: Read by the author.*

The lazy Susan, in antiquity, would have been a fire.  
Drinking all night, the parents never get drunk.  
This is an ancient brew, with nuts, seeds, fruit  
to fuel the hours, to light a center.  
The tea dispenser's orange light reminds us:  
they're in the dining room, laughing in Chinese  
while we play Scrabble or Monopoly out here.  
They're telling stories we don't bother to record  
because the nights are long. We've heard them before.  
We don't comprehend the punch lines. They're tired.  
They live this way because of us.

We live this way because of them.  
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because the nights are long. We've heard them before,  
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Drinking all night, the parents never get drunk.  
The lazy Susan, in antiquity, would have been a fire.

# **Popular Chronicles**

- [The Homesick Restaurant Run by Cuban Refugees](#)

# The Homesick Restaurant Run by Cuban Refugees

From 1996: What's the difference between the Centro Vasco in Havana and the one in Miami? Thirty-three years of dreaming.

By [Susan Orlean](#)

January 7, 1996



## Content

In Havana, the restaurant called Centro Vasco is on a street that Fidel Castro likes to drive down on his way home from the office. In Little Havana, in Miami, there is another Centro Vasco, on Southwest Eighth—a street that starts east of the Blue Lagoon and runs straight to the bay. The exterior of Miami's Centro Vasco is a hodgepodge of wind-scoured limestone chunks and flat tablets of Perma-stone set in arches and at angles, all topped with a scalloped red shingle roof. Out front are a gigantic round fountain, a fence made from a ship's anchor chain, and a snarl of hibiscus bushes and lacy palm trees. The building has had a few past lives. It was a speakeasy in the twenties, and for years afterward it was an Austrian restaurant called The Garden. The owners of The Garden were nostalgic Austrians, who, in 1965,

finally got so nostalgic that they sold the place to a Cuban refugee named Juan Saizarbitoria and went back to Austria. Saizarbitoria had grown up in the Basque region of Spain, and he had made his way to Cuba in the late thirties by sneaking onto a boat and stowing away inside a barrel of sardines. When he first arrived in Havana, he pretended to be a world-famous jai-alai player, and then he became a cook at the jai-alai club. In 1940, he opened Centro Vasco, and he made it into one of the most popular restaurants in Havana. Having lost the restaurant to Castro, in 1962, Juan Saizarbitoria moved to Miami and set up Centro Vasco in exile. Along with a couple of funeral homes, it was one of the few big Cuban businesses to come to the United States virtually unchanged.

The first Centro Vasco in America was in a small building on the edge of Miami. After a year or so, Saizarbitoria bought The Garden from the departing Austrians. He didn't have enough money to redecorate, so he just hung a few paintings of his Basque homeland and of the Centro Vasco he'd left behind in Havana; otherwise, the walls remained covered with murals of the Black Forest and rustic Alpine scenes. The restaurant prospered: it became a home away from home for Miami's Cubans in exile. Soon there was money to spend, so a room was added, the parking lot was expanded, awnings were replaced. Inside, the walls were redone in a dappled buttery yellow, and the memories of Austria were lost forever under a thick coat of paint. Until then, there might have been no other place in the world so layered with different people's pinings—no other place where you could have had a Basque dinner in a restaurant from Havana in a Cuban neighborhood of a city in Florida in a dining room decorated with yodelling hikers and little deer.

*Published in the print edition of the [January 15, 1996](#), issue.*

These days, Centro Vasco is an eventful place. During a week I spent there recently, I would sometimes leaf back and forth through the reservation book, which was kept on a desk in the restaurant's foyer. The pages were rumpled, and blobbed with ink. Los Hombres Empresa, luncheon for twelve. Beatriz Barron, bridal shower. The Velgaras, the Torreses, and the Delgados, baby showers. A birthday party for Carmen Bravo and an anniversary party for Mr. and Mrs. Gerardo Capo. A paella party for an association of Cuban dentists. A fund-raiser for Manny Crespo, a candidate for judge. Southern

Bell, a luncheon for twenty-eight people; someone had written next to the reservation, in giant letters, and underlined, “*no sangria.*” The Little Havana Kiwanis Club cooking contest had been held in the Granada Room; the finals for Miss Cuba en el Exilio had taken place on the patio. There were dinner reservations for people who wanted a bowl of *caldo Gallego*, the white-bean soup they used to eat at Centro Vasco in Havana; lunches for executives of Bacardi rum and for an adventurous group of Pizza Hut executives from Wisconsin; hundreds of reservations for people coming on Friday and Saturday nights to hear the popular Cuban singer Albita; a twice-annual reservation for the Centauros, 1941 alumni of a medical school in Havana; a daily reservation for a group of ladies who used to play canasta together in Cuba and relocated their game to Miami thirty years ago.

Juan Saizarbitoria goes through the book with me. This is not the Juan of the sardine barrel; he died four years ago, at the age of eighty-two. This is one of his sons—Juan, Jr., who now runs the restaurant with his brother, Iñaki. The Saizarbitorias are a great-looking family. Juan, Jr., who is near sixty, is pewter-haired and big-nosed and pink-cheeked; his forehead is as wide as a billboard, and he holds his eyebrows high, so he always looks a little amazed. Iñaki, fifteen years younger, is rounder and darker, with an arching smile and small, bright eyes. Juan, Jr.’s son, Juan III, is now an international fashion model and is nicknamed Sal. He is said to be the spitting image of sardine-barrel Juan, whom everyone called Juanito. Before Sal became a model, he used to work in the restaurant now and then. Old ladies who had had crushes on Juanito in Havana would swoon at the sight of Sal, because he looked so much like Juanito in his youth. Everyone in the family talks a million miles a minute—the blood relatives, the spouses, the kids. Juan, Jr.’s wife, Totty, who helps to manage the place, once left a message on my answering machine which sounded a lot like someone running a Mixmaster. She knows everybody, talks to everybody, and seems to have things to say about the things she has to say. Once, she told me she was so tired she could hardly speak, but I didn’t believe her. Juanito was not known as a talker; in fact, he spoke only Basque, could barely get along in Spanish, and never knew English at all. In Miami, he occasionally played golf with Jackie Gleason, to whom he had nothing to say. Some people remember Juanito as tough and grave but also surprisingly sentimental. He put a drawing of the Havana Centro Vasco on his Miami restaurant’s business card, and he built a

twenty-foot-wide scale model of it, furnished with miniature tables and chairs. It hangs over the bar in the Miami restaurant to this day.

On a Friday, I come to the restaurant early. The morning is hot and bright, but inside the restaurant it's dark and still. The rooms are a little old-fashioned: there are iron chandeliers and big, high-backed chairs; amber table lamps and white linen; black cables snaking from amplifiers across a small stage. Pictures of the many Presidential candidates who have come here trolling for the Cuban vote are clustered on a wall by the door.

Now the heavy door of the restaurant opens, releasing a flat slab of light. Two, three, then a dozen men stroll into the foyer—elegant old lions, with slick gray hair and movie-mogul glasses and shirtsleeves shooting out of navy-blue blazer sleeves. Juan comes over to greet them, and then they saunter into the far room and prop their elbows on the end of the bar that is across from Juanito's model of the old Centro Vasco. These are members of the Vedado Tennis Club, which had been one of five exclusive clubs in Havana. Immediately after the revolution, the government took over the clubs and declared that from now on all Cuban citizens could use them, and just as immediately the club members left the country. Now the Vedado members meet for lunch on the first Friday of every month at Centro Vasco. Meanwhile, back in Havana, the old Vedado clubhouse is out of business—a stately wreck on a palm-shaded street.

The Vedado members order Scotch and Martinis and highballs. The bartender serving them left Cuba just three months ago. They themselves left the Vedado behind in 1959, and they are as embittered as if they'd left it yesterday. A television over the bar is tuned to CNN, and news about the easing of the Cuban embargo makes a blue flash on the screen.

A buoy-shaped man with a droopy face is standing at the other end of the bar. He is Santiago Reyes, who had been a minister in the Batista regime, the bartender tells me.

Santiago Reyes winks as I approach him, then kisses my hand and says, "My sincere pleasure, my dear." He bobs onto a bar stool. Four men quickly surround him, their faces turned and opened, like sunflowers. Santiago Reyes's words pour forth. It's Spanish, which I don't understand, but I hear a

familiar word here and there: “embargo,” “United States,” “Miami,” “Castro,” “yesterday,” “government,” “Cuba,” “Cuba,” “Cuba.” Across the room, the Vedado members chat in marbled voices. There are perhaps thirty-five of them here now, out of a total of a few hundred, and there will never be more. There has never been anything in my life that I couldn’t go back to if I really wanted to. I ask if Little Havana is anything like the real Havana.

One gray head swivels. “Absolutely not at all,” he says. “Miami was a shock when we got here. It was like a big farm. Plants. Bushes. It was quite something to see.”

I say that I want to go to Havana.

“While you’re there, shoot Fidel for me,” the man says, smoothing the lapels of his blazer.

I say that I think I would be too busy.

He tips his head back and peers over the top of his glasses, measuring me. Then he says, “Find the time.”

The tennis club sits down to *filete de mero Centro Vasco*. The food here is mostly Basque, not Cuban: *porrusalda* (Basque chicken-potato-and-leek soup), and *rabo encendido* (simmered oxtail), and *callos a la Vasca* (Basque tripe). Juanito made up the menu in Havana and brought it with him to Miami. It has hardly changed; the main exception is the addition of a vegetarian paella that the cook concocted for Madonna one night when she came here for a late dinner after performing in Miami.

I wander into the other dining room. At one table, Dr. Salvador Lew, of radio station WRHC, is having lunch with a couple who have recently recorded a collection of Latin-American children’s music. They are talking and eating on the air—as Dr. Lew does with one or more different political or cultural guests every weekday. The live microphone is passed around the table, followed by the garlic bread. From one to two every day, at 1550 AM on the radio dial, you can experience hunger pangs.

Iñaki and Totty sit at a round table near Dr. Lew, having a lunch meeting with two Colombians. The four are discussing a plan to market the restaurant to Colombians, who are moving into the neighborhood in droves. More and more, the Cubans who left Havana after Castro's arrival are now leaving Little Havana, with its pink doll houses guarded by plaster lions, and its old shoebox-shaped apartment buildings hemmed in by sagging cyclone fences—Little Havana, which is nothing like big Havana. The prosperous Cubans are moving to the pretty streets off Ponce de Leon Boulevard, in Coral Gables, which looks like the elegant Miramar section of Havana; or to Kendall, near the newest, biggest Miami malls; or to breezy golf-course houses on Key Biscayne. Centro Vasco, which had been an amble from their front doors, and a home away from home, is now a fifteen-minute drive on a six-lane freeway—a home away from home away from home.

Totty and Iñaki think a lot about how to keep Centro Vasco going in the present. They have plans to open a Little Havana theme park behind the restaurant: there would be cigar and rum concessions and a huge map of Cuba, made out of Cuban soil, and a mural showing the names of American companies that want to do business in Cuba as soon as the embargo is lifted and Castro leaves. Totty and Iñaki have already added more live music on weekends in order to draw young people who were probably sick of hearing their parents talk about old Havana, and who otherwise might not want to spend time somewhere so sentimental and old-fashioned, so much part of another generation. Now performers like Albita and Malena Burke, another popular singer, draw them in. And even that has its ironies, because the music that Malena Burke and Albita perform here and have made so popular with young Cuban-Americans is *son* and *guajira* and *bolero*—the sentimental, old-fashioned music of the pre-revolutionary Cuban countryside. Totty and Iñaki have also come up with the idea that Centro Vasco ought to have a special Colombian day. As I sit down at their table, they and the Colombians are talking about something that ends with Iñaki saying, “Barbra Streisand, O.K., she has a great, great, great voice, but she doesn’t dance! She just stands there!”

The Colombians nod.

“Anyway,” Totty says, “for the special Colombian day we’ll have a Colombian menu, we’ll decorate, it’ll be so wonderful.”

One of the Colombians clears his throat. He is as tanned as toast and has the kind of muscles you could bounce coins off. He says to Totty, “The perfect thing would be to do it on Cartagena Independence Day. We’ll do a satellite feed of the finals from the Miss Colombia beauty pageant.” He lifts his fork and pushes a clam around on his plate. “I think this will be very, very, very important to the community.”

“Perfect,” Totty says.

“We’ll decorate,” Iñaki says.

Totty says, “We’ll make it so it will be just like home.”

I told everyone that I wanted to go to Havana. The place had hung over my shoulder ever since I got to Miami. What kind of place was it, that it could persist so long in memory, make people murderous, make them hungry, make them cry?

“If you go, then you should go to the restaurant and look at the murals,” Iñaki said. “If they’re still there. There’s one of a little boy dressed up in a Basque costume. White shirt, black beret, little lace-up shoes. If it’s still there. Who knows? Anyway, the little Basque boy was me.”

Juan laughed when I said I was going. I asked what it had been like on the day Castro’s people took the restaurant away, and he said, “I was working that day, and two guys came in. With briefcases. They said they were running the restaurant now. They wanted the keys to the safe, and then they gave me a receipt for the cash and said they’d call me. They didn’t call.”

Was he shocked?

“About them taking the restaurant? No. Not really. It was like dying. You know it’s going to happen to you eventually—you just don’t know exactly what day.”

One night at dinner, I tried to persuade Jauretsi, Juan’s youngest daughter, to go with me, and she said, “It would be a scandal, the daughter of Centro Vasco going to Cuba. Seriously, a scandal. No way.” I was eating *zarzuela de mariscos*, a thick seafood stew, with Jauretsi, Totty, and Sara Ruiz, a

friend of mine who left Cuba fifteen years ago. Juan came over to our table for a moment, between seating guests. All the tables were full now, and grave-faced, gray-haired, black-vested waiters were crashing through the kitchen doors backward, bearing their big trays. Five guys at the table beside us were eating paella and talking on cellular phones; a father was celebrating his son's having passed the bar exam; a thirtyish man was murmuring to his date. In the next room, the Capos' anniversary party was under way. There was a cake in the foyer depicting the anniversary couple in frosting—a huge sheet cake, as flat as a flounder except for the sugary mounds of the woman's bust and the man's frosting cigar. The guests were the next generation, whose fathers had been at the Bay of Pigs and who had never seen Cuba themselves. The women had fashionable haircuts and were carrying black quilted handbags with bright gold chains. The young men swarmed together in the hall, getting party favors—fat cigars, rolled by a silent man whose hands were mottled and tobacco-stained.

"If you go to Havana, see if the food is any good now," Juan said to me.

"I heard that there is only one dish on the menu each night," Totty said.

Sara, my émigré friend, said she used to go to Centro Vasco all the time after Castro took it over. Now she was eating a bowl of *caldo Gallego*, which she said she had hankered for ever since the Saizarbitorias' restaurant was taken away. "In the Havana Centro Vasco, the food isn't good anymore," she said. "It's no good. It's all changed." You have to pay for the food in United States dollars, not Cuban pesos, she said, but you don't have to leave a tip, because doing so is considered counter-revolutionary.

The Basque boy is still there, in Havana. His white shirt is now the color of lemonade, though, because after the revolution the murals on the walls of Centro Vasco were covered with a layer of yellowish varnish to preserve the old paint.

My waiter in Havana remembered Juanito. "He left on a Thursday," the waiter said. "He told me about it on a Wednesday. I was at the restaurant working that day." I was at Centro Vasco, sitting at a huge round table with a Cuban friend of Sara's, eating the *caldo Gallego* that made everybody so homesick, but, just as I'd been warned, it wasn't the same. The waiter

whispered, “We need a Basque in the kitchen, but we don’t have any Basques left,” and then he took the soup away. The restaurant looks exactly like Juanito’s model—a barnlike Moorish-style building, with an atrium entryway. The government has had it for thirty-five years now and has left it just as Juanito left it, with a fish tank and a waterfall in the foyer, and, inside, thronelike brown chairs, and cool tile floors, and the murals—Basques playing jai alai and rowing sculls and hoisting boulders and herding sheep—wrapping the room. As I had been told, business is done in dollars. People with dollars in Cuba are either tourists or Cubans who have some business on the black market or abroad. When my new Cuban friend and I came in, a Bruce Willis movie was blaring from the television in the bar. At a table on one side of ours, a lone Nicaraguan businessman with clunky black eyeglasses was poking his spoon into a flan, and at the table on our other side a family of eight were singing and knocking their wine goblets together to celebrate the arrival of one of them from Miami that very day.

I myself had been in Havana for two days. On the first, I went to the old Centro Vasco, where Juanito had started: not the place where he had moved the restaurant when it became prosperous, the one he’d built a model of to hang over the Miami bar, but the original one—a wedge-shaped white building on the wide road that runs along Havana’s waterfront. The wedge building had been Havana’s Basque center—the *centro Vasco*—and it had had jai-alai courts and lodgings and a dining room, and Juanito, the pretend world-famous jai-alai player, had started his cooking career by making meals for the Basques who came.

That was years ago now, and the place is not the same. My new friend drove me there, and we parked and walked along the building’s long, blank eastern side. It was once an elegant, filigreed building. Now its ivory paint was peeling off in big, plate-size pieces, exposing one or two or three other colors of paint. Near the door, I saw something on the sidewalk that looked like a soggy paper bag. Close up, I saw that it was a puddle of brown blood and a goat’s head, with a white striped muzzle and tiny, pearly teeth. My friend gasped, and said that it was probably a Santería ritual offering, common in the countryside but hardly ever seen on a city street. We looked at it for a moment. A few cars muttered by. I felt a little woozy. The heat was pressing on my head like a foot on a gas pedal, and the goat was pretty well cooked.

Inside the building, there were burst-open bags of cement mix, two-by-fours, bricks, rubble. An old barber chair. A fat, friendly, shirtless man shoring up a doorway. On the wall beside him were a mural of Castro wearing a big hat and, above that, a scene from the first day of the revolution, showing Castro and his comrades wading ashore from a cabin cruiser. This room had been the old Centro Vasco's kitchen, and its dining room had been upstairs. Now the whole building is a commissary, where food is prepared, and is then sent on to a thousand people working for the government's Construction Ministry.

After a minute, a sub-director in the Ministry stepped through the rubble—a big, bearish man with shaggy blond hair and an angelic face. He said the workers' lunch today had been fish with tomato sauce, bologna, boiled bananas, and rice and black beans. He wanted us to come upstairs to see where the old Centro Vasco dining room had been, and as we made our way there he told us that it had been divided into a room for his office and a room where the workers' gloves are made and their shoes are repaired. He had eaten there when it was the old Centro Vasco, he added. It had had a great view, and now, standing at his desk, we could see the swooping edge of the Gulf of Mexico, the hulking crenellated Morro Castle, the narrow neck of the Bay of Havana, the wide coastal road, the orange-haired hookers who loll on the low gray breakwater, and then acres and acres of smooth blue water shining like chrome in the afternoon light. The prettiness of the sight made us all quiet, and then the sub-director said he had heard that some Spanish investors were thinking of buying the building and turning it back into a restaurant. "It's a pity the way it is now," he said. "It was a wonderful place."

That night, my friend and I ate dinner at a *paladar*, a kind of private café that Cubans are now permitted to own and operate, provided that it has no more than twelve chairs and four tables and is in their home. This one was in a narrow house in Old Havana, and the kitchen was the kitchen of the house, and the tables and the chairs were set in the middle of the living room. The owner was a stained-glass artist by trade, and he sat on a sofa near our table and chatted while we ate. He said that he loved the restaurant business, and that he and his wife were doing so well that they could hardly wait until the government permitted more chairs, because they were ready to buy them.

I went back to Centro Vasco one more time before leaving Cuba—not the old place, in the wedge building, but the new, Moorish one, in a section of Havana called Vedado, which is now a jumble of houses and ugly new hotels but for decades had been a military installation. I wanted to go once more to be sure I'd remember it, because I didn't know if I'd ever be back again. I went with my new friend and her husband, who was sentimental about the restaurant in the Vedado, because during the revolution he had fought just down the street from it. While he was driving us to Centro Vasco, he pointed to where he'd been stationed, saying, "Right—here! Oh, it was wonderful! I was preparing a wonderful catapult mechanism to launch hand grenades." In front of the restaurant someone had parked a milky-white 1957 Ford Fairlane, and some little boys were horsing around near it. On the sidewalk, four men were playing dominoes at a bowlegged table, and the *clack, clack* of the tiles sounded like the tapping of footsteps on the street. The same apologetic waiter was in the dining room, and he brought us plates of *gambas a la plancha* and *pollo frito con mojo criollo* and *tortilla Centro Vasco*. The restaurant was nearly empty. The manager came and stood proudly by our table, and so did the busboys and the other waiters and a heavy woman in a kitchen uniform who had been folding a huge stack of napkins while watching us eat. Toward the end of the meal, someone came in and warned us that our car was going to be lifted and carried away. I thought he meant that it was being stolen, but he meant that it was being relocated: Castro would be driving by soon, and, because he was worried about car bombs, he became nervous if he saw cars parked on the street.

As we were leaving, the waiter stopped us at the door. He had a glossy eight-by-ten he wanted to show me—a glamorous-looking photograph of Juan, Jr.,'s wedding. He said that it was his favorite keepsake. The Saizarbitorias had left nearly everything behind when they left Cuba. Juan was allowed to take only a little bit of money and three changes of clothes. In Miami, Juan's daughter Mirentxu had remarked to me on how strange it was to have so few family mementos and scrapbooks and pictures—it was almost as if the past had never taken place. I admired the wedding picture for a minute. Then the waiter and I talked a little about old Juanito. I couldn't tell whether the waiter knew that Juanito had died, so I didn't say anything. Meanwhile, he told me that a friend of his had once sent him a napkin from Centro Vasco in Miami, and he had saved it. He said, "I've had so many feelings over these years, but I never imagined that Juanito would never come back."

There had been one other Centro Vasco, but it wasn't possible for me to visit it. It had been the first Centro Vasco that Juanito opened in the United States, on the corner of Ponce de Leon and Douglas Road, in a building that straddled the border between Miami and Coral Gables—a place that might have been satisfactory except that the two cities had different liquor laws. If you wanted a drink, you had to be sure to get a table on the Miami side. The border had come to be too much trouble, so Juanito moved to Southwest Eighth Street, and eventually the old building was torn down.

But I did go back to the Centro Vasco on Southwest Eighth one more time after I came back from Cuba. It was a Saturday night, and it was busy: people were coming for dinner and to hear Malena Burke sing. I wanted to tell the Saizarbitorias about my trip, to tell them that the Basque boy was still there and that the food wasn't very good, but that the restaurant was just as they had left it and, in spite of the thirty-three years that had passed, was still in fine shape. Then I realized that I didn't know whether they would be glad or sorry about what I would tell them. In Havana, everyone I met talked constantly about the future, about what might happen when the United States lifted its embargo and when Castro retired, both of which events they expected soon. To the people I met in Cuba, the present seemed provisional and the past nearly forgotten, and their yearning was keen—charged with anticipation. In Miami, the present moment is satisfying, and thought is given to the future, but the past seems like the richest place—frequently visited, and as familiar and real and comforting as an old family home.

The music wasn't to start until after midnight, so for a long time I stood in the foyer and watched people parade in: the executive of a Latin-American television network, in a tight white suit and high white shoes; an editor from a Spanish soap-opera magazine; a Puerto Rican singer who had just performed at Dade County Auditorium, followed by her entourage; another singer, named Franco, who called out to someone while he and I were talking, "Hey, man, you look great! I thought you were dead!"; and dozens of good-looking couples speaking in bubbly Spanish, and all wearing something that glistened or sparkled or had a satiny shine. Toward midnight, Sherman Hemsley, of "The Jeffersons," came in with a television producer, and Iñaki wrote "Cherman Jemsli Del Show Los Jeffersons" on a little slip of paper for Malena, so that when she pointed him out in the audience she'd know what to say.

Malena came onstage at one in the morning. She began with a ballad that had been made famous in Cuba in the fifties by a singer called La Lupe, who used to get so emotional when she reached the crescendo that she hurled things at the audience—usually her shoes and her wig. The room had been roaring before Malena came out, but now it was hushed. Malena had left Cuba just a few months earlier. Someone told me that the tears she sheds when she's singing about lost love are really real. By then, I was sitting at a table in the back of the room with Totty. I had some snapshots with me that I had taken in Havana for the family, because I'd thought they might like to see the old home again. Just as I was about to slide the pictures across the table to Totty, the singer sobbed to her crescendo, so I decided to wait until another day. ♦

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

By [Calvin Trillin](#)

# Readings

- [What's the Point of Food in Fiction?](#)

# What's the Point of Food in Fiction?

From 2007: In modern literature, the way we cook provides a recipe for representing the way we think.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

April 2, 2007



## Content

Recently, there was an exchange in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* about the presence, and the propriety, of recipes in novels, and we intend to settle the questions that have arisen there in the American way, right now, and for good. There are four kinds of food in books: food that is served by an author to characters who are not expected to taste it; food that is served by an author to characters in order to show who they are; food that an author cooks for characters in order to eat it with them; and, last (and most recent), food that an author cooks for characters but actually serves to the reader.

Most books that have food in them, including the classic nineteenth-century novels, have the first kind of food. In one Trollope novel after another, three meals a day, the parsons and politicians eat chops or steaks or mutton, but

the dishes are essentially interchangeable, mere stops on the ribbon of narrative, signs of life and social transactions rather than specific pleasures: “Mr. Peregrine greatly enjoyed his chop” or “For Dr. Patterson, even the usual satisfaction he took in his beefsteak and porter was somewhat diminished by this thought”—such food provides space for a moment of reflection. The dishes are the Styrofoam peanuts in the packaging of classic narrative. There are moments in Trollope when what a character *drinks* matters—claret good or bad, porter or port—but his food is, in every sense, at the service of his story.

*Published in the print edition of the [April 9, 2007](#), issue.*

Next come the writers who dish up very particular food to their characters to show who they are. Proust is this kind of writer, and Henry James is, too. Proust seems so full of food—crushed strawberries and madeleines, tisanes and champagne—that entire recipe books have been extracted from his texts. But he’s not a greedy writer; that his people are eating lobster or veal matters to how they feel about who they are, but we are not meant to leave the page hungry. Proust will say that someone is eating a meal of *gigot* with sauce béarnaise, but he seldom says that the character had a *delicious* meal of *gigot* with sauce béarnaise—although he will extend his adjectives to the weather, or the view. He uses food as a sign of something else. (It’s what social novelists, even mystically minded ones, always do: J. D. Salinger doesn’t like food, either, but the fact that his characters are eating snails or Swiss-cheese sandwiches tells so much about them that it must be noted, and felt, like every other detail.)

Then, there are writers who are so greedy that they go on at length about the things their characters are eating, or are about to eat—serving it in front of us and then snatching it from our mouths. Ian Fleming is obsessed with food; gluttony, even more than lust, is the electric current of his hero’s adventures. Newcomers to James Bond, imagining him to be the roughneck he has once again become in movies, will be startled to see how much time Bond spends, in “Casino Royale” and the other early Bonds, giving advice to his girls and his spy superiors on what to eat, with the author hovering over his shoulder as he examines the menu: the problem with caviar, Bond announces, is getting enough toast (not true); English cooking is the best in the world when it’s good (certainly not true then); and rosé champagne goes

perfectly with stone crabs (very true). His creator, one feels as the excitement builds, is not just itemizing the food, waiter-like, but actually sitting at the table and sharing it with him.

And then there are writers, ever more numerous, who present on the page not just the result but the whole process—not just what people eat but how they make it, exactly how much garlic is chopped, and how, and when it is placed in the pan. Sometimes entire recipes are included in the text, a practice that links Kurt Vonnegut's "Deadeye Dick" to Nora Ephron's "Heartburn," novels about the inadvertent mayhem that a man can inflict on a woman; in "Heartburn," the recipes serve both as a joke about what a food writer writing a novel would write and as a joke on novel-writing itself by someone who anticipates that she will not be treated as a "real" novelist.

These days, we have long cooking sequences in Ian McEwan; endless recipes in James Hamilton-Paterson; menus analyzed at length in John Lanchester; and detailed culinary scenes involving Robert B. Parker's bruiser of a detective, Spenser. Cooking is to our literature what sex was to the writing of the sixties and seventies, the thing worth stopping the story for to share, so to speak, with the reader.

Not long ago, I attempted to mimic some cooking as it is done in a number of relatively recent novels. I began, foolishly, with several recipes from Günter Grass's Nobel Prize-provoking "The Flounder," the epic allegory of German history told through the endlessly repeated parable of an evil fish, a gullible man, a virtuous woman, and a lot of potatoes. The talking Flounder, being both the evil daemon and the central consciousness of the piece, has a natural class interest in flounder's not being eaten, so there is a shortage of fish recipes in "The Flounder." (I was tempted by a detailed description of how to make stewed tripe, but who in my gang would eat stewed tripe?) There is one nice moment, though, when the eternal talking Flounder, who "knew all the recipes that had been used for cooking his fellows," mentions simmering the fish with white wine and capers. Well, from his mouth to our plate: I did just that, with a nice fillet from Citarella, and, as suggested, added some sorrel. Then, learning in a later section what could be done with potatoes and mustard—the potato, with its false promise of cheap nutrition for all, is, I suppose, meant to represent the false hope of the Enlightenment in Germany, but the mustard surely could represent the saving genius of the

Bavarian rococo—I made a gratin with mustard to accompany it. It was fine, though it reminded me of why it is that, at a moment when Spanish cooking is everywhere sanctified and even English cooking, for the first time, canonized, not many people are making a case that German cooking is much more than fish and potatoes and sauerbraten. Eating Günter Grass's flounder was actually like reading one of his novels: nutritious, but a little pale and starchy.

Great masters are not meant to offer small plates. My eye fell next on "School Days," one of Robert B. Parker's excellent Spenser mysteries. Where John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee, Spenser's daddy in the genre, would occasionally throw an inch-thick T-bone on the grill of the Busted Flush, Spenser produces entire dishes, and we read about them bit by bit. (Nero Wolfe had a personal chef, and ate a lot, but it was mostly in the "the great detective dined on *quenelles de brochet*" line.) In "School Days," Spenser, with his beloved Susan away at a psych seminar, and only the dog for company, makes a dish of cranberry beans, diced steak, and fresh corn, dressed with olive oil and cider vinegar.

The beans alone establish Spenser's credibility as a cook. "I shelled the beans from their long, red-and-cream pods and dropped them in boiling water and turned down the heat and let them simmer," he tells us. A devotion to shell beans, I have noticed, divides even amateur cooks from non-cooks more absolutely than any other food, and they are, into the bargain, a perfect model of writing. Like sentences, shell beans are a great deal more trouble to produce than anyone who isn't producing them knows. You have to shell the beans, slipping open the pods with your thumbnail and then tugging the beautiful little prismatic buttons from their moorings—a process that, like writing, always takes much longer than you think it will. And then even the best shell beans, cleaned and simmered, are like sentences in that nobody actually appreciates them as much as they deserve to be appreciated. Shell beans are several steps more delicious, lighter and finer, than dried beans, much less canned beans; but the sad truth is that nobody really cares beans about beans, and not many eaters can tell the fresh kind from the dried, or even the canned.

I carried on with the recipe: Spenser takes a small steak from the refrigerator and dices it, sautés it, and then mixes it with the beans. I did this, and,

honestly, I don't think it's a good idea. Maybe I didn't do it right—there is a certain lack of specificity about what kind of steak he's using and just how long he keeps it in the pan—but I found that my steak dried out when it was diced and cooked, and, anyway, didn't have enough salty punch to play off against the floury blandness of the beans. Sausage, not steak, is what's called for here. As for the corn, well, even off-season corn is pretty tasty mixed with oil and vinegar, and makes a good combo with the shell beans. It's a nice dish, worth interrupting the murders for.

Still, you have to wonder how well the food fits in the book. The purpose of the scene, after all, is not to teach a recipe but to paint a mood—to show the lonely Spenser as somehow more modern, broader in interests and resources, than lonely city detectives in fiction often are. What the reader recalls, though, is not the setting but the dish. Should the food come off the page onto the plate quite so readily, overwhelming the atmosphere, and does this indicate that there is something subtly off, non-functional, about the presence of elaborate food-making in fiction?

Rising to a higher level of culinary ambition, I went on to make, the following night, a fish-stew recipe, a kind of English bouillabaisse, from Ian McEwan's superb "Saturday": Henry Perowne, the central character, a neurosurgeon, cooks this elaborate dish as he watches television and broods on "monstrous and spectacular scenes." Henry, though confessedly inexpert, is a convincing home cook; he admits that he belongs to the chuck-it-in school, the hearty school of throwing ingredients together in a pot—he likes the "relative imprecision and lack of discipline." In the passage I was following, he makes a tomato-and-fish stock for his stew, and, at the same time, starts prepping the rest. He "empties several dried red chillies from a pot and crushes them between his hands and lets the flakes fall with their seeds into the onions and garlic," before adding "pinches of saffron, some bay leaves, orange-peel gratings, oregano, five anchovy fillets, two tins of peeled tomatoes." Then he takes some mussels from a string bag, throws those, with the skeletons of three skates, into a stockpot, and tips some Sancerre into the tomato sauce. Meanwhile, he readies monkfish, slicing tails into chunks, a few more mussels, and, finally, some clams and prawns. All the while, he is watching on a mostly muted television the run-up to the Iraq war—marchers in London, Colin Powell at the U.N.—and brooding on life in our time.

McEwan is obviously painting a picture of *l'homme bourgeois* as he is today, his hands filled with fish, his mind with intimations of terror. (McEwan really is serving this dish to his readers; a revised version of the recipe is right there on his Web site.) It's a tribute to McEwan's powers of persuasion that the scene would never work that way in reality. You can't idly make a bouillabaisse while you brood on modern life any more than you can idly make a cassoulet; these are nerve-wracking concoctions. The mussels, which Henry drops into his stock straight from a string bag, need at a minimum to be spray-washed, and probably cleaned and checked for those obscene little beards they have. European mussels have fewer of these, it's true—more like soul patches. (Later on, Henry scrubs the mussels, but he seems to be doing it absent-mindedly, and you can't do it absent-mindedly.) The fish needs to be taken from its wrappings and washed; and then how fine do you chop the garlic, and are you sure the alcohol has boiled off from the wine? The “orange-peel gratings” are a story in themselves, since all the experts insist that you avoid getting any white pith in with them, and this is about as difficult as writing a villanelle. (It doesn't actually matter much, but they say that it does.) Worse than that, having crushed a “handful” of those little dried peppers between your fingers means that you have to wash your hands instantly, with soap, since nothing is more common among home cooks, like Henry, than wiping a tear from your eye while chopping the onions, your hand still contaminated by hot pepper, with horrific results.

While you are doing all this, I was reminded as I did it, you are thinking about the bouillabaisse, not about life in our time. Or, rather, you are not thinking about the bouillabaisse, or about anything: you are making the bouillabaisse. And here, I suspect, lies the difficulty with using cooking as the stock for the stream-of-consciousness stew. It is that the act of cooking is an escape from consciousness—the nearest thing that the non-spiritual modern man and woman have to Zen meditation; its effect is to reduce us to a state of absolute awareness, where we are here now of necessity. You can't cook with the news on and still listen to it, any more than you can write with the news on and still listen to it. You can cook with music, or talk radio, on, and drift in and out. What you can't do is think and cook, because cooking takes the place of thought. (You can daydream and cook, but you can't advance a chain of sustained reflections.)

The recipes in these books are not, of course, meant to be cooked; they have literary purposes, and one of them is to represent the background of thought. Every age finds an activity that can take place while a character is meditating; the activity surrounds and halos the meditation. In Victorian fiction, it is walking; the character takes a long walk from Little Tipping to Old Stornsbury and, on the way, decides to propose, convert, escape, or run for office. But the walk as meditational setting and backdrop came to an end with Joyce and Woolf, who made whole walking books. In recent American fiction, driving was recessive enough to do the job; in Updike and Ann Beattie, characters in cars are always doing the kind of thinking that Pip and Phineas Finn used to do on walks. Driving and walking, however, do seem to be natural “background” actions. But you cannot have characters thinking while cooking; the activity is not a place for thought but in place of thought.

We need these devices in books, because we do not, in life, think our thoughts over time. Since our real mental life is made in tiny flashes in the midst of our routines, we have to stretch it out, taffy-like, in literature to cover a span of time worthy of it. If we accurately represented our mental life as it takes place—sudden impulses on the way to the washroom, a spasm of neurons unleashed over coffee—no one would believe it. Consciousness is not a stream but a still lock that suddenly drops into little waterfalls. The lengthy descriptions of cooking that we find in modern literature are a way of artfully representing, rather than actually reproducing, our mental life—a modelled illusion, rather than a snapshot of the thing.

So no matter how much cooking a novel contains, in the end it goes back to being a book, as all books will. Even cookbooks are finally more book than they are cook, and, more and more, we know it: for every novel that contains a recipe, there is now a recipe book meant to be read as a novel. When we read, in Alain Ducasse’s recent Culinary Encyclopedia, a recipe for Colonna-bacon-barded thrush breasts, with gilet canapés, on a porcini-mushroom marmalade, we know that we are not seriously expected to cook this; rather, we are to admire, over and over, the literary skill, the metaphysical poetry, required to bring these improbable things together. You and I are not about to cook thrush breasts with a porcini-mushroom marmalade—Alain Ducasse is not about to cook them, either—any more than we are about to throw ourselves under the train with Anna or sleep with Madame Bovary.

The secret consolation may be that it works the other way around as well. The space between imaginary food in books and real food is the space where reading happens. The people we encounter in novels are ultimately mere recipes, too—so many eyes, so many bright teeth, so many repeated tics and characterizing mannerisms—and we accept that we cannot perfectly reproduce them, either. Our mental picture of Henry Perowne, like our mental picture of Lady Glencora Palliser, is as hard-won as the bouillabaisse from “Saturday,” as vague in critical aspects and as likely to vary from maker to maker, from reader to reader. (The characters in Flaubert are like the recipes in Escoffier; we are surprised to see how much is left out.) We read about Cabourg in Proust, and are unprepared for what we find when we actually get there. The act of reading is always a matter of a task begun as much as of a message understood, something that begins on a flat surface, counter or page, and then gets stirred and chopped and blended until what we make, in the end, is a dish, or story, all our own. ♦

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

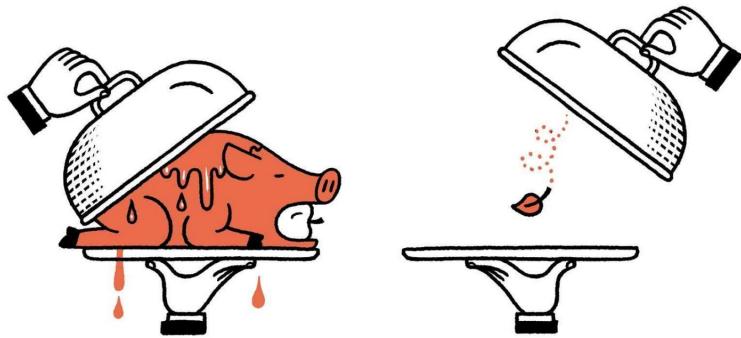
## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [When Lean Cuisine Was New](#)

# Two Menus

By [Steve Martin](#)

February 13, 2000



*KING'S RANSOM*

Paducah, Kansas

*Fine dining at its best.*

*Published in the print edition of the [February 21 & 28, 2000](#), issue.*

*Fried-Butter Appetizer*

Butter, cream, fat, lard, shortening, palm oil, drawn-butter dip.

*Greaseballs*

Four greaseballs served flaming hot in your hands (grease, balls).

♥ *Cow Organs Charlton Heston*

Steaming entrails and freshly slaughtered virgin cow brains, marinated in lard. Find the bullet and eat free!

*Maybelle's Vegetarian Special*

Ham, ham hocks, pork rinds, butter, eggs. Ask for Bac-O-Bits!

*Double Height Rib-Eye Steak*

Cooked in its own juice while alive, served with hot buttered metal screws, cardboard.

*Egg-Yolk Omelette à la Mitt*

Yellow hearts of egg folded into an omelette. Cooked and served inside a boxing glove.

*Our Banana Split*

Fried ice cream, butter, double-cream-infused banana, whipped cream, cherries in red dye No. 2, triple-fudge chocolate sauce, pancakes, cow fat.

♥ Heartwise!

*SYNERGY*

Beverly Hills, California

*Phone: Yeah, right.*

*Air Salad*

Dehumidified ocean air on a bed of fileted basil.

*Egg-White Omelette*

Egg whites, pumpkin seeds, Vitamin C, nonfat cheese buttons, aerated yogi urine.

*Spaghetti à la Nerf*

Our natural eggless spaghetti, cooked in desalinated Caspian Sea water, simmered in oliveless olive oil, and sprinkled with parsley skins. As light as a Nerf ball!

*Filet of Sole*

Sole.

*Chilean Sea Bass*

The Patagonian toothfish is overfished, so try our soya-based lo-fat substitute, swimming in hot water. Soy, water, gelatin added for viscosity. Garlic vapor. A natural face-lift dish.

*Our Banana Split*

One banana lying in its own skin, covered in chocolate, on a bed of arugula. A cheesecloth mouth condom is supplied to enable you to taste the chocolate without swallowing.

*Hemlock Tea*

Try our depoisoned herbal infusion. ♦

# Studio Visit

- [Audrey Flack Keeps It Real](#)

[September 6, 2021 Issue](#)

## Audrey Flack Keeps It Real

The ninety-year-old artist, once known for photo-realist works, dishes on Josef Albers (a bit of a letch), the Abstract Expressionists (sex-crazed), and Rodin (“a perv”), as she prepares for a new show.

By [Emma Allen](#)

August 30, 2021

The petite, ninety-year-old artist Audrey Flack recently welcomed a visitor to her East Hampton house, which previously belonged to Jimmy (son of Max) Ernst. “Jimmy had real *Surrealist* taste,” Flack, who wore jeans, rainbow socks, and gold hoop earrings, said. “When I moved in, the kitchen was avocado green, with plaid carpeting.” She plopped onto a voluminous white sofa, beneath a 2004 work of her own, a Medusa rendered in pink glitter, titled “Art Is the Last Judgment,” and reminisced about Yale’s art program in the fifties, when the design department was headed by [Josef Albers](#). By her account, he was a bit of a letch.



*Audrey Flack* Illustration by João Fazenda

“Albers wasn’t terrible, just dangerous,” she explained. “That sweet little pink-cheeked Bavarian man. But it wasn’t as bad as the Cedar Tavern. You just knew what was going to happen there. Reuben Nakian, he’s like a second-level Ab Ex sculptor. He’s a little guy, too, and I was young, and he comes up to me and he puts his hands here.” She grabbed her breasts.

Hollis Taggart gallery is showing Flack’s early, mainly Abstract Expressionist work at the Hamptons Fine Art Fair, this weekend, under the title “Last Woman Standing.” Her floppy-haired studio manager, Severin Delfs, served tea from a blue teapot that had belonged to Elaine de Kooning.

“The Ab Ex women were worse than the men,” Flack said. “Worse in the sense that they felt that they had to outdrink the men. They bought into a behavior. The sex! It was crazy. I was no angel. But the women pay the price.” She turned her attention to Delfs. “Sevvy, my darling, you may have to add hot water because it gets pretty strong—Elaine’s teapot doesn’t make great tea.” She went on, “Lee was always mad at Elaine for taking Bill’s name. She’d say, ‘I’m Lee Krasner, I’m not Lee Pollock. You’re Audrey Flack!’ Elaine, in retaliation, got a dog that she called Jackson, and she would say, ‘Jackson, sit!’ ”

Delfs added, “This dog was apparently a stray and walked into Bill de Kooning’s studio and shat in the middle of the floor. And they were, like, that’s just like Jackson!”

Flack recalled that in the mid-century art world it was “almost radical to say you could be a mother, to talk about your children.” When a Madison Avenue gallery director asked to see Flack’s pioneering photo-realist paintings, in 1963, she scuttled her two daughters and their babysitter out of her 104th Street apartment, whose dining room served as her studio. “I ran around the house putting clothes, diapers, everything away. Any sign that I had a child had to be erased.” The gallerist included her painting of John F. Kennedy in a show titled “Six Women Artists.”

The critic Hilton Kramer panned her photo-realist works as “kitschy still-lifes” in 1976, the year after *MOMA* acquired one. Flack has shelves of campy trinkets (a mug with bobbling breasts, a cobra clock) that she lovingly handled on the way to her studio, which housed large sculptures of

Daphne, Eve, and another Medusa, alongside an in-progress Dürer-Disney mashup painting.

“I’m always ahead,” Flack said. “It’s just a fact. They’ll catch up to this stuff. There were great sculptors in the eighteen-hundreds, the ‘New Sculptors,’ and [Rodin](#) comes and knocks them all out—that’s another bastard. He had women do all his marbles and his models run around naked. He was a perv.”

Flack played banjo in a group called Audrey Flack and the History of Art Band, for which she wrote a song about Rodin’s lover, the sculptor Camille Claudel. She sang, “I fell in love with Rodin / I thought he was my only man / but then he double-crossed me / he broke my heart, oh, woe is me.”

“It’s interesting,” she said. “I never liked Rodin’s work. What did Pollock say? You paint who you are.” So why does she keep returning to Medusa?

Flack mused, “Medusa was a triplet—Medusa, Stheno, and Euryale—and she was the only normal one. They were Gorgons with fangs and claws and scales, but she was beautiful. Her mother is the mother of all monsters, poor woman. Then she has Medusa, who sings like an angel. And Poseidon takes one look at her and falls in love. And what do Greek gods do when they fall in love?” A loaded pause.

Delfs chimed in, “So she’s running away and ends up in Athena’s temple, asking for help.”

Flack: “But he rapes her, in the temple. Now, the myth is that Athena is so angry that her temple was defiled that she turns Medusa’s hair to snakes.”

Delfs: “Punishes the woman.”

Flack: “She’s not only raped, she’s blamed for it! But I think there’s another side, because the fact that her hair gets turned to snakes empowers her. Now she looks at a man and he turns to stone. So she’s also known as the great sculptor—all these frozen men!” ♦

## **Tables for Two**

- A Boldness of Vision at Little Mad

[September 6, 2021 Issue](#)

## A Boldness of Vision at Little Mad

At the NoMad restaurant, the chef Sol Han's Korean-inflected cuisine seems determined to establish its own identity, with dishes such as the crispy pig-ear salad, and rice with mushrooms and bone marrow scraped tableside.

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

August 27, 2021



*Bungeo-ppang*, a fish-shaped waffle, is a beloved Korean pastry that's typically stuffed with sweet red-bean paste. At the new NoMad restaurant Little Mad, from the owners of Atomix and Her Name Is Han, the thirty-three-year-old chef Sol Han's *bungeo-ppang* is an amuse-bouche made savory with a scallion-laden batter, hollowed of filling and fluffed up in texture. The reinvented fish bun arrives sitting next to a pat of rich seaweed butter, seeming cannily aware of its metamorphosis. "Is it a scallion pancake or bread or a Korean pastry?" Han asked when I spoke to him recently. "I like to say, 'It's just a Little Mad.' "

This opening salvo sets the tone for the Korean-inflected cuisine, which, considering the restaurant's proximity to the merry chaos of K-town, seems

determined to establish its own identity. With a sleek open kitchen and a tapas-style menu (there are no entrées, only small and slightly less small plates), Little Mad cultivates a spare, cosmopolitan cool. Han, who moved from Korea to New York at the age of seven, grew up helping at his parents' Japanese restaurant and has worked in upscale Italian and French kitchens. An effortless ease with both the East and the West informs his boldness of vision and his tilt toward experimentation and reinvention.



*The rice dish (at thirty-one dollars, it ranks among the most expensive items on the menu) is built for extravagance and decadence.*

At their most successful, Han's creations are dazzlingly poetic. Take the yellowtail dish, which grew out of Han's frustration with the usual presentation of his favorite fish. "I've only seen it served flat, and I wanted to give it height," he told me. His solution—to sandwich a thin sashimi slice between translucent wafers of Asian pear—is elegant and sculptural, evoking a fish swimming through an emerald-and-yellow pool of scallion oil and lemon juice. "The dressing is something my parents used on the house salad at their restaurant for twenty years," he said. "So this is also my way of paying tribute to them."

For the crispy pig-ear salad, cartilage-veined ribbons are braised, deep-fried, and nestled atop frisée. The dressing, a fermented-shrimp vinaigrette with kombu aioli, cuts through the richness of the pig ears while supplying a turbocharged explosion of umami—not bad for something Han describes as

“super easy and snacky.” When asked to define Mad in the context of Little Mad, Han laughed and said it was probably some combination of “crazy, funky, different, and creative.”



*An effortless ease with both the East and the West informs Han's tilt toward experimentation and reinvention.*

One of the restaurant’s most Instagrammable dishes is the beef tartare, which comes with oversized moss-green chips, made from *maesaengi* seaweed, in the shape of elephant ears. It’s presented with a miniature wooden hammer, to break the chips into shards for scooping the meat. All this theatre is innocuous enough, yet it comes off as gratuitous pageantry—why couldn’t the chips be crushed in the kitchen? One diner, who was trying to determine whether the beef or the chips needed hammering, said that it seemed to be the kind of gimmick that felt indulgent rather than delightful.

The Tuna Mul-hwe is another dish that tries perhaps a bit too hard. *Mul-hwe*, which means “seafood in water,” is a Korean summer favorite that features ice cubes in a cold broth. To make it Mad, Han swaps the cubes for a tomato slushie, which peeks out from under a stack of jalapeño, cucumber, and red onion. The concept is novel, but the slushie—which caused, in one diner, a “spicy brain freeze”—feels like an unnecessary distraction.

The menu ends on a strong note, with a rice dish built for extravagance. (At thirty-one dollars, it’s among the most expensive items here.) Han told me

that he remembered the way his white friends ate rice when they were younger—with a spoonful of butter. This inspired him to mingle the meaty flavors of roasted maitake and oyster mushrooms with marrow, scraped from the bone tableside. It takes bravado to invent something new with rice, and this dish fully earns Han’s favorite description: it’s indisputably a Little Mad. (*Dishes \$18-\$45.*) ♦

# **Take Out**

- [Take It or Leave It](#)

[November 4, 2013 Issue](#)

# Take It or Leave It

From 2013: Every New Yorker has heard a newly arrived British person grumble about tipping.

By [Zadie Smith](#)

October 28, 2013



## Content

*Audio:* Listen to this audio.

The first time I ordered takeout in New York, two things confounded me: the terrific speed with which the food arrived, and the fact that, after I'd paid for it, the man from the Chinese restaurant and I stood on either side of the threshold staring at each other, though only one of us understood why. After a minute of this, I closed the door. An American friend sat on the sofa, openmouthed:

“Wait—did you just close the door?”

In London, you don't tip for delivery. A man on a motorbike arrives and hands over an oil-soaked bag, or a box. You give him the exact amount of money it costs or wait and look at your shoes while he hunts for change. Then you close the door. Sometimes all this is achieved without even the removal of his motorcycle helmet. The dream (an especially British dream) is that the whole awkward exchange pass wordlessly.

*Published in the print edition of the [November 4, 2013](#), issue.*

Every New Yorker has heard a newly arrived British person grumble about tipping. The high-minded Brits add a lecture: food-industry workers shouldn't need to scrabble for the scraps thrown from high table—they should be paid a decent wage (although the idea that the delivery boys of Britain are paid a decent wage is generally an untested assumption). Now when I'm in London I find myself tipping all kinds of people, most of whom express a sort of unfeigned amazement, even if the tip is tiny. What they never, ever do, however, is tell me to have a nice day. "Have a good one"—intoned with a slightly melancholy air, as if warding off the far greater likelihood of an evil "one"—is the most you tend to hear.

But I'm not going to complain about Britain's "lack of a service culture"—it's one of the things I cherish about the place. I don't think any nation should elevate service to the status of culture. At best, it's a practicality, to be enacted politely and decently by both parties, but no one should be asked to pretend that the intimate satisfaction of her existence is servicing you, the "guest," with a shrimp sandwich wrapped in plastic. If the choice is between the antic all-singing, all-dancing employees in New York's Astor Place Pret a Manger and the stony-faced contempt of just about everybody behind a food counter in London (including all the Prets), I wholeheartedly opt for the latter. We are subject to enough delusions in this life without adding to them the belief that the girl with the name tag is secretly in love with us.

In New York, a restaurant makes some "takeout" food, which it fully intends to take out and deliver to someone. In England, the term is "takeaway," a subtle difference that places the onus on the eater. And it is surprisingly common for London restaurants to request that you come and take away your own bloody food, thank you very much. Or to inform you imperiously that they will deliver only if you spend twenty quid or more. In New York, a

boy will bring a single burrito to your door. That must be why so many writers live here—the only other place you get food delivery like that is at MacDowell.

Another treasurable thing about London's delivery service is its frankly metaphysical attitude toward time (minicabs are equally creative on this front). They say, "He'll be with you in fifteen minutes." Thirty minutes pass. You call. They say, "He's turning onto the corner of your road, one minute, one minute!" Five minutes pass. You call. "He's outside your door! Open your door!" You open your door. He is not outside your door. You call. He is now five minutes away. He "went to the wrong house." You sit on the doorstep. Ten minutes later, your food arrives. My most extreme encounter with this uniquely British form of torture was when, a few years back, I ordered from an Indian restaurant four minutes from my house as the crow flies. I was still being told he was on the corner of my road when I walked through the restaurant's door, cell phone in hand, to find the delivery boy sitting on a bench, texting. As was his God-given right. It's not as if anyone were going to tip him. ♦

# The Boards

- Sophocles Gone Wild!

[September 6, 2021 Issue](#)

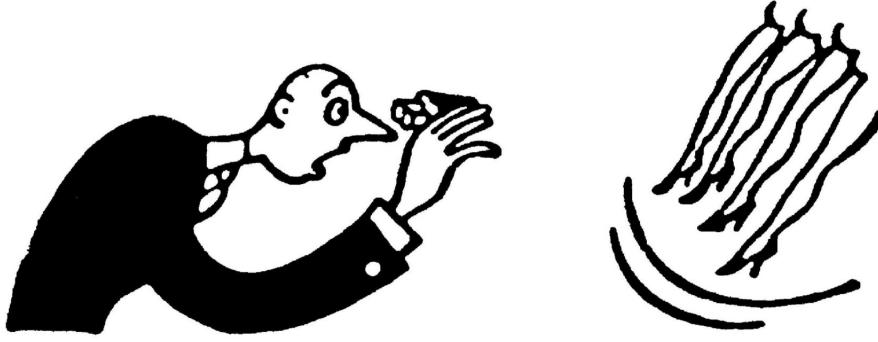
## Sophocles Gone Wild!

For a nude production of “Antigonick,” a translation of the Greek play “Antigone,” performers for Torn Out Theatre dodged the crazies and the lookie-loos during rehearsals in Prospect Park.

By [Henry Alford](#)

August 30, 2021

O gods! Let us take measure of the many vagaries of performing Greek drama outdoors in Prospect Park in the nude; let us dare to glance behind the behinds. For Torn Out Theatre’s recent nude production of “[Antigonick](#),” Anne Carson’s translation of Sophocles’ “Antigone,” the show’s director, Britt Berke, and an intimacy director named Cha Ramos outlined measures that would be taken to insure the performers’ safety: Torn Out would provide robes for them to slip into offstage, a security guard would be on site for performances, and photography would be banned. Berke and Ramos also encouraged the nine cast members—mostly in their twenties, and mostly queer—to talk about their characters in the third person (Berke: “Character naked, actor not”), and to feel free to decide, at any point, not to be nude (Ramos: “True consent is reversible”).

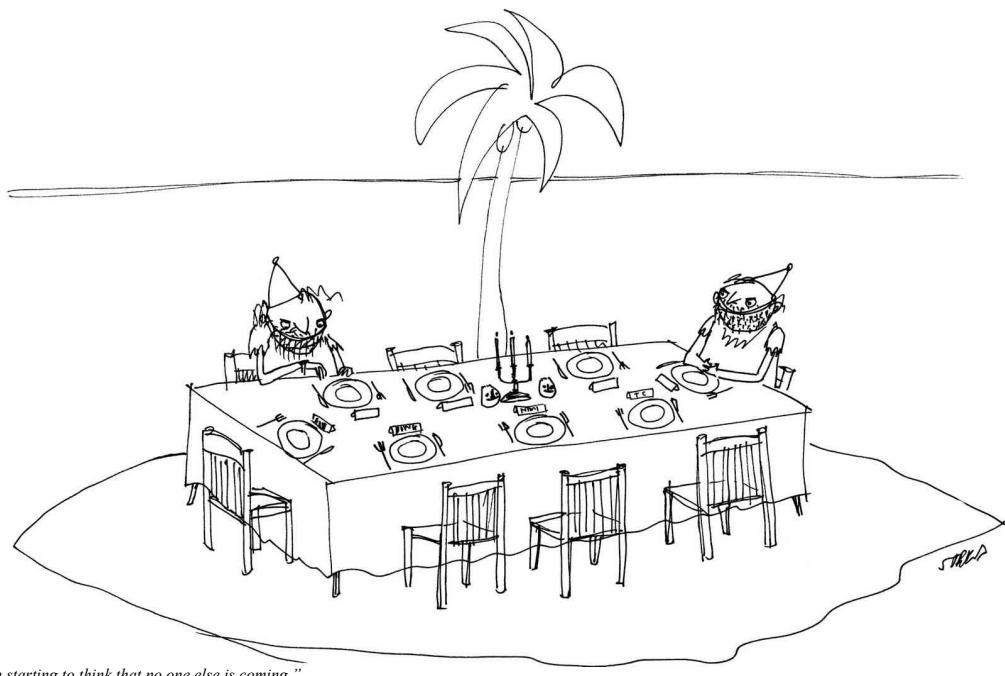


In preparation for its opening, earlier this month, the company rehearsed both at Prospect Park’s music pagoda and in a Brooklyn studio. Because of legal restrictions, fully bare rehearsals could only take place inside; outdoor rehearsals saw cast members shirtless, or in underwear. El Yurman, a trans actor who played Teiresias, the blind prophet who was once transformed into a woman, said, “We were more nervous being naked around each other than around the audience. The performer-audience relationship is clear. You never have to see the audience again if you don’t want to.”

But three days before the première, during a rehearsal at the music pagoda, the company experienced what Torn Out’s artistic director, Pitr Strait, called “a trifecta of harassment.” First, a man on a bike screamed at the actors that they were immoral and headed for Hell; then a man lurking in the woods started filming them and masturbating; then a homeless man who sleeps in the pagoda threatened them and spit at them. Antigone pays a huge price for her decision to bury her brother’s naked corpse against Kreon’s edict, but the Torn Out gang seemed to be paying a huge price simply for spouting poetry in their underwear.

Although performing the classics outdoors, for free, is part of Torn Out’s mandate—the company aims to explore questions of body politics for a diverse audience—the group decided to switch venues, to a Presbyterian

church on Eighty-sixth and Amsterdam Avenue, in Manhattan, which houses a performance space called the Center at West Park. One actor then balked at nudity. Sha Batzby, a Black musician and comedian performing the role of the Messenger, had enjoyed rehearsing in the buff in the studio: “It called for a higher level of focus. It’s, like, ‘Oh, now you’re naked and I’m supposed to engage with you like you’re not.’ You’re trying not to derail the car you’re driving amongst all these other cars onstage that are intentionally trying to cause accidents.” Batzby, who describes himself as a “radically reformed” Jew, had reacted to the homeless man’s outburst by mounting the music pagoda with his siddur, a prayer book, and trying to “reclaim the space” with prayer. But the move to the church tripped him up. “Something about being naked there didn’t sit right with me,” he said. He conferred with Berke, who supported his decision to be clothed.



*“I’m starting to think that no one else is coming.”*

The show’s two performances at the Center attracted neither lookie-loos nor spitters. The audience alternately marvelled at and puzzled over seeing a naked Antigone prepare to bury her brother’s naked corpse. (In some translations, Antigone’s actions are called a “naked rebellion.”) If the church’s soaring dimensions seemed an apposite venue for “Antigonick” ’s magisterial dialogue, the dearth of air-conditioning made some audience members wish that *they* were nude.

The day after the show closed, Strait, the artistic director, reminisced about Torn Out's all-female 2016 production of "The Tempest." Strait had wanted the characters on Prospero's island to have full pubic hair, "because why wouldn't they?" However, Strait, who is trans, was living as a cis man at the time, and felt it would be inappropriate to tell a group of women with twenty-first-century grooming habits to make their highly manicured nether parts resemble an Ed Koren cartoon. "We should have gotten merkins," Strait said. "We should have merkinned up."

Meanwhile, Batzby, the actor who'd had a change of heart, said he'd recently auditioned for the role of a naked homeless man on Michael Che's HBO sketch show. "I'd do nudity for HBO," Batzby said. "It's not regular dick, it's HBO dick." ♦

# The Current Cinema

- The Lovable Idealism of “Big Night”

September 23, 1996 Issue

## The Lovable Idealism of “Big Night”

From 1996: Although the picture is dedicated to the principle of tiny, delicate, scrupulously crafted aesthetic pleasures, the filmmakers have the good sense to lay on plenty of them.

By [Terrence Rafferty](#)

September 15, 1996



The primary setting of Campbell Scott and Stanley Tucci's "Big Night" is an Italian restaurant called the Paradise, which, like the movie itself, is small, quiet, and elegant. The restaurant clearly reflects the low-key dignity of its owners, a pair of immigrant brothers named Primo (Tony Shalhoub) and Secondo (Tucci). Primo, the chef, is a shy and rather unworldly culinary perfectionist; he's mostly content to remain in the kitchen, meticulously re-creating the great cuisine of his homeland, while his suaver, more pragmatic little brother deals with impatient loan officers and placates customers who expect a side of spaghetti and meatballs to accompany Primo's lovingly seasoned risotto. The upscale urban audiences who patronize low-budget independent pictures like "Big Night" are bound to sympathize with the struggles of Primo and Secondo, whose approach to food preparation is well

ahead of its time; the action takes place in the fifties, when the popular image of Italian culture was pretty much exactly represented by a heaping plate of spaghetti and meatballs. The then current stereotype, of exuberant, excessive, mamma-mia Italianness, is embodied by the brothers' local competitor, Pascal (Ian Holm). His establishment is loud and overdecorated, and the food he serves up symbolizes to Primo "the rape of cuisine"; but Pascal's is packed every night, while the Paradise, just down the street, clings to its purity and generally ends up closing early.

It isn't difficult to see that "Big Night" is essentially a fable of art versus commerce. Stanley Tucci also wrote the screenplay (in collaboration with his cousin Joseph Tropiano), and has shaped the story into something that functions as both a demonstration and a vindication of the sort of subtle, finely detailed character acting that he and Tony Shalhoub have practiced in relative obscurity throughout their careers. Although both these wonderful actors have appeared in several movies—once together, in the underrated Bill Murray comedy "Quick Change" (1990)—their most substantial roles have come in series television: Tucci in "Wiseguy" and "Murder One" (in which he played the sinister smoothie Richard Cross), and Shalhoub in the sitcom "Wings" (he's the lonely, fatalistic Italian cabbie, Antonio). The chief pleasure of "Big Night" is watching these two expert miniaturists in starring roles: they seem to be challenging themselves—and each other—to create large characters without sacrificing the deft, precise craftsmanship that they would apply to more modest parts. They pull it off beautifully, and their graceful work together appears to inspire their fellow-performers. The cast of "Big Night" is obviously a happy, relaxed ensemble; this is actors' Paradise.

*Published in the print edition of the [September 23, 1996](#), issue.*

And, thankfully, "Big Night" manages to avoid the independent-movie trap of being too pure and noble for its own good. Early in the picture, Primo, after dismissing his brother's hesitantly offered suggestion of a minor change in the menu, advocates an idealistic approach to attracting customers—"If you give people time, they learn"—and Secondo, through clenched teeth, responds, "This is a restaurant, not a fucking school." "Big Night" sanely balances the brothers' contradictory (and equally valid) philosophies: it takes its time, allowing us to adjust our Hollywood-coarsened sensibilities

to its leisurely rhythm and understated humor, but it never forgets that it's a movie, not a school. Although the picture is dedicated to the principle of tiny, delicate, scrupulously crafted aesthetic pleasures, the filmmakers have the good sense to lay out plenty of them for us to sample. "Big Night" surrounds Primo and Secondo with a vivid gallery of characters. Ian Holm's Pascal is a brilliant comic portrait of a man whose vulgarity is both instinctive and cunningly calculated; this is the juiciest screen role Holm has had in years, and he sinks his teeth into it greedily. Isabella Rossellini, as Pascal's unfaithful mistress, Gabriella, is languid, sultry, and surprisingly funny (she should do comedy more often); Campbell Scott contributes a swift, hilarious turn as a fast-talking Cadillac salesman; and Minnie Driver and Alison Janney, as the brothers' sort-of girlfriends, serve quite nicely as their characters stand and wait. And the movie rewards its characters by bringing them all together for a gustatory blowout at the Paradise—a special dinner that represents the brothers' last chance to save the restaurant. The guest of honor is to be the popular singer-bandleader Louis Prima; his endorsement, the brothers hope, will give the business the boost it needs.

By the time the lavish dinner has begun, about halfway through, you may already suspect that the movie's title will prove to be ironic; it's apparent that, in this picture's world, "big" is hardly an indication of value. Even while you're rooting for Primo and Secondo to bring off their public-relations coup, you sense that this sort of self-consciously "important" event isn't really their style. (The deepest irony of the situation is that the stage persona of the man they're trying to impress, Louis Prima, trades on cliché images of Italians as swarthy, bouncy, bellowing exhibitionists. Prima—described by one character, charitably, as "boisterous"—is Italian in all the ways that Primo and Secondo, to their financial misfortune, are not.) The big night doesn't work out as the brothers planned, but it also doesn't go wrong in quite the manner that the viewer expects. Instead of ruining Primo and Secondo's evening with slapstick mishaps, "Big Night" stages a party in which everything that matters—that is, the food and the social atmosphere—is idyllically right, and only the larger intentions go unsatisfied.

The soup-to-nuts spread that Primo and Secondo lay out for their lucky guests looks marvellous, and, unlike the haute-cuisine banquet of "Babette's Feast," this food is clearly meant to be eaten rather than genuflected to. The party scene is a fitting climax to the movie's patient accumulation of savory

and blissfully pointless delights, a convincing illustration of how keen pleasure for pleasure's sake can be. And Tucci and Shalhoub use this extravagant set piece to put the finishing touches on their performances. Tucci, whirling through the restaurant's uncharacteristically crowded dining room, miraculously combines a born host's easy charm with a bad businessman's unnerving eagerness to please; his manner tells us all we need to know about Secondo's restless spirit. Although for most of "Big Night" Secondo appears to be more comfortable in America than Primo does, by the end of the movie we realize that the older brother is fundamentally the happier of the two. Shalhoub is one of the few actors who could make us understand the *innocence* of an obsessive artist like Primo and make us laugh at it, too. One of Shalhoub's best effects is a sort of slow blink before he delivers a line; his eyes remain closed just a beat or two longer than they should, as if he were hoping that the world outside would just go away, and when they open again, reluctantly, he looks terribly disappointed. It's an actor's trick (he uses it frequently on "Wings"), but in this picture it seems something more: a lovely comic expression of an artist's childlike willfulness and self-absorption. In the banquet scene, though, his eyes remain open, and, for once, he appears to like what he sees. As the diners dig into his glorious food, *their* eyes keep closing—partly, perhaps, in homage to the chef, but mostly in uncomplicated rapture. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of the show "Wiseguy."

## The Pictures

- [The Standup Who Doubles as a Digital Emily Post](#)

[September 6, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Standup Who Doubles as a Digital Emily Post

Jaboukie Young-White stars in “Dating & New York,” an old-school rom-com refreshed for the swipe-right era.

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

August 30, 2021

On a recent afternoon, the comedian Jaboukie Young-White walked into Syndicated, a bar and movie theatre in Bushwick. He had bleach-blond hair and the beginnings of a mustache, and he wore workout clothes. “I like to exercise, but ‘I want to look plump and juicy’ isn’t enough motivation,” he said. “I need more of a narrative.” He had reserved a spot in a Muay Thai class nearby, but the class had been cancelled because of a sudden rainstorm. The gym’s owner texted him a video, and Young-White held up his phone: floor mats covered in gushing water. “Life during climate change, I guess,” he said, sliding into a booth. Two movie projectors beamed images onto a wall—“Fitzcarraldo,” the [Werner Herzog](#) film, next to “Whenever, Wherever,” the Shakira video. “Every bar should have this,” Young-White said. “If you’re on a first date and things get super awkward, you can at least look up and comment on something together, instead of each disappearing into your phones.”



Jaboukie Young-White Illustration by João Fazenda

Young-White has thought a lot about cell phones, dating, and New York, in part because he stars in a movie called “Dating & New York,” out this month, a traditional rom-com refreshed for the swipe-right era. The writer and director, Jonah Feingold, was born in the nineties, as were most of the cast members, including Young-White, who is twenty-seven. “The Internet matured as we were maturing,” he said. “We did a lot of comparing notes, on set, about the little etiquettes and mores that you naturally learn when your whole life is mediated through a phone. The right way to punctuate a text, things like that.” Once, as a New Year’s resolution, Young-White turned on read receipts, which notify the people you’re texting with when you’ve seen their messages. “The idea was, this will make me more accountable, so I won’t keep forgetting to respond,” he said. Instead, he forgot that the setting was on: when he let a conversation lag, it seemed like a snub. He said, “It was actually Bo”—the comedian Bo Burnham, another connoisseur of the ways in which the Internet is warping human relationships—“who told me my read receipts were on. He went, ‘I assumed it was a power move.’ ”

In 2017, when Young-White appeared on the “Tonight Show” for the first time, he opened with a joke about being ethnically ambiguous. “When I’m in Chicago, people just think that I’m half Black, half white,” he said. “When I’m in New York, people think that I’m Puerto Rican. But when I’m in CVS everyone thinks I’m stealing.” Later in the set, he referred to himself

as queer, which was news to his parents. Milo, Young-White's character in "Dating & New York," is straight, an acting challenge that he referred to as a "reverse Chalamet." ("It was really good," he said of Timothée Chalamet's performance in "Call Me by Your Name," "but I have notes. I think he could have arched his back more.") He continued, "Playing straight characters, I get to subtly comment on masculinity." In one scene, Milo spots a stranger at a rooftop brunch and says, "I'm going to marry that woman." Young-White said, "When we were shooting that, I had to be, like, 'Please walk me through how this would work.' I would never do that, and, even if I did, a huge wall would immediately come up: Is that person even gay?"

Young-White first garnered attention as a [Twitter](#) comedian, and his style is suited to the medium. "antivaxxers on here defending themselves like 'if my child dies that's my opinion,'" he tweeted in 2019. (He recently retweeted that one.) For a while, he was a kind of impressionist, changing his avatar photo and display name to impersonate a celebrity or a brand. One year, on Martin Luther King Day, he changed his display name to "FBI" and wrote "Just because we killed MLK doesn't mean we can't miss him." Twitter briefly suspended him for this running gag, but, after his fans protested, his account was reinstated.

Young-White is now branching out as a writer, working with Issa Rae to develop an HBO show about queer gang members, but in his standup he often treats online etiquette the way Jerry Seinfeld treats breakfast snacks. (Speculating about how an Uber driver ends up with a 3.8 rating: "Like, are you murdering people?") On "The Daily Show," where Young-White serves as Senior Youth Correspondent, he has explained to Trevor Noah, a "vintage millennial," why Trump's tweets were too thirsty, and how to increase youth voter turnout. ("Can't you just Postmates the election to me?") These days, perhaps the most online-native aspect of Young-White's Twitter presence is that he deletes almost all his tweets seconds after he posts them. "It can seem really dark," he said of social media. "Like we're all prisoners doing our little puppet shows for each other, just for the dopamine." But he saw an upside to life under quarantine: "Everyone is finally admitting that they're as addicted to their phones as I am. I'm, like, 'Welcome to the party, guys.'" ♦

# The Theatre

- A Play About Love Written in Isolation

[September 6, 2021 Issue](#)

## A Play About Love Written in Isolation

Ngozi Anyanwu stars opposite Daniel J. Watts in her play “The Last of the Love Letters,” which follows a pair of lovers grappling with their relationship, at the Atlantic Theatre Company.

August 27, 2021



Photograph by Philip Montgomery for The New Yorker

The emotional aftermath of the quarantine era will give playwrights plenty to chew on. While in isolation, Ngozi Anyanwu wrote **“The Last of the Love Letters”** (in previews, opening on Sept. 13), a “meditation on loneliness” that follows a pair of lovers each grappling, in poem-like monologues, with whether to stay or to go. At the Atlantic Theatre Company, which previously staged Anyanwu’s “The Homecoming Queen,” the playwright performs opposite Daniel J. Watts (above), in a production directed by Patricia McGregor.

# **U.S. Journal**

- [Eating Crawfish in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana](#)

# Eating Crawfish in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana

From 1972: There are crawfish (or crayfish, or crawdads) all over the country, but outside of Louisiana they are all but ignored—lumps of clay lacking a sculptor.

By [Calvin Trillin](#)

May 12, 1972



The question in my mind when I arrived at the Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival was whether to enter the official crawfish-eating contest or content myself with acts of free-lance gluttony. The idea of entering the contest came from Peter Wolf, an old friend of mine who grew up in New Orleans and returned to Louisiana from New York for the festival this year, having concocted some sort of business conference in Houston to serve as an excuse for flying in that direction. Peter was brought up to appreciate what Louisiana has to offer. His father was the man who put the state government in perspective for me a dozen years ago, just after I had returned from watching the Legislature in Baton Rouge stage some particularly bizarre entertainments in anticipation of the imminent desegregation of the New Orleans schools. "What you have to remember about Baton Rouge," he said,

“is that it’s not southern United States, it’s northern Costa Rica.” Peter’s sister, Gail, who still lives in New Orleans, has been able to participate in a lot of serious crawfish eating in the Cajun area of southern Louisiana since she decided that it was the most convenient place to visit with friends who live in Houston—the spot of precise equidistance being, as far as I can interpret Gail’s calculation, an area bounded by the Vermilion restaurant, the L. & L. Seafood Market (suppliers of fresh crawfish), and a race track called Evangeline Downs. Despite being isolated in New Orleans, miles away from the Atchafalaya Basin—a swampy wilderness that is to crawfish what the Serengeti is to lions—Gail is so accustomed to crawfish eating that the word “crawfish” is understood rather than expressed in her discussion of restaurants. “They have a great *étouffée*,” she may say of a place, or “They don’t serve boiled there.”

Peter had simply assumed we would enter the eating contest. Not entering, he told me while we were safe in New York, would be like going to the festival at Pamplona and not running with the bulls. My hesitation was based on practical considerations. The contest is conducted with boiled crawfish, and if I had to pick my sport I would say *étouffée* or bisque rather than boiled. (Crawfish *étouffée* means smothered crawfish, and is otherwise indescribable; crawfish bisque is indescribable.) Also, I had learned in advance of the festival that, whatever a contestant’s capacity, the amount of crawfish he can eat is governed by the amount of crawfish he can peel. (Only the tail of a crawfish is eaten, although people who are not under the pressures of official competition sometimes take the time to mine some fat from the rest of the shell with their index fingers.) Through geographical circumstances over which I have no control, I have little opportunity to keep in practice at peeling crawfish. There are crawfish (or crayfish, or crawdads) all over the country, but outside of Louisiana they are all but ignored—lumps of clay lacking a sculptor. A New York crawfish craver who couldn’t make it to the Atchafalaya Basin would have to settle for Paris, where crawfish are called *écrevisses*, except by people from Louisiana, who always call them inferior. The world record at crawfish eating—the record, at least, according to Breaux Bridge, which is, by resolution of the Louisiana Legislature, the Crawfish Capital of the World—was set by a local man named Andrew Thevenet, who at one Crawfish Festival ate the tails of thirty-three pounds of crawfish in two hours. My doubts about being able to peel that much crawfish in two hours—not to speak of eating it—were

increased by some stories I heard about tricks contestants have used in the past. One man was said to have perfected a method of peeling a crawfish with one hand and popping it into his mouth—a process that was described as “inhaling crawfish”—while reaching for the next crawfish with his other hand. Somebody told me that one contestant had spent the evening before the contest “lining his stomach with red beans and rice”—although that sounds to me at least contradictory and maybe suicidal. A pharmacy student who triumphed at the Crawfish Festival two years ago (festivals are held only every other year) drank orange juice with his crawfish instead of the traditional beer, and Gail had heard that the orange juice was laced with exotic chemicals (known only to people like pharmacy students) that somehow provided the same service for crawfish in the stomach that an electric trash-compacter provides for trash. In fairness, I should add that a former contestant from Lafayette told me the pharmacy student had used no tricks at all and was “just a hungry boy.”

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A lot of people around Breaux Bridge were happy to discuss the question of whether or not Peter and I should enter the crawfish-eating contest. They like to talk about crawfish in general. Once the subject came up, they were likely to spend some time talking about an evening they once spent with some particularly tasty boiled crawfish, or a dish they once had that was somewhere between an *étouffée* and a stew, or a woman in town who used to make crawfish *beignets*. (I don’t mean we talked about nothing other than eating crawfish. I spent a lot of time, for instance, discussing a restaurant in Opelousas named Dee Dee that specializes in oyster gumbo, roast duck, and a marvel called dirty rice.) The Cajun parishes of Louisiana constitute just about the only section of the United States in which good food is taken as the norm in any kitchen; I once asked a serious New Orleans eater who was familiar with the area where I should eat while staying in Iberia Parish, and he said, “Anywhere.” (Taking his advice, my wife and I had lunch one day in the first tacky-looking bar we came to in a small town not far from New Iberia. There were two ketchup bottles on the table. One held ketchup; the other one contained the best *rémoulade* sauce I have ever tasted. I had the blue-plate special, which happened that day to be shrimp *sauce piquante*. My wife ordered boiled crawfish, and was brought a tray holding what we estimated to be about a hundred of them. We stayed the afternoon.) A few

days before the festival, I asked a local citizen named Woody Marshall—who can list among many accomplishments the invention of crawfish racing as we know it today—whether or not Peter and I could expect to face Andrew Thevenet, the world-record holder, if we entered the eating contest. Marshall said that Thevenet, a man of about seventy, had been so ill that serious eating was over for him. When I expressed my sympathy, Marshall told me about having recently heard Thevenet describe a lifetime of eating—the fresh oyster, the well-aged venison, the crawfish prepared in ways a crawfish fancier dreams about. “You know what he told me?” Marshall said. “He told me, ‘There have been kings who didn’t eat as well as I did.’ ”

What surprises the devout eater about the current effort to preserve the Cajun atmosphere of southwestern Louisiana is its concentration on the French language as the basis of Cajun culture. Even with the new emphasis on teaching French in primary school and exhorting Cajuns to speak it to their children at home, the language is likely to disappear from Louisiana eventually through lack of use. (The language preservationists have to contend not only with television and Anglo newcomers but with the stigma French has always represented for Cajuns—an echo of all the bad jokes about ignorant swamp-dwellers named Boudreux who speak with comical accents.) Most of the people in Breaux Bridge who grew up before the war grew up speaking French—including Woody Marshall, despite his Anglo name—but the young people rarely speak it now. When Marshall told me about Andrew Thevenet’s royal history of eating, it occurred to me that those in charge of what people in Louisiana sometimes call the French Renaissance might not be concentrating on the strongest element of the culture. Marshall and I were having lunch at the time—a splendid chicken *étoffée* and some French bread for me—at a tiny Breaux Bridge restaurant called Schwet’s. (It was meant to be called Chouette—a pet name that means “screech owl” in French—but Marshall, who serves as the town sign painter, was, like most Cajuns of his age, raised speaking French rather than spelling it.) It occurred to me that the posters of the kind the state commission for the French Renaissance furnished for the window of Schwet’s should not say “*Parlez français avec vos enfants à la maison*” or “*Aidez vos enfants à parler le français*” but “*Transmettez vos recettes à vos enfants*”—“Hand down your recipes to your children.”

I am a confirmed festival and fair attender. I routinely drive out of my way for the most pedestrian county fair. If I happened to be in the right part of the state at the appropriate time, I know I would attend, say, the North Louisiana Cotton Festival and Fair at Bastrop, or even the Louisiana Brimstone Fiesta at Sulphur—although, as far as I know, neither of the products celebrated in those places is edible. These days, of course, the festive atmosphere is always dampened a bit by the inevitable discussion about whether the festival I am enjoying is likely to be the last of its kind to be held. The impending demise is always blamed on young people from outside—young people who seem to travel from one event to another, behaving more or less the way a horde of dropped-out fraternity boys might be expected to behave at their first rock festival. The cultural forces that produced this band of celebrants have lately included a merchandising milestone—the development of what are sometimes called “soda-pop wines.” Although a lot of citizens in places like Breaux Bridge would have been hard put a few years ago to find anything good to say about a lot of mindless young people roaming the streets carrying beer cans, they now realize that beer is less inebriating than wine and that a gutter full of beer cans is not nearly as dangerous as a gutter full of broken glass. From what I was told by the organizers of the Crawfish Festival—who banned drinking from glass containers this year—I am justified in holding the idea man who developed soda-pop wines personally responsible for the fact that the Cochon de Lait Festival in Mansura, Louisiana, ended before I had a chance to sample the *cochon*. May the next belt-tightening in the wine industry (or the advertising industry, if that is where he’s harbored) find him in an expendable position.

In Louisiana, where some mildly legitimate cultural basis can actually be found for some of the festivals, there is a kind of pattern that transforms an informal local celebration into one of the stops along the route from Fort Lauderdale. The festival becomes primarily a business proposition, great efforts are made to attract the visitors who are later deplored, the local citizens lose interest or retreat to those events that are unaffected by outsiders (events usually having to do with naming queens, or at least princesses), there is a lot of talk about the outside kids “taking over,” and then the discussion turns to whether or not having a festival is worth the trouble after all. The transformation of the New Orleans Mardi Gras took more than a century, but Breaux Bridge seems to have telescoped the whole process into a dozen years. The Crawfish Festival grew out of the town’s

centennial, in 1959, and everyone agrees that the first few festivals were joyous occasions—townspeople costumed in old-fashioned Acadian dress, everyone dancing the *fais-dodo* in the streets, jollity at the crawfish races in the afternoon and at the local dance hall at night. The remarkable increase in fame and attendance seemed to be a blessing at first, except to motorists trying to get to Breaux Bridge from Lafayette, the nearest city with a motel. (Even becoming hopelessly stuck on the road could be seen as joyous: Thelma's, a restaurant between Lafayette and Breaux Bridge, is a sort of crawfish festival in itself.) Merchants in Breaux Bridge welcomed the opportunity to remove the glass from their storefronts and peddle as much beer or boiled crawfish as they could stock. In the last dozen years, the area has developed a sort of crawfish industry that is enhanced by the festival publicity—peeling plants to service the restaurants, rice farmers “growing” crawfish in ponds to supplement the supply known as “wild” crawfish, even a modern plant whose owners believe that they have a freezing method that will make it possible for people to go into restaurants in St. Louis or Dallas and eat crawfish meat that actually tastes like crawfish meat rather than like balsa wood.

But the popularity of the festival with outsiders—particularly young outsiders—made it less popular with a lot of Breaux Bridge citizens. A quiet town on the Bayou Teche, Breaux Bridge has only five thousand people, a remarkable number of them named Broussard or Guidry or Hebert. In the last couple of festivals, lack of civic interest has meant dispensing with the parade of boats down the Teche and, alas, with the cooking bee. Some Breaux Bridge citizens, greatly offended by the behavior of some visitors, have said that they would just as soon not have the festival at all—except, of course, for the ceremony and tableau necessary for the coronation of the Crawfish Queen, an event that is carried on even in off-years, when no tourists are around. The Crawfish Festival association has insisted that everyone will be happy with the festival if only it can be controlled and can eventually acquire the reputation of a “family event.” It is hardly appropriate, of course, for organizers of a festival to preach sobriety. Woody Marshall, who often uses the same flourishes in speech that are necessary in sign painting, explained it to me as a matter of moderation. “We would appeal to the beautiful youths to practice a degree of restraint so that they are not wantonly drunk, if you know what I mean,” he told me a couple of days before the festival. “If the youths persist in conducting themselves in such

manner as they have conducted themselves, they will destroy the very festivals they like. But, as we say here, '*Laissez le bon temps rouler*'—‘Let the good times roll.’ ”

This year’s festival was to be an experiment in control—an attempt to hold the main events of the festival in a sort of pasture a mile or so from the business district. The conditions of the experiment were not perfect, since a few of the bars had refused to move their operations to the pasture, but the officers of the festival association believed that the results in Breaux Bridge might show the future for Louisiana festivals. I told them I would be happy to attend the festival wherever they held it. I had not been offended by the criticism of outsiders. My wife would be at the festival, so, in a way, we were one of the families attending a family event. Also, in all of the discussion about excesses—about beer cans being thrown and immoral acts being committed in the churchyard and people walking half naked in the street—nobody had said a word about gluttony.

The day before the festival weekend began, a hard rain turned the pasture into a mudhole. The food booths and the festival events had to be moved back into the city. I tried to show some sympathy for the financial burden the sudden move had put on the festival association, but I have to admit to being pleased that the festival would take place where it had always taken place. Somehow, a festival that is known for inspiring dancing in the streets wouldn’t seem quite the same if it inspired dancing in a pasture. The rain seemed to have cut down the crowd, and the festival association—staggered by the move and by the spoilage of thousands of pounds of boiled crawfish it had intended to sell—seemed to forget about the issue of raucous behavior. By the time the festival started, the sun was out. Woody Marshall, looking spectacular in a bowler and a red vest and sleeve garters, stood next to the crawfish track he invented (which is shaped like a target, with the starting gate in the bull’s-eye—compensating, with brilliant simplicity, for the notorious reluctance of a crawfish to walk in the direction anyone expects it to walk) and formally entered the names of this year’s entries in the official logbook he made a few years ago by folding over several old “Allen Ellender for Senator” posters. At the baby contest, which drew a hundred entries, a king or queen and two alternates were named in each category, and the winners were awarded plaques that had silver-plated models of babies lying in the traditional bear-rug pose.

Naturally, the predictable merchandising efforts were visible—crawfish T-shirts, crawfish beer mugs, crawfish aprons—but Breaux Bridge could shine through almost any amount of commercialism as in fact the Crawfish Capital of the World. Breaux Bridge people are incapable of turning out the kind of cardboard junk food usually peddled to tourists even when they try. Woody Marshall, for instance, invented something called a crawfish dog—he is, as I have said, a man of many accomplishments—and although that may sound pretty awful, it happens to be delicious, except for the hot-dog bun. (The recipe in the official program says, “Make roux with shortening and flour, cook until light brown, sauté onions, add crawfish and fat and water and seasoning. Cook 20 minutes and serve on an open-face hot-dog bun.”) If someone could figure out how to make hot dogs taste like crawfish dogs, he could bring back baseball.) The same booth that served beer and ordinary hot dogs sold, for fifty cents, something called a crawfish pattie, which is also known as crawfish pie, and which if served in some expense-account French restaurant in New York would keep that restaurant jammed on rainy recession Tuesday evenings. (“Six dollars is, of course, a lot to ask for an appetizer,” the review would say, “but the exquisite *Écrevisses à la Teche* at the Cajun d’Or happen to be worth every penny of it.”)

A crawfish pattie is what I happened to be eating when the time for the crawfish-eating contest approached. I was also drinking a glass (nonbreakable plastic) of non-soda-pop wine and sitting under an oak tree and listening to some fine music played by Celbert Cormier and the Musical Kings (a violin, an accordion, two electric guitars, and a drum) and discussing the logistics involved in timing our departure the next day in a way that would put us at a restaurant called the Yellow Bowl in Jeanerette around mealtime. Peter Wolf, who was doing all of those things himself, was saying that we had waited too late to register and would be unable to participate, since only ten contestants are allowed. (Otherwise, everyone would be up there gobbling up the free crawfish.) I happened to know that only nine people had registered, but I also knew that they included such formidable eaters as the oyster-eating champion of Louisiana, who had downed fifteen and a half dozen oysters in an hour at the Oyster Festival in Galliano—a festival that was somehow kept secret from me for years. (The oyster champion, a specialist away from his specialty, turned out to be the first to drop out. “I’m still hungry,” he said, “but these things don’t taste right.”) I also knew that we had been invited to dinner that evening at the

home of Mrs. Harris Champagne, who, according to experts in Breaux Bridge, was the first person to serve crawfish *étouffée* in a restaurant, and I realized that sitting down to a plate of her legendary *étouffée* when already stuffed with boiled crawfish would be an act of irresponsibility. It had also occurred to me that if I did become full before approaching Mrs. Champagne's table, I would prefer to become full of crawfish patties. Boiled, after all, is not my sport. I told Peter it was a shame we hadn't registered in time. ♦

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