

Slate eBook Club Editions

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The Second-Best Sauce

The joys of "home" cooking.

By Herbert Stein

Posted Friday, October 3, 1997, at 12:30 AM PT

"There's no sauce in the world like hunger." You may think that your grandmother made that up, but actually it was Cervantes in *Don Quixote*, about 400 years ago. Neither I nor any of my friends are ever hungry except for a few hours on Yom Kippur, so I am unable to test Cervantes' proposition. I will concede it to him, however.

I want to talk about the second-best sauce, which is "belonging." Food tastes enormously better when it is eaten in a place where you are

accepted as a special person, special for something other than the color of your credit card.

I was struck by this proposition about a month ago when I spent some time with my son in Los Angeles. In the space of two days, we ate four meals-- lunch and dinner and then lunch and dinner again--in the same restaurant. My son thought the food was great; I thought it was only pretty good. He seemed disappointed that I did not share his appreciation of the food. A little later I realized what the problem was. The restaurant was a gathering place for people in "the business," meaning the Hollywood movie-and-TV business. My son was one of them. When he came into the restaurant, people slapped him on the back and said, "Great show, Ben!" And he slapped someone else on the back and said, "Great show, Tom!" (or whoever). This was his club, and that made the food taste great. But it was not my club.

I can see many other examples of this in my eating history. The most obvious is the White House Mess. To eat there one had to be either a fairly high-ranking official of the administration or the guest of such a person. That is, eating there gave one a strong sense of special privilege. (When I was there we hadn't yet learned that access to the privileges of the White House could be sold for cash.) And this sense of belonging made the food taste great. But the cooks there were not graduates of the Cordon Bleu. The *pièces de résistance* were the cheeseburger, the hot fudge sundae, and the Tex-Mex food on Thursdays. Objectively speaking, one could get better food at any of six restaurants within two blocks of the White House. But the judgment of the food in the White House Mess was not an objective judgment.

One doesn't have to eat in "high-class" surroundings to get this delicious feeling of belonging. For some time after we were married I used to tell my wife about the great meals prepared by Freddie the Cook. That referred to my college days. I had been the dishwasher at a fraternity house. The waiters were all members of the fraternity and ate the same meals in the

same dining room as the other members. But I was not a member, so I ate in the kitchen with the other kitchen help who were not students and who were all "colored," as we used to say. We in the kitchen felt that we were getting the best of everything, better and fresher food than was served to the members upstairs. What it all was, I no longer remember, with one exception: For dessert I often had a quart brick of vanilla ice cream bathed in the wonderful syrup extracted from the sugar maples around Williamstown, Mass. But Freddie was really a mediocre cook.

There was a time, probably now past, when medium-price restaurants would advertise themselves as serving "home cooking." They were trying to play upon the memory of home cooking as having been very good cooking. But the odds were against your mother having been a very good cook. It was mainly the feeling of having been part of the family that made the food there seem so good in retrospect.

Good restaurants exploit this feeling. They know that you will enjoy the food more if the headwaiter greets you as "Mr. Jones" without having to look in his book when you come in. That is, if your name is Jones. Otherwise, to be called "Jones" spoils the meal.

I have eaten in some three-star restaurants in my time--almost always on someone else's expense account. Only one of those meals was memorable. That was in a restaurant off the Champs Élysées where I ordered ris de veau in the belief that it was veal with rice. *Quelle horreur!*

Surely there are exceptions to my general rule. There must be people with palates so fine that even blindfolded they could tell the difference between food from La Tour d'Argent and food from McDonald's. And there probably is some food so good that even I, eating it in a strange place, would recognize its merit. But, in general, my rule holds. If you are not hungry, eat where you belong!

Gamma Burgers

Food irradiation is safe, even if it is overkill.

By Atul Gawande

Posted Friday, September 12, 1997, at 12:30 AM PT

I pretty much ignored the first reports this summer that people were getting food poisoning from *E. coli* O157:H7 bacteria in hamburgers. I might have raised an eyebrow when beef supplier Hudson Foods recalled 25 million pounds of hamburger. But when the recall caused Burger King to run out of burgers, I started to worry. Shouldn't somebody do something about this food poisoning thing?

The Big Media apparently agreed. Within days of the recall, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, and others were proposing a simple solution: Irradiation of food to kill not just *E. coli* but all the nasty germs and parasites that slip into our food supply.

This rapid blanket approval of irradiation by the establishment naturally stirred my suspicions. We are talking about radioactivity, after all. On closer inspection, however, food irradiation turns out to work safely and effectively, opponents' concerns notwithstanding. But questions remain about whether food poisoning is such a big problem in the first place.

Human skin and intestines crawl with ordinary *E. coli*. But a few uncommon strains of the bacteria--especially the notorious *E. coli* O157:H7--produce toxins. Ingest these toxic bacteria, and you experience watery diarrhea and severe abdominal pain at first, bloody stools next. You're miserable, but these symptoms don't usually require medical attention--at least, in developed countries. But in some cases, the toxins trigger the destruction of blood cells and cause renal failure. This "hemolytic uremic syndrome" can be deadly in children. The Centers for Disease Control estimate that toxic *E. coli* cause 25,000 cases of illness and up to 100 deaths each year in the United States.

Meat is the most common source of *E. coli* O157:H7, but raw milk,

vegetables, and fruit juice have carried it in recent outbreaks. (You may recall that toxic E. coli showed up in alfalfa sprouts two months ago, and in Odwalla apple juice last year.) The bug lives in the guts of about 1 percent of cattle and contaminates meat when digestive contents spill where they shouldn't during slaughter. It also contaminates produce if farm wastewater enters the irrigation supply. Toxic E. coli are just one of the top seven bacterial food contaminants. More common bacteria, such as salmonella (present in 60 percent of chicken) and campylobacter (the number one cause of food poisoning), cause diarrhea for 2 million to 4 million Americans each year. However, washing your produce and cooking your meat until well done will almost always remove these bacteria.

Burger King terminated its Hudson Foods supply contract not for safety concerns but for PR reasons. Like other fast-food chains, it cooks its burgers to over 155 degrees, killing all bacteria. But it feared that it might earn a reputation for bacteria burgers, which has plagued the Jack in the Box chain ever since 1992, when four people ate some of its undercooked, tainted beef and died. (Ironically, Hudson Foods, primarily chicken suppliers, didn't distribute beef until Burger King talked them into the business a few years ago.)

Advocates of food irradiation say that a rare burger doesn't have to be dangerous. Irradiators containing cobalt-60 or another radioactive source would bombard hamburger, apple juice, and other foods with gamma rays, killing resident bacteria and parasites. The radiation disrupts DNA, which germs need to survive. (Meat doesn't need functional DNA, since it's already dead.) Lower doses will pasteurize food--i.e., kill the disease-causing organisms. Higher doses of radiation will completely sterilize food.

Supporters of irradiation like writer Richard Rhodes argue that the process is perfectly safe, leaves no funny taste or appearance, and prevents illness from E. coli O157:H7, salmonella, beef tapeworms, fish parasites, and trichinae in pork. Since fungi are killed, radiation-pasteurized food lasts longer, too--up to two weeks in the fridge instead of a few days. For

gamma ray fans, food irradiation is the most logical step after heat pasteurization of milk.

The Food and Drug Administration has approved irradiation of produce, pork, poultry, and other foods, but industry has not adopted it widely. (For unclear reasons, the FDA has stalled on a 1994 application to allow the industry to irradiate beef and veal.) You'd think that the poultry industry, which has suffered terrible publicity over salmonella outbreaks, would rush to irradiation, but it fears that the negative public reaction to irradiation would be worse. Currently, astronauts, patients in many hospitals, and people in 27 other countries eat irradiated food.

Advocates blame slow adoption of irradiation on technophobic lobbying groups that ignore the evidence and stir public fears with outrageous claims that the process makes food radioactive. The critics I spoke to, however, offered credible arguments. Most admit that irradiation works, and some, like Michael Jacobson of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, will even concede it's safe for consumers. But they argue that it's expensive, harmful to workers and the environment, and unnecessary if safer farming methods are practiced. They suggest growing livestock under cleaner, less confined conditions to prevent contamination of feed and water; slaughtering the animals so bacteria-containing skin and feces never get on food; and using simpler technologies, like steaming, to clean raw meat. As environmental advocate Michael Colby told reporters, "Irradiation is a cop-out. Irradiation is saying we have to have fecal matter in our hamburgers."

For the record, gamma rays do not make food radioactive. And studies do seem to show it's safe. In a six-year study, scientists fed dogs and other animals irradiated chicken and found no evidence of increased cancer or other toxic effects. Other research found no signs of hazard in humans who eat irradiated food. Also, studies showed that, at the lower, pasteurization doses, radiation does not degrade nutrients. The World Health Organization, the American Medical Association, and the American

Dietetic Association all back the technology as safe.

What about the other arguments against irradiation? It doesn't seem expensive--they use it in Bangladesh, after all. A Florida company charges 4 cents a pound for irradiation, and advocates say wider use would halve costs. The risks to the environment and to workers seem theoretical. The same technology is already used safely in hospital radiation-therapy units and plants that sterilize medical products. Food irradiators do produce radioactive waste that must be stored under nuclear regulatory guidelines, but the current regulations governing hospitals and sterilization companies seem to work, and the amount of radwaste generated is far too small to cause Three Mile Island-like effects. Advocates like to point out that the waste hasn't killed anyone, but kids die every year from food poisoning.

Irradiation also seems more cost-effective than changing farming and slaughtering practices. It's pretty hard to keep feces out of meat. Some meat producers in Sweden do, but their meat is double or even triple the usual price. And even with clean practices and technologies like steaming of meat (which hasn't been tested nearly as much), some food would still be contaminated. Advocates say there'd still be reason to irradiate.

So irradiating food seems safe, effective, and cheap. Yet it also seems like a high-tech swatter for an overhyped fly. Toxic E. coli infect just three in 100,000 people. Thanks to officials who pushed for a recall, Hudson hamburgers didn't kill anyone. Irradiation backers exaggerate food poisoning's impact, claiming the top seven contaminants kill 9,000 people each year. According to the most recent data, though, fewer than 1,000 people die from tainted food each year. Compare that with, say, car accidents, which kill 40,000 people a year, or smoking, which kills over 400,000.

Food poisoning is a serious risk only for vulnerable populations, like the very young. For the rest of us, it's an uncommon annoyance caused mainly by inadequately cooked chicken or pork. I'm not against saving a

few hundred lives a year for a few pennies extra on my beef, so go ahead and zap my food. But irradiated or not, I'll still order my burgers rare.

Freedom Coke

The Arab world's foolish boycott of American food.

By Jon Fasman

Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2003, at 8:06 AM PT

When the first McDonald's opened in Moscow, in January 1990, 30,000 Russians braved the winter cold to stand in line for their Big Macs. Those were the good old days. While American brands like McDonald's used to benefit from their association with the land of the free, in the 21st century U.S. multinationals have more frequently been associated with sweatshops, rapaciousness, income inequality, and—in the Middle East—Israel. This has led to far-fetched rumors: Procter & Gamble, for instance, has taken an economic hit in Egypt because a grass-roots group called the Egyptian Committee for Boycott claims its detergent Ariel is named for the hated Israeli leader, and that its atomic logo is a cleverly disguised Star of David. (P&G plausibly denies both rumors: Ariel and its logo have been around longer than Sharon.)

The truth is that U.S. companies in the Middle East have been suffering across the board, even in the absence of damaging, pointed rumors. Coke's sales have dropped by 10 percent across the Middle East, falling even further in Bahrain, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. McDonald's sales declined by 7.5 percent in the Middle East/Asia Pacific this month, the sharpest drop in any of its regional markets (compared with a global decline of 4.7 percent). American fast-food business is down by 50 percent in Saudi Arabia since September 2000. Fast-food outlets in Lebanon, Oman, Bahrain, Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have been physically attacked; all these countries are officially neutral or friendly toward the United States.

As a result, a long-overdue phenomenon appears to have emerged in the region: local entrepreneurship, in the form of protest foods. West Bank-made Star Cola has seen its sales rise by 40 percent in the last three months in the United Arab Emirates (another supposed friend of America's). Also available in Palestine are Hero Chips, which come in a bag depicting a boy about to throw a stone at an Israeli tank. In Egypt, consumers can buy cheese-flavored Yasser Arafat chips; the bag—festooned with the red, green, black, and white colors of Palestine's flag—shows Arafat saluting while standing in what appears to be a field of exploding potato chips. Egypt's Al-Ahram brewery has become one of the world's most profitable; it openly sells halal beer (which is non-alcoholic) to practicing Muslims and discreetly delivers the real stuff to less observant consumers' homes. Shortly after its 1979 revolution, Iran started producing Zamzam Cola, named for a holy spring in Mecca, which it used to export only to Iraq and Afghanistan; this year the cola was distributed in Bahrain, Qatar, and to millions of pilgrims making the hajj in Saudi Arabia. The company plans to expand its sales to Europe, targeting the Muslim diaspora. After Israel's incursion into Jenin last year, a Tunisian-born French Muslim launched a drink called Mecca-Cola, with the slogan "Don't Drink Stupid—Drink Committed!" and a promise to donate 10 percent of its profits to Palestinian children's charities and 10 percent to European Muslim charities. He expects to sell 300 million bottles this year and says his product "is not just a drink. It is an act of protest against Bush and Rumsfeld and their policies." Another French-based drink called Muslim Up promotes itself as "an alternative for all who boycott Zionist products and big American brands." Qibla-Cola—named for the direction in which Muslims pray—launched this year in England, and also promises to give 10 percent of its profits to Muslim charities.

Such protest-boycotting should ring familiar: As Bob Ney could attest, the Middle East is hardly the only region to politicize its food; renaming french fries "freedom fries" is merely a petulant and childish nose-thumbing at a prickly ally. But France's agricultural and culinary economy is so large,

diverse, and firmly established that even if Americans stayed away in droves from Beaujolais and brie, it would likely do little harm.

In the Middle East, however, a successful boycott could be harmful—to the boycotters, not the targeted companies. Western fast-food restaurants are locally owned franchises; their employees, naturally, are also local. Qibla and Mecca colas are not even Arab owned; they are European companies who showily donate a portion of their profits to charity and use canny ethnic appeals to entice buyers whom they, unlike Coke and Pepsi, do not employ. In Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt, Coke pays its employees 15 percent more than local franchises do. In Palestine, Coke, which is the region's second-largest investor, and their Palestinian bottling company offer steady work, loans, and business training. In Egypt, Procter & Gamble—the company that supposedly named its products after Ariel Sharon—has spent \$97 million on factories and community projects; it has built schools and paid for pilgrims to go to Mecca.

Right now, Qibla, Mecca, and Muslim Up offer a Potemkin alternative; the percentage that the companies donate to charity is ultimately of less value to the region than the hundreds of jobs Western companies provide. Could the companies ride the crest of anger, expand into the Middle East, and become as prominent a part of the local economy as Coke and Pepsi are now? Possibly, but that's a long way off. Right now, if Arab consumers believe that venting anger is more important than sustaining their economy, then Qibla and Mecca are the appropriate colas for them to buy. But perhaps a better immediate investment—for the region, if not for the arteries—would be an order of freedom fries in a red and yellow carton.

The Omnivore

Learning to eat everything.

By Jeffrey Steingarten

Posted Wednesday, August 28, 1996, at 12:30 AM PT

"My first impulse was to fall upon the cook," wrote Edmondo de Amicis, a 19th-century traveler. "In an instant I understood perfectly how a race who ate such food must necessarily believe in another God and hold essentially different views of human life from our own. ... There was a suggestion of soap, wax, pomatum, of unguents, dyes, cosmetics; of everything, in short, most unsuited to enter a human mouth."

Though de Amicis was describing his feelings about Moroccan cuisine, this is precisely how I felt about desserts in Indian restaurants until 1989, the year that I, formerly a lawyer, was appointed food critic of *Vogue* magazine. As I contemplated the heavy responsibilities of my new post, I realized how inadequate I was to the honor, for I, like everybody I knew, suffered from a set of strong and arbitrary likes and dislikes regarding food. I feared that I was no better than an art critic who becomes nauseated by the color yellow, or suffers from red-green color blindness. At the time, I was friendly with a respected and powerful editor of cookbooks who so detested the flavor of cilantro that she brought a pair of tweezers to Mexican and Indian restaurants and pinched out every last scrap of this herb before she would take a bite. Imagine the dozens of potential Julia Childs and M.F.K. Fishers whose books she pettishly rejected, whose careers she snuffed in their infancy! I vowed not to follow in her footsteps.

It went even deeper than that. Humans were designed to be omnivores. Blessed with all-purpose dentition and digestive systems, we are ready for anything. Unlike those of most other animals, our genes do not tell us what foods we should find tasty or repulsive. We enter the world with a yen for sweets and an aversion to bitterness. (Newborns, it has recently been discovered, can even distinguish among glucose, fructose, lactose, and sucrose--but little else.) After four months, we develop an innate fondness for salt. And that's about it.

The nifty thing about being omnivores is that we can take nourishment from an endless variety of sources and easily adapt to a changing food

world--crop failures, droughts, herd migrations, restaurant closings, and the like. Cows will starve in a steakhouse and wolves in a salad bar, but not we.

The tricky part about being omnivorous is that we are always in danger of poisoning ourselves. That is why the most potent cause of food aversions is an attack of nausea after eating. Just one illness will do the trick--even if the food we ate did not actually cause the problem, and even if we know it didn't. Hives or rashes may make us rationally avoid a given food in the future, but only a stomachache will result in a lasting, irrational, lifelong sense of disgust. Otherwise, psychologists know very little about the host of powerful likes and dislikes--let's lump them all under the term "food phobias"--that children carry into adulthood.

By shutting ourselves off from the bounties of nature, we become failed omnivores. We let the omnivore team down. And that is only the beginning.

I have always thought that people who keep a long list of certifiably delicious foods that they avoid are at least as troubled as people who avoid sex, except that the latter will probably seek psychiatric help, while food phobics rationalize their problem in the name of genetic inheritance, allergy, vegetarianism, matters of taste, nutrition, food safety, obesity, or a sensitive nature. (True food allergies can be extremely dangerous, but no more than 1 percent or 2 percent of adults suffer from them.) The examples of neurotic food avoidance could take several volumes to fill, but milk is a good one.

Suddenly, everybody has become lactose-intolerant. But the truth is that very, very few of us are so seriously afflicted that we cannot drink even a glass of milk a day without trouble. I know several people who have given up cheese to avoid lactose. But fermented cheeses contain no lactose! Lactose is the sugar found in milk; 98 percent of it is drained off with the whey (cheese is made from the curds), and the other 2 percent is quickly

consumed by lactic-acid bacteria in the act of fermentation.

I cannot figure out why, but the atmosphere in America today rewards this sort of self-deception. Fear and suspicion of food have nearly become the norm. Civil dinners have become impossible, and with them, the sense of festivity and exchange. We are as pitiable as the poor bushmen of the Kalahari who perish in large numbers during the droughts that afflict them every two or three years because they consider only about a quarter of the 223 animal species that inhabit their world to be edible.

People should be ashamed of the irrational food phobias that keep them from sharing food with each other. Instead, they have become proud and arrogant and aggressively misinformed. But not me. When I donned the heavy mantle of food critic, I sketched out a six-step program to rid myself of all puissant and crippling likes and dislikes.

Step One was to list my food phobias, which ranged from mild to psychotic. They included dill, kimchi (the national pickle of Korea), swordfish, miso, mocha, chutney, raw sea urchins, cinnamon, California chardonnay, falafel (those hard, dry, fried little balls of chickpea flour unaccountably enjoyed in Middle Eastern countries), chickpeas generally, cranberries, kidneys, okra, millet, coffee ice cream, refried beans, and most forms of yogurt.

I was also convinced that Greek cuisine was an oxymoron. Nations are like people. Some are good at cooking, while others have a talent for music or baseball or manufacturing VCRs. The Greeks are really good at both pre-Socratic philosophy and white sculpture. They have not been good cooks since the fifth century B.C., when Siracusa in Sicily was the gastronomic capital of the world. Typical of the Greeks' modern cuisine are feta cheese and retsina wine. Any country that pickles its national cheese in brine and adulterates its national wine with pine pitch should order dinner at the local Chinese place and save its energies for other things. The British go to Greece for the food, which says volumes to me. You would probably think

twice before buying a Russian or Algerian television set. I had thought for 10 years before buying my last Greek meal.

This had to stop.

Step Two was to immerse myself for several weeks in the scientific literature on human food selection. Did you know that babies who are breast-fed will later have less trouble with novel foods than those who are given formula? The reason is found in the variety of flavors that make their way into breast milk from the mother's diet and prepare the infant for the culinary surprises that will follow weaning.

Food phobias can be extinguished in five or six ways, of which I considered only brain surgery, medication, and mere exposure. Bilateral lesions made in the basolateral region of the amygdala seem to do the trick in rats and, I think, monkeys--eliminating old aversions, preventing the formation of new ones, and increasing the animals' acceptance of novel foods. But the literature does not report whether this brain operation also diminishes the ability of these phobia-free animals to, say, watch the entire Republican Convention on C-SPAN, or get an external CD-ROM changer to work under Windows 95, key skills I might even value over becoming phobia-free. I am kidding, of course--nobody can do these things.

Administration of the drug chlordiazepoxide also seems to work. According to an old *PDR*, this is nothing but Librium, the once-popular tranquilizer also bottled as "Reposans" and "Sereen." But the label warns you about nausea, depression, and heavy machinery. I just said no.

Bribery does not work. Children who are offered more playtime for eating spinach may temporarily comply. Those who are offered Milky Way bars in return for eating spinach quickly learn to value Milky Way bars.

Step Three was to choose my weapon. Exposure was the only answer. Researchers have found that eating moderate amounts of a novel or hated food at moderate intervals is nearly guaranteed to work. The reason is that

omnivores are born with neophobia, a fear of new foods that accompanies our biological need to explore for them--an ambivalence that protects us from unbridled banqueting. Most parents give up trying out novel foods on their weanlings after two or three attempts, and then complain to the pediatrician; this may be the most frequent cause of finicky eaters, of omnivores *manqués*. Most babies will accept nearly anything after eight or 10 tries.

Step Four: I immediately made eight or 10 reservations at Korean restaurants, purchased eight or 10 anchovies, searched the Zagat guide for eight or 10 restaurants with the names "Parthenon" or "Olympia" (which I believe are required by statute for Greek restaurants), and brought a pot of water to the boil for cooking eight or 10 chickpeas.

I dedicated the next six months to this effort, and by the time I had finished, nearly every food aversion (along with every positive preference that had kept me from exploring freely) was gone. Now I yearn for miso and am a noted connoisseur of anchovies. Try to find those packed in salt rather than in oil.

Step Five, the final exam and graduation ceremony. I was in Paris, France--a city that my professional duties frequently compel me to visit. I was trying a nice new restaurant, and when the waiter brought the menu, I found myself in a state unlike any I had ever attained--call it Zen-like if you wish. Everything on the menu, every appetizer, hot and cold, every salad, every fish, every bird, and every meat was terrifically alluring, but none more than any other. I had absolutely no way of choosing. Though blissful at the prospect of eating, I was completely unable to order dinner. I was reminded of the medieval church parable of the ass equidistant between two bales of hay, who, because animals lack free will, starves to death. A man, supposedly, would not.

The Catholic church was dead wrong. I would have starved--if my companion had not saved the day by ordering for both of us. I believe I

had a composed salad with slivers of foie gras, a perfect sole meunière, and sweetbreads. Everything was delicious.

Step Six: learning humility. Just because you have become a perfect omnivore does not mean that you must flaunt it. Intoxicated with my accomplishment, I began to misbehave, especially at dinner parties. When seated next to an especially finicky eater, I would amuse myself by going straight for the jugular. Sometimes I began slyly by staring at the food left on her plate and then inquiring about her allergies; sometimes I launched a direct assault by asking how long she had had a fear of bread. And then I would sit back and sagely listen to a neurotic jumble of excuses and explanations: the advice from her personal trainer, her intolerance to wheat gluten, a pathetic faith in Dean Ornish, the exquisite--even painful--sensitivity of her taste buds, hints of childhood abuse.

While it is perfectly all right--even charitable--to practice this kind of tough love on those of one's dinner-party neighbors who are less omnivorous than oneself, the perfect omnivore must always keep in mind that it is an absolute necessity to get invited back.

Diary of a Chowhound

By Jim Leff

Posted Thursday, March 30, 2000, at 6:00 PM PT

Some people dream of traveling to Hawaii, Rio, or the Côte d'Azur. For me, a destination that has long enticed is West Haverstraw, N.Y., an anonymous little village a few miles south of Bear Mountain. I've never been there, but a reliable source once told me that it's a haven for Central Americans, and there would surely be lots of places serving my favorite Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan dishes, and perhaps (I quake at the thought!) even Nicaraguan, Panamanian, Costa Rican, and Belizian—cuisines I've been looking for for years.

So, I crossed Bear Mountain Bridge and pointed the chowmobile down Route 9W, paralleling the Hudson River, in high spirits. I was savoring last night's chorizo quesadillas, enjoying the spring day, and glad to be back in the saddle again, doing what I love: driving somewhere new and intriguing for an afternoon of contented chowhounding.

I passed a fast-food joint called Annie's, a kind of old-fashioned roadside drive-in New Yorkers only find upstate, and on impulse I cut the wheel and skidded into their parking lot. What had caught my attention was a handwritten note tacked to a takeout window reading "Onion Rings!" It was essential to conserve appetite, but I knew I had to try those onion rings.

The counter girl fried up a fresh batch, and they were extraordinary. Nothing fancy or revisionist (not that there's anything necessarily wrong with fancy or revisionist), but simply a perfect execution of the classic recipe; these were truly the ur-onion rings. Oil was fresh, onions were sweet and just firm enough, and batter was ultra-crisp yet melted instantly in the mouth.

Though I normally show professional restraint and discipline while working—sampling mere bitefuls and letting The Mouths Along for the Ride clean the plates—I finished the entire order. I didn't feel guilty at all; life is short and great chow is fleeting.

Not as fleeting as West Haverstraw, however. The place didn't seem to actually exist. As far as I could determine, it consists of a stretch of nondescript residential land that weaves its unshapely self around Haverstraw. As I drove along side roads, signs constantly announced my leaving and then re-entering West Haverstraw. There was no town center other than a half-mile of 9W filled with generic sprawl—certainly no Salvadorian pupusarias or anything. So I ventured into the village of non-West Haverstraw.

I'll cut to the chase. In Haverstraw, I spotted a few Latino restaurants, but

only Mexicans and Dominicans, and those are cuisines easily found back in the city. I did quick take-outs in two of them (see sidebar via link below), and enjoyed impressive cooking ... but no Central American wonderland.

I probably should have felt frustrated and disappointed, but in fact I smiled all the way back to Chappaqua. I might yet one day find West Haverstraw, and in the meantime those superb onion rings were an accomplishment sufficient to satisfy me both personally and professionally.

Which got me to brooding about my job; whether it's a self-indulgent waste of time and energy to drive around and write about onion rings.

Here's the thing: People will go to Annie's, they'll try the onion rings, and something may spark in their eyes as they begin to realize that things can be better; *life* can be better. They'll see that if only they try a little harder, drive a little farther, any occasion can be a special occasion, and life can be a rich and satisfying adventure. That there's no reason to settle for the charmless junk that's constantly marketed at us in *all* realms, not just food. That it's incredibly liberating and rewarding to jump off the treadmill.

I also recalled how much it meant to Maria (the miraculous chef-owner of Bo) that at least a small group understood and appreciated what she was doing. If I can tip discerning eaters to the Marias of the world—many of whom toil outside the media/marketing spotlight—they'll eat and live better, and deserving chefs will have more of a shot at cultivating the following they need (unlike a painter or musician, a chef, working in an inherently participatory art form, is nothing without an audience).

It's the passion of chowhounds (the 10 percent who live to eat, but who—unlike "foodies"—refuse to eat where they're told) to seek and revere such unappreciated treasure, and I happen to be a professional chowhound ... and host of a cyberhaven in which we hounds can compare notes. This strikes me as legitimate work.

We needn't settle for the bland, the uniform, and the highly processed. It's

a matter of training one's attention on the treasure in the cracks and choosing to patronize those heroic few who take pride and care in what they do rather than the vast majority who coldly seek maximal profit from minimal effort. Most of us, sadly, live our lives oblivious to all this.

An onion ring can change the world.

Should You Eat Fish?

Only when it's cooked like fish, not like steak.

By Sara Dickerman

Posted Wednesday, March 12, 2003, at 10:21 AM PT

I'm in the fifth year of my beluga boycott. Since the breakup of the U.S.S.R., it seems, Caspian sturgeon has been harvested to the brink of extinction. So, I avoid imported caviar. (Actually, I avoid it unless I'm at a wedding where there's one of those icy caviar setups. Then I'll eat the beluga, just out of respect for the sturgeon.)

But what's a diner supposed to do about less precious seafood? The growing worldwide taste for seafood has run smack-dab into shrinking populations of wild fish, ham-fisted fishing techniques, international poaching, and environmental degradation. The main alternative to fishing the open ocean, fish farming, is fraught with complications: Vegetarian fish farming in tanks is seen as a great option for the environment, but farming salmon in the ocean creates enormous waste, and the mangy, lice-ridden farmed fish can escape and threaten wild salmon populations.

Eating and cooking fish have become political acts, but even the most bleeding-heart chefs and diners have a hard time sorting out which fish to serve and eat. Over the past five years, chefs have been asked by various environmental organizations to pledge not to serve problematic fish like swordfish, Chilean sea bass (actually Patagonian toothfish), and farmed salmon, as well as Caspian caviar. (It's even more confusing than the days

of the on-again, off-again grape boycotts organized by César Chávez.)

Of course, listening to the average chef talk about fisheries management isn't pretty—not unlike hearing Sheryl Crow denounce the war on Iraq. In her swordfishing memoir, Linda Greenlaw minced no words about chefs who signed on to the swordfish boycott. "In my opinion, little Chef Fancy Pants should work at perfecting his crême brulee and leave fisheries management to those who know more about swordfish than how to prepare it."

Greenlaw has a point: Chefs are trained to be epicures, not ethicists. But the food revolution of the past 30 years has made independent chefs into citizen consumers as much as kitchen technicians. It's in their interest, personal and commercial, to know where and how food has reached their kitchens. If it's a good story, they'll put it on the menu: grass-fed beef, free-range eggs, foraged greens. It helps sell food. The same holds true for seafood that's been harvested "artisanally": "diver's scallops" and "hook-and-line-caught cod," for example. But as with organic food, chefs are often selectively noble: They will stick to the environmentally correct option up to a certain price point.

Listing the provenance of seafood offerings has a certain tiresome virtue, but chefs can be even more effective in the kitchen than in their menu prose. One reason why we are depleting some stocks so rapidly is that we don't treat fish like fish. For this, blame both chefs and cagey consumers. Americans have long been wary about seafood. Fifty years ago, it was breaded and then frozen to help suspicious eaters forget about its origins.

Today, on the other hand, seafood is too often cooked and served like meat and chicken. Sole and trout, with their modest filets, used to be the standard restaurant fish, but these days, if a piscine can't yield a vast 6-ounce to 8-ounce serving, forget about it. Seared rare ahi is the steak-lover's fish—you could eat it with A-1 if you wanted. Chilean sea bass is the real chicken of the sea, with mild flesh that can be loaded up with any

number of undignified fruity sauces. I've even seen swordfish served with a bony handle, like a veal chop. And don't get me started on the teriyaki-slicked salmon that's invading chain restaurant menus.

Fish treated this way has lost touch with its fundamental fishness: It becomes a sort of briny tofu, a lower-fat stand-in for the missing meat. Even salmon farmers admit that their product is popular because it tastes less salmony than wild fish. It's the slow-growing sea giants—usually the most threatened fish—that are most vulnerable to the demand for massive chunks of mild, meaty fish.

Here is where chefs can make a difference; they can make customers try nearly anything. Ten years ago, no one would have imagined that beef cheeks and lamb tongues would be foxy items on the menus of chic urban bistros. Bony cuts like short ribs and oxtail used to be a bargain, and now their per-serving cost competes with roasts. I'm plugging for a similar revival in delicate, small-filleted fish, bony fish, and oily fish. From an aesthetic viewpoint, expanding a tiresome seafood repertoire is a chance to help Americans get over their seafood squeamishness—a job most cooks I know would relish. What's more, many of these fish live a rock 'n' roll life: They grow up fast, mate early, and die young, and thus they tend to be harder to deplete.

Right now I cook at a Basque-Spanish restaurant, and my chef, with great Iberian pride, imports fish I had never before handled: floppy eels, blushing red mullet, tiny cuttlefish that look exactly like space invaders, blue wings with iridescent butterfly fins. I don't know what the environmental organizations would say about these jet-setting fish, many of which don't land on their lists, but most customers dig the offbeat selection. They're willing to eat fish throats, fish livers, and whole fish whose beady little eyes stare up from the plate. Those who can't be convinced to eat the unusual seafood turn to other parts of the menu. Which I'm sure is fine with the fish.

Sweetness and Bite

History's ambivalence toward sugar, and other culinary tales.

By Jack Hitt

Posted Tuesday, July 23, 1996, at 12:30 AM PT

Early in June 1906, a certain Detective Young in Scotland testified before a Joint Parliamentary Committee examining issues of public morality. He had seen "boys and girls kissing and smoking and cuddling away at each other" in an ice-cream parlor, he said. He had encountered 12-year-old girls lured into prostitution by sugar. Then the following exchange occurred:

Q: Do you ask us to believe that the downfall of these women was due to ice-cream shops?

A: I believe it is.

That delirious transcript is part of the story of the triumph of refined sugar over old-fashioned honey that takes up almost half of Sidney Mintz's new book, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions Into Eating, Culture, and the Past*. Mintz, an anthropologist at Johns Hopkins University and author of *Sweetness and Power* (a more detailed look at sugar and its meaning), also explores other topics, ranging from the broader relationship between political power and food to more idiosyncratic excursions such as the chapter entitled "Color, Taste, and Purity: Some Speculations on the Meanings of Marzipan."

But it's the saga of refined sugar that forms the core of this book, a tale Mintz punctuates with telling historical surprises. In the sweetener competition, for example, sugar received an early and unexpected boost from Henry VIII. In 1537, when the king abolished the monasteries, the decline in demand for candle wax slowed the honey output and opened a window for sugar. Detective Young was able to indulge in his cheap

moralizing four centuries later because back then, everything about sugar was suspect--its novelty and potency, its exotic origin in Moorish Spain, its pure pharmacopoeal whiteness. Honey, on the other hand, was one of our first foods (dating to the Paleolithic Era). It was comparatively mild in taste, always locally produced, natural and gooey--trustworthy, even good for the youth.

In time, sugar became "the first imported luxury to become a cheap daily necessity of the masses," and, along with tea and tobacco, it "probably provide[s] us with the first instance in history of the mass consumption of imported food staples." As 18th-century British aristocrats wallowed in sugar, the working class yearned for it, creating a demand that would underlie the expansion of enormous sugar plantations in the Caribbean, and hence the slave trade. For politicians, sugar became "an eminently taxable commodity," and "acquired many champions in the press, in the medical journals, in the Foreign Office, and in Parliament." It introduced the West to a new source of political power--mass producers, before whom elected officials would need to bow and scrape.

We've never stopped linking sugar with notions of good and evil. Mintz quotes some astonishing speeches by Abolitionists who easily equated cane sugar with murder, one of them even providing the precise calculus: "[I]n every pound of sugar used (the product of the slaves imported from Africa), we may be considered as consuming two ounces of blood." Sugar's aura of evil endures to this day--that's what those pink and blue packages on every restaurant table signify. At the same time, vestiges of its virtue--dating from a time when a gift of confectionery was both rare and prized--survive in every box of Valentine's Day candy. No one who reads these chapters will scoop up another spoonful of sugar without reflecting on the history of ambivalence, global turmoil, and centuries of suffering needed to put it on the table.

None of Mintz's other chapters is quite as satisfying as the three devoted to sugar. Still, this is a book whose bibliography includes monographs

entitled *Private Tooth Decay as Public Economic Virtue* and tomes such as *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*--so the rest of it is still loaded with nuggets worth finding. The dominance of Coke, for example, in the cola wars may date to the influence of Gen. George Marshall (a Southerner), who was able to get Coca-Cola (Atlanta-based) exempted from the wartime rationing of sugar. As a result, 64 bottling plants were built in both theaters of battle, and 148 bottling technicians served there. Three bottlers gave their lives for their country.

Toward the end of the book, Mintz tells a story about offhandedly mentioning in a lecture that America has no "cuisine." The students' reaction was swift and contentious, as if their feelings had been hurt. Mintz seems puzzled, musing that it wasn't as though he'd said America had no literature. But it does hit a nerve, so Mintz spends his last chapter pondering the question of whether America has a cuisine after all.

He answers with an academic distinction. "Regional cuisines," Mintz says, are "authentic" because they use "local ingredients" and involve "a community of people who eat it, cook it, have opinions about it, and engage in dialogue involving those opinions." On the other hand, "national cuisines" are largely artificial constructs: You won't find a "French" restaurant in France for obvious reasons. The blue-plate specials typically offered as "American cuisine"--hamburgers, pizza, fried chicken, baked beans, hot dogs--aren't worth considering, Mintz says, despite such "irrepressible enthusiasts" as Edna Lewis and Betty Fussell. (His nouns in this chapter do begin to grate.) He then concludes: "I don't think anyone wants to call that array a cuisine." (That's right, "array.")

Mintz dismisses our regional cuisines--New England, Southern, Cajun, Pennsylvania Dutch--because they have been ruined by the environmental impact of overfishing local stocks, and by ferocious marketing that dilutes their "authenticity" and ends in "bowdlerization." But this is food, which means that it's not easy for all "irrepressible enthusiasts" to sit still and listen. Mintz means to start an argument, to lay out a polemic, but what's

nettlesome is not his answer but the question. If cuisines emerge organically over time from rooted people, then why pose the question about a people who have come to epitomize rootlessness?

Instead, he might have consulted the works of J.B. Jackson, the architecture critic who observed that most American architecture isn't meant to last. Americans throw up office parks and strip malls one year, tear them down the next, and build something else. So to judge America's fleeting architecture by Europe's canonical standards is preposterous. Ditto with food. Americans make no time for dialogue, much less cuisine. They're scouting out new food fads, scarfing them down, and then rooting about for the next one. Had a blackened redfish lately? Probably not. Paul Prudhomme was so 1989. Enjoy this year's mesclun salads. The end is nigh.

Even Mintz senses the bathos of ending his book on such a weak note. So he tacks on different ending by turning, in his own words, to "an unbelievably grim scenario." He cites one of those suspiciously Malthusian studies forecasting a biblical future of scarce water, arid fields, and a desperately hungry America. Then he ... well, surprisingly, he *moralizes.* Mintz suggests that "consumption gluttony" will prompt another Operation Desert Storm, but this time for meat. "Its effects on American moral integrity," he intones, "would be utterly disastrous." Worse, "we might let our obsessive notions of individual freedom destroy our democracy." Oh, for the restraint of Detective Young.

Broasted Chicken: A Chatterbox Investigation

By Timothy Noah

Posted Wednesday, July 21, 1999, at 10:59 AM PT

Chatterbox, while travelling earlier this month through Iowa, wrote an item ("[Did a White Iowan Invent Rap Music?](#)") that mentioned, in passing, tasting a Midwestern delicacy called "Broasted" chicken, which Chatterbox

found something less than delicious. Chatterbox called it "a kind of deep-fried chicken." To be honest, though, Chatterbox wasn't entirely clear *what* Broasted chicken is. Now he knows a bit more.

Broasted chicken is the invention of the Broaster Company, headquartered in Beloit, Wisc., which since 1954 has manufactured the special kind of pressure fryer used to make Broasted chicken. (The Broaster Co. owns the trademark to the words "Broaster" and "Broasted," and no restaurateur can call his product Broasted chicken without purchasing the Broaster Co. pressure fryer and receiving training in its use from a Broaster Co. distributor. He must also use the Broaster Co.'s specially designated marinade, Chickite, and breading, Slo-Bro. The company refers to this arrangement as "a franchise without the franchise fee.") Chatterbox asked Renee Rudolph, a marketing assistant at the Broaster Co., how *Broasted* chicken differs from *fried* chicken. "When you pressure-fry chicken the way we teach them to make it," she said, "as soon as the meat hits the oil it kind of like sears it and keeps the juices inside." It's the juices that cook the meat, she explained--not the oil. So Broasted chicken is "not as oily as fried chicken."

Broasted chicken is found mainly in the Midwestern states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa, but it's also found as far afield as California. About 5,000 restaurants nationwide are licensed Broaster operators. "The VA canteens are a big customer," Rudolph said. One reader informed Chatterbox that there's even a deli, now closed, across Amsterdam Ave. from Barney Greengrass on Manhattan's Upper West Side, that boasts on its still-posted sign that it served Broasted chicken. (Apparently there was greater consumer demand for Barney Greengrass' chopped liver and sable, much-praised by Ron Rosenbaum in the New York Observer.)

Since Broasted chicken is supposed to taste the same no matter where you eat it, Chatterbox figured the unexceptionable sample he had in Iowa was probably representative. But two questions haunted him. The first was: *Did Chatterbox get real Broasted chicken?* According to Rudolph, the

Broaster Co. does what it can to crack down on restaurants that pass off as Broasted mere fried chicken, and to make sure any chicken used in its pressure cooker is properly smothered in Chickite and Slo-Bro. But she conceded that Broaster piracy happens "more often than we want it to." Chatterbox's second question was: *Had the rigors of travel and campaign reporting made Chatterbox so tired that he was unable to appreciate Broasted chicken?* To ameliorate both concerns, Chatterbox decided to seek out expert opinion.

Chatterbox went first to Calvin Trillin, the justly celebrated author of three volumes on offbeat regional foods (*American Fried*, *Alice*, *Let's Eat*, and *Third Helpings*), which a few years back were packaged in one volume as *The Tummy Trilogy*. "I am not an expert on Broasted chicken," Trillin told Chatterbox, though he did recall it was "done by some machine." When Chatterbox explained that Broasted chicken is supposed to taste the same everywhere, Trillin interjected, "Anything that tastes the same wherever you find it is not good. Things are not supposed to taste the same." Trillin advised Chatterbox to sample what he called the *real* specialty of Iowa, a pork tenderloin sandwich.

"Not a pig snout sandwich. A pork tenderloin sandwich." If I couldn't get that, he said, try corn.

Next, Chatterbox queried Jane and Michael Stern, authors of *Eat Your Way Across the U.S.A.*, about whether Broasted chicken was "a synthetic form of folk culture." By e-mail, Michael Stern answered:

"I would have to say that most folk culture--especially food folk culture--is at least slightly synthetic. Corporate character has been a significant part of real folk food for at least this century, from Jell-O to Aunt Jemima and Betty Crocker ... It's really only elitist food writers who can afford to think of vernacular culinary culture as some earthy farm wife somewhere milking her cow and tending free-range chickens. By comparison to the HUGE corporate presence of, for instance, the Taco Bell Chihuahua,

Broasted chicken seems almost quaint.”

But, Stern confessed,

“I'm only speaking image-wise here, as I am a sort of a purist about fried chicken, really only going for skillet-fried. Even though I grew up in the Midwest and have certainly seen my share of Broasted chicken in our travels, I don't believe I've ever eaten any.”

Chatterbox next checked in with Alison Cook, food writer for *House and Garden* and Houston Sidewalk. She e-mailed that she'd never eaten Broasted chicken:

“Mormon scones, yes; Great Lakes whitefish livers, yes; Panhandle carrot coins marinated in condensed tomato soup, even. But no Broasted chicken. Frankly, I never really believed there was such a dish. The name has such a wonderfully silly, fence-sitting, made-up quality to it. Sort of like "brunch.”

Chatterbox also consulted Jeffrey Steingarten, food critic for *Vogue* and author of *The Man Who Ate Everything*, the legitimacy of whose title must now be called into question because he has never eaten Broasted chicken. "I've heard of it," he said, "but I've never known what it was.”

Trillin had suggested that Chatterbox contact Michael Gartner, the former president of NBC News, who actually lives in Iowa (where he edits the *Ames Tribune* and owns the Iowa Cubs). Gartner confirmed that he *had* eaten Broasted chicken.

What did he think of it?

"You know how," Gartner said, "if you order fish somewhere and you say 'I've never had this kind of fish before,' and you're kind of a picky eater, and they say, 'You'll like it, it tastes just like chicken'? And you think, 'If I wanted chicken, I'd just order chicken?' Broasted chicken tastes just like

chicken."

Finding this response somewhat evasive, Chatterbox phoned David Shribman, a former colleague of Chatterbox's in the Washington bureau of the Wall Street Journal who is now Washington bureau chief for the Boston Globe. Shribman had written a memorable piece for the Journal's editorial page several years back praising the regional cooking of Iowa. It hadn't mentioned Broasted chicken. Had Shribman eaten any?

Yes.

What did he think?

"The phrase I would use would be 'utterly forgettable,' " he said. "I've completely forgotten what it tastes like."

Finally, Chatterbox consulted Jason Vest, Washington correspondent for the Village Voice and a onetime colleague of Chatterbox's at U.S. News and World Report, who has spent a lot of time in the Midwest. Vest said that not only had he eaten Broasted chicken; for a brief period three years ago he had eaten it every week! Not in the Midwest, but in Arlington, Va., just outside Washington! "I usually went to Whitey's in Arlington on Tuesdays," he explained, "to listen to Bill Kirchen (lead guitarist for Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen) and get beers and Broasted chicken. I always wondered why they called it Broasted chicken because it seemed like fried chicken to me."

And? And?

"I've had better fried chicken ... It's not that I dislike it. But if you are a true connoisseur of fried chicken, Broasted chicken is just not top of the list."

There's More Than One Way To Peel a Shrimp

By Michael Kinsley

Posted Friday, April 27, 2001, at 12:00 AM PT

Speaking of China (as we are these days), did you read that macabre story in the April 15 *New York Times Book Review*? It appeared in a review of *Comfort Me With Apples*, a volume of memoirs by Ruth Reichl, former restaurant critic of the *Times*. The reviewer, a philosophy professor named Paul Mattick, said he thinks of Reichl as "an imaginary friend, like the ones children sometimes have." He praised Reichl's observation that, "It's everything around food that makes it interesting. The sociology. The politics. The history." He then recounted Reichl's adventure on a trip to China.

[S]he makes surreptitious contact with the friend of a man she knows in New York. ... He has sent a message through Reichl suggesting that his old friend come to America. The friend, a banquet chef who was "re-educated" during the Cultural Revolution by being made to dig a lake by hand, declines when Reichl tells him: "I don't think that Americans are ready to appreciate your cooking. I'm not sure we would understand that shrimp peeled in ice water taste better."

Horrible, no? Like the character in Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* who is trapped forever reading Dickens to a mad hermit in the South American jungle, this man—who had a friend in America ready to help him escape—is condemned to spend the rest of his life in China, his arms plunged up to the elbows in ice water, staring at the lake they made him dig by hand. All because his friend entrusted the crucial message to someone who apparently thinks the important question is whether Americans are ready for his crustaceans.

What a story. The sociology! The politics! The history! Somebody option it quick. Glenn Close, of course, as the demented American foodie. We call it *Imaginary Friends*. ("With imaginary friends like this, who needs imaginary enemies?") But that's not how our reviewer sees it. To him, this story illustrates Reichl's "sensitivity to social context." It's Julie Andrews

leading a swarm of adorable Chinese children in *The Icy Shrimp Song*. ("I see shrimp, icy shrimp, something something ...," oh heck, forget it.) Actually, it's hard to imagine a more spectacular example of no sensitivity at all to food's social context than the notion that someone should prefer life in China over America on the basis of how we peel shrimp.

This couldn't be right, I thought. The philosophy professor must be misrepresenting the episode for his own mysterious purposes, possibly involving a gang war among different philosophies of shrimp peeling. Of course, what counts most is that the *Times Book Review* presented this tale as both true and charming, with the participation or acquiescence of a reviewer and several editors. This says something about the "social context" of the *Times Book Review* whether the story is true or not.

But the reviewer did not misrepresent the book. Reichl's version just adds lurid details. This trip occurred long ago, in 1980, when the oppressive nature of the Chinese government was perhaps worse than it is now. (Though, to be fair to Reichl, the general quality of American Chinese food was worse as well.) And her victim, Mr. Chen, despite his mastery of shrimp peeling, was not a celebrated chef in Beijing. No, he turned down America to peel away his days in a grim nowheresville landscape where, as Reichl portrays it, dissidents slip you a half-decent bowl of bean curd the way they pass along manifestos about freedom in places of more conventional oppression. And getting Mr. Chen to America was not just the whim of a distant friend. Mr. Chen had spent years learning English in preparation, before the shrimp scales fell from his eyes about the depraved nature of American society as it relates to the preparation of seafood.

"Thank you," he said ... "You have helped me. Please tell my old friend Chan that I will be staying. Tell him that life is better here."

"Is it?" I asked. But I remembered that cool, dark kitchen with its view of the lake. And then I thought of Mr. Chan's face behind the mountain of

laundry in the hot streets of New York.

Easy choice. But I still couldn't believe it. So I e-mailed Ruth Reichl: Was she sure it all happened this way? Does she have any second thoughts? She answered: "Did I remember it correctly? Probably not. It was 20 years ago and ... I find I often kept notes about the wrong things. I found being in China so disorienting that by the time I got back to New York I found it hard to believe that any of these things had really happened." So the whole thing could have been a dream. Or, to make the drama even more Shakespearean, it could have been a tragic misunderstanding. She says, "It certainly would have been presumptuous of me to offer him advice," but he heard her comments as advice—and he took it.

And boy, could she have advised him of a thing or two if she'd wanted. "I did not say that this is a deeply racist country. I did not tell him that our history with Asian immigration has been shameful. I merely told him how that was reflected in our attitudes about food." Even 21 years later, she notes, "There is not, to my knowledge, a single truly great Chinese restaurant in America."

Not a one. That really says it all, doesn't it? I presume there are great American restaurants all over China. Maybe Mr. Chen will get, or got, a meal at one before he peels, or peeled, his last shrimp.

Wok the Dog

What's wrong with eating man's best friend?

By William Saletan

Posted Wednesday, January 16, 2002, at 3:56 PM PT

Nine months ago, Frame Game grossed out its readers by tackling a mounting controversy in newspapers and state legislatures: the ethics of having sex with dogs. In that column, Frame Game asked "why, if it's wrong to rape animals, it's OK to kill them." Carnivores who ignored this

question will now have to confront it. The biggest team sporting event on earth, soccer's World Cup, is coming to South Korea, where hot dogs and doggy bags are all too literal. Those of us who don't take our poodles with noodles will have to think about why, or whether, it's wrong to eat man's best friend.

In case you've been distracted by the war or the recession, here's where the dog fight stands. Dogs are eaten in parts of East and Southeast Asia. The South Korean dog meat industry reportedly involves about 1 million dogs, 6,000 restaurants, and 10 percent of the population. French actress-turned-activist Brigitte Bardot, backed by thousands of rabid European and American letter writers, has enlisted FIFA, the world soccer federation, to pressure South Korea to shut down the industry. South Korean lawmakers, angered by this pressure, are pushing to legalize the industry next month. The industry, armed with supportive research by a scholar known as "Dr. Dogmeat," plans to set up dog-meat stands near World Cup stadiums and advertise recipes on English-language Web sites.

On Jan. 14, animal rights activists muzzled the industry's PR campaign kickoff. On Jan. 19, Korean hackers plan to attack the Web sites of French and American media companies that have disparaged canine Seoul food. The controversy has even invaded New York, where lawmakers are considering whether to ban dog meat (which is legal in 44 states) amid reports that it's being sold there. Editorials have expressed disgust at the practice, and Korean-Americans are assuring the public that they, too, find it barbaric. Everybody wants to show that he's civilized by condemning the eating of dogs. There's only one problem: Nobody can explain why it's wrong. In fact, on closer examination, the arguments against dog-eating turn out to be creepier than dog-eating itself.

Let's start with the clearest complaint: the needlessly cruel methods—beating, strangling, boiling—by which many dogs are killed in Korea. To Frame Game, this is a no-brainer. These methods have to be stopped. At a minimum, they should be replaced with electrocution, which

is far more humane. That's why South Korean lawmakers are proposing to legalize, license, and regulate the industry. But guess who's trying to stop them? The same attack-dog activists who complain about the cruelty of the old methods.

South Korea's Livestock Processing Act doesn't officially apply to dogs. The obvious solution is to classify dogs as livestock. But in 1999, legislators who tried to do that were thwarted by critics who warned that legalization would hurt the country's image. Now anti-dog-meat activists in Korea, Britain, Australia, and elsewhere are trying to block legalization again, arguing that "there is no recognized humane method of killing" dogs. As a spokesman for the Korea Animal Protection Society put it, "South Korean officials misunderstand the situation. They think it would be okay as long as dogs are not killed in a cruel manner." Given a choice between ending the cruelty and waging their all-out war till the last dog is hung, the activists choose the latter. FIFA, too, opposes legalization—at least until after the World Cup—and calls for a total end to dog-meat consumption.

To justify keeping the industry underground, unsafe, and inhumane, activists ought to have a pretty good reason why dog-eating—as opposed to the eating of other animals, which they tolerate—is too horrible to legalize. But what is that reason? Since dogs aren't smarter or more gentle than pigs, for example, anti-dog-meat activists argue that dogs are special because they're "pets" and "companion" animals. FIFA President Sepp Blatter calls them the "best friend of humankind." Dogs are "friends, not animals," Bardot told a Korean radio interviewer. "Cows are grown to be eaten, dogs are not. I accept that many people eat beef, but a cultured country does not allow its people to eat dogs."

Strip out Bardot's silly arrogance and her Korean colleagues' sentimentality, and their philosophy boils down to this: The value of an animal depends on how you treat it. If you befriend it, it's a friend. If you raise it for food, it's food. This relativism is more dangerous than the

absolutism of vegetarians or even of thoughtful carnivores. You can abstain from meat because you believe that the mental capacity of animals is too close to that of humans. You can eat meat because you believe that it isn't. Either way, you're using a fixed standard. But if you refuse to eat only the meat of "companion" animals—chewing bacon, for example, while telling Koreans that they can't stew Dalmatians—you're saying that the morality of killing depends on habit or even whim.

The joke is on you because in Korea, until recently, dogs haven't been pets. Therefore, by the "companion" standard, it's OK to eat them. In fact, the "companion" standard is exactly what South Korean newspapers and government officials are using to justify an emerging system of dog Nazism. In the city, Koreans raise "pet dogs." In the country, they raise "meat dogs," also known as "junk dogs" and "lower-grade" dogs. But you don't become a "lower-grade" dog by flunking an IQ test. You're just born in the wrong place. Then you're slaughtered and fed to a man who thinks he's humane because he pampers a Golden Retriever that has half your brains. And Bardot, who says that cows can be butchered because they're "grown to be eaten," can't fault this arrangement.

If dog-eating isn't intrinsically wrong, why should South Koreans give it up? Because, Bardot told her radio interviewer, "Eating dog meat seriously hurts the image of your country." FIFA President Blatter likewise told South Korea that the practice was bad for its "international image." He urged the country "to show the world that it is sensitive to vociferous worldwide public opinion." But absent an underlying moral argument, appeals to "image" and "sensitivity" are as likely to disguise snobbery or evil as to promote good.

There's more than a whiff of cultural supremacy, if not racism, in French attacks on Korean dog-eating. When Bardot's radio interviewer told her that some Western visitors eat dog meat in Korea, she replied: "French people, German people, and Americans never eat dogs. If they did, it is most likely that South Koreans served them dog meat, saying it was either

pork or beef." The French soccer team supports Bardot's campaign. A French state TV channel recently ridiculed Korean dog-eating in a piece full of distortions. Never mind that some Frenchmen eat horse meat or snails or that, according to a Seoul waitress, more than one staffer from the French Embassy has sated his canine tooth at her restaurant. Norwegians didn't stop eating reindeer during the 1994 Lillehammer Olympics. American restaurants didn't stop serving bull testicles during the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. No one forced Spain to outlaw cat stew during the 1982 World Cup, and no one is hounding Japan, the co-host of this year's World Cup, to shut down its sushi bars.

Fourteen years ago, when Seoul hosted the Summer Olympics, the dog-meat critics had their day. The South Korean government threw them a bone, banning dog meat under a law prohibiting "foods deemed unsightly." That's the law FIFA now wants South Korea to invoke to sweep away dog-meat restaurants during the World Cup. But unsightliness, by definition, is in the eye of the beholder, and beholders are motivated by prejudice as often as by justice. The last time organizers of a global sporting event removed an "unsightly" presence from their city, that presence was the homeless people of Atlanta. If FIFA and other carnivorous arbiters of civilization want to tell Koreans what to eat, they'll have to come up with a better reason than that.

The Joy of Truffles

A most erotic mushroom.

By Jason Epstein

Posted Thursday, December 18, 1997, at 12:30 AM PT

According to one historian of erotica, the word "erotic" in the sexual rather than the amorous sense was first used by Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in 1825 in his gastronomic classic, *The Physiology of Taste*. The truffle, he said, is an "*erotique*" fungus. It arouses what he called "genetic" pleasures. He meant that truffles stimulate the performance of one's reproductive duty.

To illustrate his point he tells the story of a young woman who, while her husband is away, shares a truffled fowl with her husband's best friend, "a handsome young man of some wit." After dinner the wife is so overcome with the desire to reproduce that her virtue barely survives. Feeling awful the next day, she blames her near disgrace on the truffle. Brillat-Savarin, eager to defend his thesis, believes her, or pretends to.

My own experience does not support this aphrodisiac theory. As a rule, it's the truffle I want, not the people I'm sharing it with. Brillat-Savarin was a moralist who lived in a mechanistic age. For him, every action presupposed a reaction and appropriate moral consequences. A woman eats a truffle, *ergo* she wants a child and nearly becomes an adulteress. In the world of Brillat-Savarin, living organisms stripped of their incidental forms were reproductive machines stoked by alimentary systems, governed by the senses and an inner moral compass. The purpose of a truffle was to make babies. The purpose of a baby was to make another baby.

Today we are wiser. We know that life is only undifferentiated aggression, the random pursuit of gratification clothed in transparent rationalizations. We depend on armed guards and lawyers to keep us from obliterating one another, not moral philosophers or ethical impulses. Today no sane person would claim that a truffle, or for that matter a Krispy Kreme doughnut, is anything but a treat for those with the power to seize one.

The closest I have come to being eroticized by a truffle was at the start of Christmas week in Italy a dozen or so years ago, when I was driving from Milan to Venice with a friend. We decided to stop for lunch in Verona and parked near the Piazza del Herbe, Verona's main square, where there was a sumptuous green market that featured at that time of year irresistible baskets of late-season white truffles from the Piedmont (the season runs roughly from November through Christmas). This display lured us to the Twelve Apostles, Verona's famous restaurant, where each of us ordered the seasonal specialty, a simple tart made of a mild cheese custard with a

dash of nutmeg and dense with shaved and crumbled truffles set in a fragile pastry, in effect an unsweetened truffle cheesecake. Had our itinerary not demanded that I subdue the ancillary passions aroused by this exquisite dish, I might today be more open to Brillat-Savarin's thesis, for the tart provided an experience so poignant that even now, years later, its memory overwhelms me with polymorphous desire.

The white truffles of the Piedmont, which currently sell for as much as \$1,300 a pound, wholesale, are far superior to the black truffles from the Perigord, over which Brillat-Savarin's errant couple nearly lost their virtue. Black truffles lack profundity and at best are only mildly pungent. They should be stewed in melted pork fat or *foie gras*, sliced thin, and placed with a little salt beneath the skin of a young fowl, which is then poached or gently roasted, preferably in clay or en croûte. Another method is to wrap them in unsmoked, parboiled bacon; wrap both bacon and truffle in foil; and roast them in wood embers. Timing is crucial. They should be left on the fire long enough for the bacon fat to melt and the truffle to be heated through. If they are left too long in the embers they become embers themselves. Otherwise, they are removed from the ashes and served whole with a simple red Burgundy. Whatever flavor the black truffle may have had to begin with will be intensified by this method. Black truffles may also be served in salads or with scrambled eggs. Their texture, if nothing else, makes them a good foil for sea scallops. Elizabeth David, the great English cookery writer, suggests that they be left overnight in a basket of fresh eggs, which are then lightly boiled the next morning. Before Vanel closed his delightful restaurant of the same name in Toulouse, he served them in an omelet combined with *foie gras* and cèpes. Tinned black truffles are flavorless and should be avoided.

On the other hand, white truffles at their best impart the full essence of the rotting soil surrounding the oaks from which they are dug, as good oysters and caviar impart the amniotic flavor of the sea. To be in the presence of an excellent specimen is to know the joy that moles and earthworms must feel as they take their meals. The intensity of white truffles is inconsistent

and fleeting. Hold one to your nose. Only if the pungency is unmistakable and the texture is firm should you buy it. Do the same in restaurants and observe an additional precaution: Because the availability of truffles is unpredictable they are seldom listed on the printed menu. If the waiter offers them as a special, ask the price. Then you will not be shocked when the bill comes.

The virtue of the truffle is the flavor it imparts to other dishes: Think of it as perfume, best appreciated when applied to something else. To serve a truffle at home, it is essential to have a truffle cutter with a scalloped and serrated blade, an inexpensive purchase compared to the truffle itself. Truffles will keep their freshness for a week or so, wrapped in newspaper or paper towels and stored in a covered container filled with rice. They must not be peeled but should be dusted with a soft brush before they are shaved as thin as possible over such bland but well-textured conveyances as baked potato mashed in sweet butter and returned to its shell, or risotto with a little grated parmesan, or noodles in parmesan and cream. If you happen to find a truly explosive specimen, serve it over a salad of mâche, or field greens, dressed with a little lemon juice and sea salt.

Whatever you do, never attempt to cook a white truffle. They are always eaten raw. Since truffles are seldom of uniform intensity a useful enhancement is a bottle of truffle oil, at \$50 or so for 8 ounces. This should be added generously to whatever starch you choose. A risotto or a fine baked potato laced with sweet butter, plenty of truffle oil, and a little sea salt under a blanket of shaved truffle is a shameful extravagance and probably an insult to the vascular system, but as ancient hedonist Aristippus, who was not troubled by Brillat-Savarin's sense of duty, might have said, "What the hell. The Dow is up. Go for it."