

TASTE & MEMORY

to Jim Harrison

It is Proust, first among the moderns, who reminds us that scent evokes memory. The olfactory sense is the most potent, penetrating the cerebellum like a spike. “All art is contemporaneous.” All smell is simultaneous. Our noses not only stick out, they poke down. We’re all pigs rooting for truffles.

You and I met across the stove at Richard Brautigan’s hacienda in Pine Creek over thirty years ago. I was stirring a pot of split pea soup. You stuck a spoon in and said it reminded you of your mother’s. This compliment, coming from a child of the Upper Midwest, was not lost on me who hails from Chicago.

In your introduction to *The Raw and the Cooked*, you quote your friend Barry Hannah: “When you are eating well, you are eating memory.” The scent of *madeleines* catapulted the middle-aged Marcel into his monumental *Récherché*. We are, all of us, searching for a paradise lost, the purity of first memories, first flavors, the Edenic garden of childhood when and where each taste generated an archetype. The structure of the self is certainly as much an architecture of taste as it is a construction informed by the dynamics, as they say, of the family.

My son’s primal infatuations centered around French bread and avocados. At age two he absconded with a two-ounce tin of Beluga caviar amidst the clamor of a party at an antique shop in Morecombe Bay, polishing it off in less than a minute, his poofy lips smeared with fish eggs. Was this not a primal gesture, the gaping maw of a toddler insisting, like the carnivorous plant in *Little Shop of Horrors*, to “Feed me!”? Won’t he remember this—the flavor if not the act—on some primordial, preconscious level, every taste of caviar forever casting him back to this infantile outburst of voracious self-interest?

All tastes but the first are forms of re-cognition. Flavor is memory. When we say that something tastes like something else, or when we say, “Gee, this tastes good,” we have, subliminally, a point of comparison. Perhaps this accounts for the typical conversation over food, the way any given meal recalls a previous meal or builds anticipation of our next. There is something so deeply civilized in this that it constitutes a literal geography and ethos in and of itself: *gastro-nomy* (γαστρονομία), “the law of the tummy.”

Do we set out to find this or does it find us? “The search for the genuine” is more serendipitous than strategic. We stumble upon our finest meals. “*Quel surprise!*” we exclaim. “*Eureka!*” as Archimedes is said to have uttered on splashing around in his bathtub. Go try and find the finest *bouillabaise* in Marseille. I dare you not to be disappointed. But you know the real thing when you taste it. This is the result of true discipline and practice, a talent honed by a lifetime’s devotion to refining your palate, the endless failures and few successes separating the wheat from the chaff.

At Lulu Peyraud’s table I was served octopus stewed in Bandol, a revelation in simplicity. Her raw sardines marinated in olive oil and lemon juice rivaled in understated minimalism a sculpture by Giacometti. In this vein I used to endlessly instruct my chefs at Campagne to remove ingredients from an overly complicated dish, to pare the plate down to its essential elements: to cook not what you can but what you must. This is an asceticism of the highest order.

Our conversation always returns to our two abiding passions: truth and beauty in language and truth and beauty in food and wine. It was Curnonsky, Prince of Gatsronomes, who proclaimed that, “In cooking, as in all the arts, simplicity is the sign of perfection.”

Not to draw spurious parallels, but Strunk & White’s Rule #17 reads: “Omit needless words.” Writing, like cooking, should be founded in the necessary. What can you not do without? Strunk’s elaboration of his rule might be rewritten for the cook as follows:

“Vigorous cooking is concise. A dish should contain no unnecessary ingredients, a meal no unnecessary dishes, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the cook make all his dishes one-dimensional, or that he avoid any complication of ingredients and cook his food only one way, but that every ingredient tell.”

Omit needless ingredients. The beauty of essential form. Apply that rule to every element on a plate, in a menu, in a restaurant, and you make a thing of beauty. But it’s equally important that every element relate to every other element both in form and content. This is a question of proportion and rhythm, of aesthetic integrity.

I know we would share in our depiction of the “genuine” that food be a consummately honest statement. How do we detect the bogus, the *ersatz*, the inflated in a dish? It would be glib, if

somewhat true, to claim that “the nose knows.” We might as easily include the eye, the tongue, as arbiters of gastronomic truth. How many times have you been presented a plate that in sheer architectonic hyperbole looks ridiculous? You laugh. It is preposterous. Visual artifice for the sake of effect: the thing made to look like something else, or the whole stacked in such ludicrous profusion—all geometry and polka dots—that you dare not touch it with your fork lest it collapse like the wild constructions of Lincoln logs we demolished as kids. In fact, you want to smash it with your fist. Or taste a dish that in its sauce to nuts to berries to mushrooms approach proffers such a hodge-podge of aimless flavors that it tastes “like shit,” as we so eloquently say?

But there is a higher measure, something intangible, a quality of passion or passionate attention. Call it “heart.” A dish achieving such a sublime level of simplicity, directness and authenticity is real “soul food” and nourishes not only our bodies but our spirits. Is this not why we experience elation when we eat this way? It can be as simple as a Papaya King hot dog, or in my *Geography of Pure Flavors* one from “Tony’s Pump Room” near Wrigley Field; a perfectly sautéed filet of brook trout spattered with lemon juice; or L’Assiette’s *Boudin Parmentier*.

I smile just thinking about these things. They restore me to sanity, return me to the world, confer a snippet of ecstasy to my hum-drum existence.