Ten of the Best

WHILE I was away for three weeks without e-mail access I made a maddening discovery: the capacity of my *which.net* mailbox is exactly 315 messages. Thus the various lines of discussion in the Guild of Food Writers newsgroup had been snipped virtually in mid-sentence. What turned out to be “Ten of the best restaurants in the world?”

The manner of posing the question contained an intriguing ambiguity: not “the ten best” but “ten of the best”. The former implies exclusivity, the latter an open-ended selection. (In other contexts, it suggests ten old pound notes, or ten measured blows from a cane.) Such lists should be ongoing; they are interesting so long as they continue to be added to but boring when the gates slam shut and no further applicants are admitted.

Exclusive lists are usually drawn up by people with established criteria. The Bible is a perfect example: a collection of writings that contains everything necessary for salvation, to which further additions are not only superfluous but prohibited. Dr. Charles W. Eliot’s five-foot shelf of Harvard Classics and Mortimer Adler’s Hundred Great Books follow the same pattern: the standards have been set by our ancestors and it is our task to follow them as closely as possible.

An important aspect of such standards is that they should be very difficult to achieve. Indeed, this is their essence. Literature, music and painting thus become competitive sports in which the object is to establish not only one’s excellence, but one’s precisely measurable superiority.

IN traditional Western gastronomy, excellence and excess are often indistinguishable. Until *cuisine minceur*, it was difficult to tell a feast from an orgy; haute cuisine was a calorific cornucopia and those who emptied it bore the evidence forever about their person. Today, thanks to Michel Guerard and his successors, it is possible to consume a *menu degustation* without retiring to the vomitorium.

As with the arts, the global village has made us more receptive than at any time in history to the enormous variety of the world’s foodstuffs. The other side of the “food miles” phenomenon is our openness to the infinite nuances of cuisine. This shows even in the traditional French markets; I wouldn’t want to go back to the days when *Epoisse* could only be purchased in Burgundy, or *Pont l’Eveque* in Normandy.

All these factors make it impossible to draw up a definitive list of “great” restaurants. By one set of classic standards—one which makes specific demands as to method, technique, ingredients and décor—Taillevent in Paris might head a list consisting only of itself. But novelty is now at such a premium that every new restaurant has its fifteen minutes of celebrity; and so our putative list would have to be continuously shuffled and discarded like a deck of cards.

One thing is certain: new schools are established only after the inventive work has long been completed. In the 19th century, Paris bistro fare would no more have been designated classic than the paintings (subsequently labelled “impressionist”) with which their impoverished creators often settled their accounts. When Alice Waters was setting up shop with her friends in Berkeley, no one called her “great”; such accolades were reserved for the restaurants Doris Muscatine had featured in her 1963 *Cook’s Tour of San Francisco*: La Petite Auberge, Jack’s, Ernie’s, The Blue Fox. (Doris would subsequently become one of Chez Panisse’s most devoted fans.)

Of course, the Bay Area has always accepted greatness with a certain nonchalance. Those of us who were trained in English lit at Berkeley in the 50s knew that the important poets of the age were the New Critics: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren. Only a handful of

eccentric profs such as Tom Parkinson and Jack Spicer were focussing their attention on the San Francisco poets, including Kenneth Rexroth, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Today the latter have streets named after them in North Beach and Ginsberg's papers were bought by Stanford University before his death for a million bucks. And where are the New Critics? One of the most successful playwrights of the 1930's perspicaciously wrote his own epitaph: *Here lies Marc Connelly. Who?*

So we're down to Marlena Spieler's ultimate reduction: whatever turns you on. (Her promised response—tearing off her clothes and rolling about on the floor between bites—would tempt me to take her out to dinner every night, forever.) Elegant surroundings and attentive service are very pleasant, but they're foreplay; what really matters is what happens when the first bite goes into your mouth. Once in a while bells ring and lights flash and you know that all those dreary dinners have not been in vain.

A COUPLE of weeks ago Marc Millon's *Wine Routes of Spain* led Mary and me to stop overnight in Getaria, the Basque fishing port on the north coast. Having checked into an incredibly cheap but comfortable hostel recommended by Mondial, we decided to eat across the street in Elkano, the most expensive restaurant in town. It was enormous and quietly luxurious, in a prevailing shade of dusty pink. A Mozart symphony was playing discreetly in the background. After a lengthy consultation we decided on a single course, the most expensive item on the menu: *besugo parrilla* (grilled red sea bream), available only for two. We sat and sipped our unpronounceable *Txakoli Txomin Etxaniz*—another recommendation of Marc's, tasting like Muscadet must taste in Plato's Heaven—and waited. What would accompany it?

After a suitable interval, two platters arrived, each containing an enormous fillet. The fish had evidently been done in the manner described by Elizabeth Lambert Ortiz in *The Food of Spain and Portugal*: rubbed with olive oil and salt and grilled in a rack over an open fire, then served dressed with slices of garlic browned in olive oil and lemon. Nothing else. No veg, no salad, no potato. Just fish.

With the first bite we were on another planet. We were instantly agreed that it was the best fish of any kind we had ever tasted. The fire over which it was grilled must have been built and tended by a genius, for there were infinite layers of flavor that could only have come from the smoke of carefully selected twigs and branches.

As we ate, the restaurant faded away and we were somewhere on a beach on a warm summer night, savoring the fish and smelling the smoldering charcoal. Only the wine was necessary; anything else would have been a distraction. We tried to make the heavenly fish last as long as possible without allowing it to become cold and congealed. We finished off the meal with a remarkable vanilla curd cheese ice cream, but our hearts were still with our beloved *besugo*.

As we left we spoke to the chef, a horny-handed peasant. He was outside on the pavement, tending a little wood fire with a simple steel rack over it. Given a few stones and scraps of metal, he could have improvised it on any beach. So. . . was this a great restaurant? We had sampled nothing else. Could they do a decent paella? Could they stew a partridge? Who cares? We had lightly trod the ocean floor, where the sea nymphs wear soles for slippers.

And what, in the final analysis, constituted the restaurant? Was it the furniture, the china, the silver? The ancient beams? The elegant waitress? Or was it the rough genius outside in the street who had brought a fish back to life in his dancing embers?

©1999 John Whiting