

## Food For Thought

by Alan Lake

After a lifetime of excessive eating and living within gluttony's dark recesses, the wall has been hit. Known as the go-to guy for all things edible, the sense of shame I feel for eating enough for a small village pains me. I volunteer at a youth center and ate enough to feed them all.

Many are close to starving and I've been a pig from hell.

In my home growing up we had a just try policy. I had to try whatever my food focused parents put in front of me. If I didn't like it, I didn't have to eat it, but I had to try. Unlike my older brother, I liked most everything and my tastebuds developed at an early age as a result.

Lobster stir fried with fermented black beans, ginger and scallions? Big yes. By age five I could break that bad boy down joint by joint, extracting meat the lobster didn't even know it had. Russian peasant beef tartare made with raw hamburger, capers, onions and dijon mustard served with rough torn black bread? Bring it on! Pickled herring, dim sum, what we called "*Jewsggetti*"- a particularly garlicy, meaty meat meatsauce at our favorite restaurant, Fanny's.

Any and all vied for our devoted attention and was an epicurean alter we worshiped at.

My mother was not a good cook prompting us to want to control what we put in our mouths. A crapshoot at best, lets just say we ate out a lot. She did make good reservations though, plus we traveled a lot allowing this gourmand in training the opportunity to sample all sorts of food from all sorts of cultures.

With deal in place, a monster was created. By adolescence, our family *shtick* included my father teasing me for ordering off the right side of the menu (where the prices reside) and willfully engaging in the most expensive, lavish meals just to taunt him and our "*just try*" policy. He pretended to bitch but in fact was proud and supported our routine until I left home at 17.

I've been saddled with it since.

My exposure and as a result, hypersensitivity to food and culture segued into my knowing where to get the finest of whatever it was that you may be

looking for. A snob? Perhaps. In the words of Oscar Wilde "*I have the simplest tastes. I'm always satisfied with the best.*" Smart guy that Oscar. Considered an eating authority since a teenager, I get calls or emails at all hours from all over the world about restaurants or recipes.

"Liebchen, was es los? Remember das scampi mit de chilies ve did in Zurich? Ah Spatlese vut be goot mit dat, ya?"

Yeah, it would.

No one that knew me as a kid would find it a stretch that I've made a career out of food, working the world over as a chef and now, writing about it. Japan, Mumbai, Dublin, France, Toronto, LA, Chicago, Phoenix... I could name a dozen more.

But what does one do when the life you've made for yourself based on the above holds less interest? When as a result of over consumption my piggish palate was caught in an avalanche of food and frankly, I haven't been as hungry since. Or as proactive in my life long affair with culinary debauchery.

I can't believe I'm saying this but its lost some of it's appeal. Up until now, it's been as Verdi said "a search for joys untasted".

Where and how did I hit, no, smash through this wall? That would be the Green City Market BBQ, an annual fundraiser held in Lincoln Park, and my favorite food event of the year. It was a few months ago and I'm still haunted by it.

Gifted with VIP tickets by a generous friend that allowed one hour of early access and primo seating in the shade of a huge tree, I arrive at 4 30 with small tray strapped to my bicycle- a necessary implement that allows maximum *foodage* while getting your chow on. A great supporter of the market and a veteran of many of these food frenzies, my friend had suggested I bring my own tray to facilitate our standard gluttony. For the record, he also passed around small battery powered handheld fans with schpitzer attachments that blew a cool mist of water at you. Way to go Ronnie.

I ate and drank for a solid 90 minutes and could have stopped there, no problem. Instead I took a break at our 10-top table under the tree for about an hour, and then ate it out for one more. In so doing I managed to consume what I'd estimate to be 20,000 calories and maybe 15,000 mg of

sodium, give or take a decimal point. Even for a lifelong trencherman, this is a daunting task. Bozo Miller would be proud.

I felt like shit because I'd ignored common sense and my inner voice. The one that if you're smart you listen to, and the one that was literally screaming "You've had enough. Stop eating for Christ's sake!".

"Did you say something? No? Sorry, I thought I heard something, nevermind."

I half staggered/waddled back to my bike and rode it home in a daze, laying down on the couch in a food coma with stomach distended like a malnourished refugee. This irony wasn't lost on me. Even my fiancé was alarmed.

Putting my grotesque folly behind me, I vowed to listen to that oft ignored voice and in turn not eat again until I felt hunger. My last bite that evening was as dusk was settling in over the park a little after 8 on Thursday. It was lovely and calm and a bit fuzzy- Renoir could have painted it. I was anything but, all bloated and stumbling in near catatonia (not to be confused with far catatonia). Besides water, the next thing I consumed was shortly after 8pm Saturday, a full 48 hours after the felony perpetrated upon my belly.

I've loved spicy and rich food forever. Pastrami, stinky creamy cheeses, foie gras, schmaltz, lobster tomalley, chili oil, the list goes into perpetuity. But now, and I can't believe I'm saying this and feel like a traitor to the cause- not so much. Nibbling instead of gorging and a bit coy around my *fresser* friends- my ravenous eating days if not behind me, are at least temporarily at bay. I'm fine with a bowl of cereal or a hard boiled egg instead of going to that new Northern Thai place 3 times in a week and ordering 8 items for 3 people. Just doesn't hold the same appeal. A midnight Polish from Jim's Original? Not for now, thanks.

You read this and say, what could he have eaten? What could cause a behavioral change in his DNA at the subatomic level?

Well I'll tell you. There's a pamphlet given to you upon arrival with a map and all the menu items to document the scene of the crime and I have it right here. My oldest friend had dropped by during my misery and seeing what a pathetic state I was in, took great relish in perusing the list item by item- he reading the menu aloud and me describing in detail the nuances in every dish.

51 in all.

Some were eaten in entirety, some just a bite. Some I had seconds and one I even had thirds on.\* Truth is, and this is pretty funny, I thought I was pacing myself by not eating any of the bread.

Behold my excess:

1. lamb bacon, stone fruit salsa, rooftop mint
2. beer can/pickle brine chicken, summer beet salad, corn relish
3. elotes ice cream
4. grilled sweetbreads slider, peach compote, balsamic reduction
5. zucchini bread, chèvre, pickled blueberries, honey, cayenne pepper
6. grilled pizza w/roasted lamb, yogurt, pickled vegs
7. mortadella w/watermelon radish
8. fried green tomatoes, smoked trout, new potato salad, lovage
9. blueberry trifle w/grilled sweet basil pound cake
10. crispy lake trout, tomatoes, sauce gribiche
11. spare ribs, duck fat potato chips, berry margarita
12. pecan smoked beef ribs, grilled peach salad, pecan bbq sauce
13. beef brisket salpicon toastadita
14. carnitas on chicharrones, slaw, hot sauce, caramelized onions \*
15. pork rillettes, baby arugula, cherry mustard, pickles
16. berry/mascarpone whoopie pie
17. goats milk cheesecake push-up
18. grilled quail, peach, garlic, chili lime sauce
19. smoked ham hocks, cider baked beans
20. crispy seared pork belly 3 chili salsa roja, homemade queso fresco
21. sloppy goat
22. confit chicken thighs w/romesco and heirloom salad
23. grilled pork belly w/grilled stone fruits
24. lamb al asador w/chimichuri
25. smoked prime rib sliders
26. whitefish ceviche
27. gazpacho popsicle with herb coulis
28. maple glazed ham, raclette, egg, ramp kimchi, sesame seed bun
29. summer berries, mint/rose ice cream, lavender, pecans, creme fraiche
30. lamb mc rib
31. crispy pig ears w/peanuts and crackerjacks
32. sage brown butter pound cake, heirloom tomato-peach salad, arugula, spiced pecans
33. grilled sweet corn, calamansi aioli, cotija cheese, cilantro
34. pickled beef tongue, summer potato salad, mushroom conserva, aioli
35. mushroom crostini, goat cheese, bacon
36. grilled lamb breast w/peaches

37. roasted lamb, tart cherries, mint, tropea onions
38. jerk pork sausage, picalili
39. grilled lamb crepinette w/summer squash, succotash, mint, cherry bbq sauce
40. spiced grilled pork belly, summer veg kimchi, egg sauce
41. blackened salmon blt w/arugula-bacon-tomato jam, charred onion, herb aioli
42. goat barbacoa slider, pickled vegs
43. harissa marinated beef heart kabobs
44. beef tongue sliders, pickled jalapeño, grilled corn, fermented pepper paste, tempura crumbs
45. roasted lamb, chimichurri, radishes, paneer and mint on paratha
46. oxtail terrine, pickled vegs, grilled ciabatta
47. grilled beef heart, veg som tum, bagna cauda vinaigrette, toasted pecans
48. blood sausage, grilled veg chimichurri
49. slow cooked goat, apricot-mustard bbq sauce, pickled ramps, shaved radishes, grilled naan
50. zinfandel braised short rib, black vinegar sauce
51. grilled pork, smoked cherry xo sauce, pickles

Besides a cherry phosphate with vanilla ice cream, I won't even get into what I drank. Caught up in the magic of the moment, it was way more alcohol than I ever do. Excessive would be underestimating it. There wasn't a micron of real estate left in my gut. It reminds me of something Chris Burden would have done as a conceptual performance art piece. He once had a friend shoot him in the arm with a rifle in the name of art.

Not certain who was in more pain.