Rumblings from the World of Food

To the Editor:

Having searched high and low to find songs about food for the “Lagniappe” page in Gastronomica’s premiere issue, I now wonder whether your readership might not prove to be a valuable resource for recommending songs that may have fallen outside the radar of my reference materials, which are more music- than food-based.

I would appreciate titles of songs about food, along with the performer’s and/or writer’s names, and information about where I can find a recording. If lyrics are easily obtainable, send them along, too. My e-mail address is jraoul@sirius.com. If you have sheet music, you can send a copy (no originals, please!) to 144 Coleridge, San Francisco CA 94110.

I am interested in everything from mainstream pop hits to madrigals to a song you wrote in your sensitive-singer-songwriter-coffeehouse days. Funny is a bonus, but not required. There is every possibility but no guarantee that a submission might find its way into a future issue of Gastronomica.

Joshua Raoul Brody
San Francisco, CA

Curiouser and Curiouser?
ANNE MURCOTT

It has become familiar, has it not, to hear that nowadays members of the public no longer trust the authorities to provide safe food and/or to tell the truth about possible health hazards in their cheeses, their apple juice, and—especially horror—their baby foods. Commentators—journalists, politicians, consumer representatives and sometimes my fellow sociologists—are inclined to refer variously, and maybe a little vaguely, to the government, a ministry of agriculture, a regulatory agency, the industry, the food supply chain itself, as some sort of authority which, once upon a time in the good old days, people could rely on to protect them from adulterated or unsafe food and/or to provide due warning and institute proper measures if there were a problem. Alas, the commentary continues, people have lost faith.

This refrain has been heard in Britain for more than a decade now. Evidence for people’s loss of trust is said to be found in the dramatic, overnight drop in purchases of an item about which a doubt has been reported. Commentators talk of the way egg sales plummeted after a Junior Health Minister observed on a national early-evening television news bulletin that “we do warn people that most of the egg production in this country, sadly, is now infected with salmonella.” And it seems as if they have only to mention BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) or mad cow disease, confident that this can serve as self-evident testament to mistrust of official pronouncements about the degrees of risk of contracting vCJD (the new variant of Creutzfeld-Jacobs Disease) from eating English beef. Such commentary may well be buttressed by quoting opinion polls that record the fluctuating, but still lowered, percentages of those surveyed, who agree that they no longer trust the government or MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food). The camera cuts to people in the street who confirm their loss of faith….

Curious: what do people think of the authoritative, if implicit, declarations of “safety” about the alternative foods to which they switch when—temporarily as it turns out, at least counted in months and years—they forswear eggs or beef?

News has reached mainland Europe and traveled across the Atlantic (import bans have been imposed) of an outbreak of fatal, incurable swine fever on pig farms in a handful of English regions. The outbreak has been reported nationally by the mass media, accompanied by information from MAFF that eating pork nonetheless poses no danger to human health. Curiously (though admittedly I pay no more than the usual attention to news and current affairs), I have come across no reports of a scornful “Well that’s what they said about BSE in the early days, and look how wrong they were on that one.” According to one newspaper report, sales of pig products in Britain have remained steady, a major supermarket reported no detectable difference, smart restaurants reported growth in the popularity of pork and no downturn in demand. A processor similarly reported demand from supermarkets as typical for the time of year, adding
“It looks as if consumers accept the fact that swine fever is not a threat to their health.”

Curiouser: why are people apparently ready to trust MAFF et al. about swine fever? What happened to all those declarations about loss of faith on a grand scale?

Among others, Claire Marris (now at the Institut National de Recherche Agronomique in France) and her fellow researchers at the University of East Anglia have done work that deserves the widest dissemination.***

In a two-stage approach, they carried out a survey, asking “Who would you trust to tell you the truth about risks?” They organized the answers into one of those familiar “trust ladders,” with those trusted least at the top, e.g., journalists, politicians (the details tend to vary from one ladder to another as to who “wins”), and those trusted most towards the bottom, e.g., doctors and close members of the family. They then took this ladder back for discussion to small groups consisting of the same people who had taken part in the first-stage survey. Group members were horrified: “I didn’t mean that.” They then set about explaining to the researchers what they did mean. It all depends. It is my family, John or Jane explained, whom I can trust to have explained, whom I can trust to have learned to gauge their clientele. They have stuck it out for years and fine-tuned their systems, those that have ripened, developed. I’m hoping to rediscover the restaurants whose cellars stock some mature vintages because they were laid down the year the proprietor opened the doors. Then, when I find a kitchen that consistently pleases and waiters who perform smoothly amidst all challenges, I know it will still do so when I return in a few months or next year. And the satisfaction of the familiar will overcome the thrill of the untried.

Alain Ducasse: in New York, but not of New York

I am sitting before a table laden with bonbons—individually wrapped caramels in multiple flavors, nuggets of soft nougat heavy with nuts, amber lollipops with trapped fossils of herbs. The ceiling above me is covered in gold leaf. An upholstered stool nearby coddles my friend’s purse. I have just finished lunch at what is being called ADNY, short for Alain Ducasse New York. And after spending two hours and $250, I am not impressed.

The Cult of Youth

Phyllis Richman

Ours is a youth culture, certainly when it comes to restaurants. Just listen to how people talk about them: “What’s new?” they ask, even before they check up on “What’s good?”

Restaurants are hot or they’re not. A new restaurant will have overburdened phones and a bar packed with wannabe diners, while last year’s version yawns with empty tables, though it may be every bit as good (or bad) as the younger upstart. Half our restaurants close within a year of their opening, but that doesn’t seem to slow down the dreamers. They keep coming—and going. The chance to win big overrides the hard facts about competition. This, after all, is a modern world in which an IPO can make you an instant winner, a movie makes its box-office success by the opening weekend’s returns, and a first book has a far greater chance of being reviewed than a second or a tenth. Experience doesn’t count for much in a society that idolizes teenagers and shunts the elderly off to the sidelines.

Among restaurants, as elsewhere in life, the young grab our attention. New restaurants are the ones that get reviews in newspapers and magazines, often in their first weeks, even before the chef has grown accustomed to the rhythm of the kitchen or the waiters have learned to gauge their clientele. It’s a system that gives short shrift to maturity. We prefer our young to their health. When I find a kitchen that consistently satisfies and waiters who perform smoothly amidst all challenges, I know it will still do so when I return in a few months or next year. And the satisfaction of the familiar will overcome the thrill of the untried.

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** The Independent on Sunday, August 20, 2000.
Don’t get me wrong. The place is impressive. The first thing I realized when I walked into this restaurant in the Essex House hotel on Central Park South is that until now, no restaurant in the United States has even come close to simulating a Michelin three-star dining experience. The formality of the greeting, the sheer number of wait staff, the distance between the tables, the quiet opulence of the room—these are details American diners haven’t had the opportunity to enjoy on their own soil. With the presentation of the ADNY menu, I begin to understand why. One appetizer costs more than $90, and the others aren’t far behind. Entrées hover around the $75 mark. A familiar bottle of New World Chardonnay that typically fetches $35 in restaurants around town appears here on the wax-sealed wine list for $92. (Note: Were I a woman, I would still be in the dark because the women’s menu doesn’t show the prices.)

The pomp grows as the meal progresses. A selection of six mineral waters is presented to quench my thirst. A wooden box of hand-honed steak knives is proffered with my steak. The arrival of the cart of petits fours (the post-dessert pastries were too large to be called petits fours) came another, more important realization: Michelin three-star dining follows a strict formula, not unlike good ol’ American fast food. The formula not only allows the experience to be replicated and dropped down in any number of places, but its very mastery diminishes the value and authenticity of the original, changing the emphasis from the aesthetically experiential to the more self-consciously performative. I see ADNY as the McDonald’s on the Champs-Elysées, a restaurant out of place, if not out of context. The more accurately Ducasse is able to simulate a three-star experience outside of France, the more exotic that experience becomes. Being made uncomfortable in one’s own backyard is disarming.

Conversely, feeling at ease among so many alien, neo-Victorian chatchkes—such as the silver pincers presented with Ducasse’s crab sticks so you can eat them with your fingers without actually having to touch them—is a blatant performance of status, peppered with worldliness, sprinkled with class, and enriched with cultural capital. As I said, ADNY has nothing to do with the food, save for its exorbitant price.

We can eat comfortably and well at any number of New York restaurants, thank you very much, packed in like sardines, hoarse from having to shout, hurried out for the next seating. But dining well, by Michelin standards, is another story. Since most of my food-world colleagues have no interest in dropping upwards of $400 per person for dinner in their hometown, perhaps ADNY’s audience will prove to be wealthy French tourists. Ironically, that would make the whole experience even more authentic, for the times I have eaten in Ducasse’s restaurants in France (and in most other three-star restaurants in Europe, for that matter) the tourists, namely Japanese and American, outnumbered the French two to one. Or maybe, in the way that French youth flock to McDonald’s on the Champs-Elysées, ADNY will be full of young, hip Americans (don’t forget, this is the new economy) increasing their cool quotient by literally consuming the exotic Other. It’s hard to argue with the universal appeal of handmade candies. They make everything, including Other-things, go down much easier.