Evacuation Day, or a Foodie is Bummed Out

There are many reasons not to eat, but none so humiliating as a day of preparation for that ultimate insult to the flesh, the camera up the ass. Like other boomers, especially those of us who hide sheer gluttony behind our “connoisseurship” in food, I have undergone a colonoscopy. Here, then, is my tale of learned humility, with new realizations about the true breadth of the field of food studies.

Before Evacuation Day, everything I had ever learned (and taught) about food studies concerned foodways—not the lower end of the digestive process. Thus, in the colonoscopic experience, all my efforts to develop palatal sensitivity were for naught, or for very new uses. Getting my gut ready for this procedure, I had to reverse a lifetime’s notions of food culture—you have the tools. And, of course, the opportunity for participant-observation awaits you.

Fasting as personal purge and cultural ritual is a staple of our field. I have read works with titles like “You Are What You Don’t Eat” that discuss the purification of the soul through denying the flesh; articles on subversion of the dominant (male) code through denying food to the self and others; and scholarly treatises on fasting and body image in advertising: waste your waist to get a man. During the week before my “field work,” the questions of how a person who lives for her next superb meal manages the spartan regime sounded like an interesting exercise, and I began by dreaming up the limpid broths, perfect aspics, and fresh fruit gelatins I would make in preparation. I thought I could improve on the regulations from the doctors, which specify limiting your intake to “clear liquids (tea, coffee and clear juices), broth or bouillon, and clear jello (do not use red jello).” As it turned out, though, the day before fast day was extremely busy. A raucous dinner party (this is when you decide to invite your first husband and his third wife for a reunion with your old professors) meant no time to prepare the cuisine maigre required for the next day. And there sat the delicious leftovers from the party…So I succumbed. For the fast day I made only yellow jello and green jello: “lemon” and “lime” do not describe their taste.

Fasting in itself had some appeal: maybe I would appreciate subtle tastes better, maybe I would learn a lesson of restraint for the future, maybe I would lose weight. It is not just the fact of a day or more of not eating. (Tip for the uninitiated: be sure to schedule your event for early morning—at least then you don’t have all those additional hours of emptiness.) It is also what must happen at the end of that day: the hours on the toilet, with time off to sip more of the potion that will keep you there. For me, fear of pain (or, more remotely, the outcome of the test) was matched only by fear of the taste of the laxative. I had been prepared by horror stories—the most appalling taste! disgusting! choke it down if you can! With the bottle before me I read: “Sip slowly 1.5 oz at four p.m. and another 1.5 oz at seven p.m.”
My heart sank, reminding me of a child who said to his mother when he heard how he and his baby brother were made, “You mean, you had to do that TWICE???” Except that the child’s mistake doesn’t apply: in the case of sipping this potion, the act really is distasteful! As the picture of myself in an hour’s time clutching my belly and crampily whining loomed, I feared failure of nerve. Would I give up? I would fail.

It is not the colon being tested, it is one’s palatal tolerance. Desperate for a strategy to sustain my courage, I determined to write my way through it. I placed a notebook and pen on the small table next to the toilet. Herewith are my confessional field notes from a participant-observer trip to the bottom of the bowel. Shocking but true.

Tasting Notes

What is your taste “wall” and how do you know when you’ve hit it? I ask my students in my culinary anthropology class this question, and they come up with things like squid or licorice. Those wanting to impress me cite that Japanese fermented soybean dish, natto (which I, against all the established notions about foreigners in Japan, happen to like), or witchetty grubs, or if they think I’m an anti-junk foodie, Hostess Twinkies or Marshmallow Fluff. As for me, I really can eat just about anything: culinary anthropologists are not supposed to have any ingrained dislikes, and I inwardly object to dinner guests who say “I don’t eat this.” I do have foods I can let alone. But now I have found my wall: it is Fleet Phospho-Soda.

Fleet Phospho-Soda is off any taste map. I try to use the relative language of wine tasting to describe the stuff, but it belies any allusion to food or drink. It is not a foodstuff. Nor is it a gussied-up medicament (I will never like cherry flavoring after Robitussin, or grape jelly after enduring my mother’s method of grinding aspirin into it for me as a
child). It is a substance designed to clear your bowels, an oral enema, a super-laxative.

I have bitten the bullet, and it is metallic; the taste almost clangs against my palate and tongue. But pursuing the taste despite a strong feeling of “Why am I doing this?” (as I once did at a salt-tasting event held by my local Slow Food Convivium), I persist and try to break the flavor down before it breaks me. The dominant taste is salty. The label says “lemon ginger,” but for the life of me I can’t find where these flavors are lurking. There is an undertaste of sweetness, but it is that flat, dead-end effect of artificial sweeteners. Not “leather” or “pencil lead” or “dark and sultry” or “effervescent, summery, and petillant,” words I read in my wine books to describe liquids you might actually sip with pleasure. The mouth-feel is an attack of salt on the palate and tongue: It is a physical slap rather than a “taste”—we are not talking of flavors and fruits and spring breezes—and the slap makes you cringe and pull back. Remember Rosemary’s Baby and the “chalky undertaste”? Not far away are the fluorescent green glow and the devilish cackles—and the exorcist.

I await the cramps, which do not come, and the purge, which does. The second round is no better than it should have been, and I am losing the battle to observe and record. I just want to sleep and forget. Instead, I read New Yorkers and cheerfully tell people who call that they are interrupting a porcelain séance and would they please wait until my gut is empty? A great way to get a telemarketer off the phone, by the way!

I drink coffee, tea, and loads of water. The yellow and green jellos begin to taste good.

The High Priest

Early in the morning, I wait my turn for the probe in elegant ritual attire, the robes that victims don before human sacrifice. I scarcely have the mental energy to wonder why the doctors are called “endoscopists”; is it because they scope out our ends? And it is a very humble me, suffering a caffeine-withdrawal headache (no coffee, or anything else, before the test please!), waiting passively to be poked. Too exhausted to feel the shame of cowardice, I tell the nurse to max up the drugs.

I am told to watch the monitor if I want to see my gut displayed in real time, and I imagine a twisted mass of garden hose, the kind I struggle with annually, or a videogame in which you hurtle down a tunnel with horrible challenges (and evil polyps) at every turn. Nothing I want to see. I turn my head to the priest instead, and he seems to want to talk about Japan. The last thing I remember hearing the white-coated doctor say is, “I remember so well walking around Kyoto…”

Good Drugs and Graham Crackers

“But nothing happened! Did they make a mistake and not do me?” I ask the nurse who nudges me awake. She insists that they’ve done the deed and hands me a graham cracker. Tastes real good on the high I have (an amnesia-inducing drug; they swear I was awake the whole time).

So for all you age-mates waiting in fear, procrastinating, or leaving town with no forwarding address, I thought I’d just give you a foodie’s roadmap of a process we seldom address in our studies of the sensual delights of food, to remind you of the vast amount of research and fieldwork yet to be done. As for me, I’m pleased to say that I won’t have a return engagement for a decade: plenty of time to prepare the veal aspic, the freshly squeezed lime and kiwi gelatin, and the herbal infusions with ginger and rose petals.

As for the outcome, let’s just say it all came out right in the end.

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