



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Advancing Knowledge, Driving Change

The Only Way to Know the Taste of a Pear Is to Eat It

Author(s): alexandra stein

Source: *Gastronomica*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 2006), pp. 72-78

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/gfc.2006.6.1.72>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Gastronomica*

JSTOR

The Only Way to Know the Taste of a Pear Is to Eat It

IT ALL STARTED WITH PIERRE. Gorgeous, depressed Pierre. With their last one hundred francs they ordered *belon* oysters and *oursins*, sharp sea urchins filled with sweet, pink meat soft as a mama bird's regurgitated offering. They squeezed lemon on the crustaceans, sprinkled a little chopped onion upon them, and swallowed the sea whole...

But now she lives in Minnesota, about as far from the sea as you can get. She has been stranded by life in Minneapolis, a smorgasbord of cultures still dominated by Lutheran plainness, as demonstrated by its white food, whose ultimate expression is lye-soaked lutefisk, a dried cod served reconstituted, its quivering jelly suffocated in butter. However, newly arrived Oromo immigrants have brought spongy East African *injera* to the cold plains. This bread is bubbly and living, its residue sticky and grainy on her fingers, the holes soaking up the red smoky juices of *berebere*-spiced sauce. The glory of globalization means she can also buy *menudo* in Minnesota—a rich tripe soup, deep, dark, holy red. The soup comes with a plate of onions, peppers, and cilantro. Into the silky broth she dips fresh corn tortillas—another bread worth worshipping, a bread she can roll up, sink her teeth into, and be sure of that perfect combination of yielding and resistance. If only...

Oh, almost cosmopolitan Minneapolis! Despite itself, the Midwest is becoming home to her and to the other immigrants who yearn for n+1, the answer to the question, When are you going home, home to your real home? This is the formula that Vishal teaches her. Vishal is here on an H-1 work visa, in a well-paid servitude to the company who sponsors him for his green card and eventual employment freedom. Vishal introduces her to Udupi, a glorious southern Indian restaurant where she almost finds the foods of London's Drummond Street: *idli* dumplings dipped in lentil soup, curry leaves fried in ghee and added in a final complication of flavors. Or *dhai vada*, which translates as lentil donuts in yogurt, but let's face it, this combination of cool yogurt, stirred with lemony tamarind sauce, intensely flavored confetti sprinkled on top of satisfying bland—well,

okay, call them donuts if you like (they are round, they have a hole in the middle)—call them what you will, but they are the polar opposite of the claggy, industrial Krispy Kreme.

N+1. Whatever year it is, then "I'm going home next year." Of course we understand where that leads: to an uneasy relationship to a new country that only one's children will resolve. In any event, here she is. She is living in Minneapolis, and she is looking for a match. An equal; a complement. A little sugar for her bowl.

Brendan

An Irishman has called her answering machine, and she has fallen in love with him thus, as he tells her, his voice caught on the rustling magnetic tape, "I was crying in the aisle of the airplane as I flew here." Now he's landed, and the first thing he's done, from his Minneapolis hotel, is to call and tell her it's incredible what she has written—that fat stack of pages that preserve her story wrapped in layers, mummified for handing to the future.

They have had an academic introduction. She has read his article, been moved and impressed by the accuracy of his observations, sent him her manuscript, and then contacted him again when she sees they are to speak at the same conference in the city where she lives. He is warm via e-mail and brings the manuscript to read, as mentioned, on the plane.

She returns his call immediately, and he insists on visiting then, that night. She answers the door to a small, thin man whose grayness is punctuated by hooded eyes of Prussian blue. He steps over the threshold and hugs her. They sit at the kitchen table while the children do homework, play, fight; they talk nonstop, the one finishing the other's sentences. They have a shared experience, one infrequently articulated, and there is a sense of wonder and relief and some joy in describing similar worlds, in finding a matching reverberation, a complementary story. A whole world spreads out—books to tell each other about, books to write together. It is sudden and overpowering and layered.

He asks to see her house. She has known him for two hours, and he has managed to see her bedroom already. Is this Irish behavior? Or is he just cheeky?

She thinks she remembers feeding the children. At ten o'clock the oldest asks, "Mom, is he sleeping over?" It is past their bedtime, and she hasn't yet begun the nightly rituals.



"What about snack?" the child asks. "Have your Cheerios," she says. And then, apologetically to the little Irishman, "I better put them to bed." He gets a taxi back to his hotel.

They spend the next three days of the conference inseparable. They sit together at lunchtime, their mutual engagement a kind of force field that prevents others from joining them. The conference director sidles up to her and remarks, "I see you and Brendan have lots to talk about." She cannot eat. The soft salads at lunch, the dry bread and

buffet lunchmeats crumble in her mouth, inedible. She takes him every day to walk outside the conference center, to get him away, to see the lilacs blooming throughout the city. They stop at a café for lunch. She orders beans and rice. She can eat none of it. He notices, asks if he can have some, and she pushes the plate toward him. He eats. They talk and talk and talk.

He is married.

He gives a marvelous speech, clinging to her first, before he stands in front of the two hundred assembled, not able to understand why he's so nervous. She encourages.

They go out for drinks with her friends. She sits next to him. They each talk to others. Their thighs touch, of course. They are connected for once without words. He has the gift of the gab. He is, after all, Irish.

After two days she invites him to dinner. Her friend has suggested Auriga, a nice place that has good food and is quiet. They'll be able to talk there. They are already talking about papers to write together, a book maybe. She has been looking for someone to work with, a fellow intellect, for years.

At the restaurant, which is dark and candlelit, he cannot navigate the menu. He reminds her of another Irishman, also from Belfast. A man who had been in the IRA, who was imprisoned in Long Kesh at the age of eighteen for seventeen long years, during which he became the block cook. She had met him only a year or so after his release. He was a good man with bad teeth, questioning and critical, and still exploring freedom when they met, discovering the feel of driving, of eating new foods, of drinking beer in the sunny courtyard of a timbered country pub. It was all new to him, so soon out of prison, an adult approaching middle age only just now experiencing life outside and finally, some years later, landing in a Corsican summer camp, cooking again, but now for tourists, not political prisoners.

And so with Brendan: he is little traveled, just opening up to life slowly after a complicated history in another prison of sorts, and now with his new academic credentials, traveling out of Northern Ireland gradually, but still not so

worldly that he can make his way unaided through a fusion cuisine menu in a Minneapolis uptown restaurant. He points: "What's that?" to the shaved jicama chips described on the menu. How to explain jicama? "You must try it," she says. She quotes Mao Zedung: "The only way to know the taste of a pear is to eat it."

They pause for a moment, consider Mao, whose Great Leap Forward required the masses to turn in their personal cooking implements to be melted into steel in backyard furnaces. The masses then ate greasy cafeteria food three times a day at collective messes, the family dinner a thing of the bourgeois past. The Great Leap Forward destroyed production, caused famine, dissolved all those cooking pots of the people to produce second-rate, unusable steel. These are the kinds of things she and Brendan talk about; these are the things they understand together.

After dinner they walk in the spring night air of the sculpture garden. She unfolds her feelings for him. He holds her. Then he sits on a sloping chunk of granite and holds his head in his hands. "What to do? What to do?" he moans, the gift of gab having quite suddenly abandoned him. Sitting there speechless, grasping at his temples, he looks for all the world like a diminutive *Thinker*, a kind of leprechaun interpretation of Rodin's great work.

Though small in stature, he is an intellectual giant, and calling upon his abundant cortical resources, he manages to think the problem through and thus directs them back to her house. It is empty of children, as they are with their father. The next day, following the conference, they end up there again. After an almost chaste bundling in her bed, she feeds him. "Would you like asparagus?" she calls to him as he showers in her bathtub. "What is it?" he replies, which causes her a mild consternation. She bears a stalk of asparagus to him in the shower. It is a little limp. He leans his head to one side, considering the green sprig. He's barely ever been out of Northern Ireland. Although surely they have asparagus in Belfast? Nonetheless, he does not yet understand asparagus, or jicama, but he enthusiastically tries them under her tutelage. (He is, she is to discover, characteristically enthusiastic.)

Brendan appears to be just right. But she learns the hard way: even though his marriage is on its last legs, and its final collapse is not too far away, well...he is married. Oceans and landmasses separate them, too, and even their desperate excesses of intercontinental digital communication cannot transport fish and fowl and flora and fauna and flesh and feeling. And, the thing is, without food, the whole crazy enterprise chews itself up and dies.

Her young daughter finds her one day at the kitchen table, weeping among the supper dishes. Her daughter hugs her. It takes her a while to begin eating again.

Is It Love or Low Blood Sugar?

Funnily enough, it is Brendan who has suggested to her that she try the personal ads. Thus procured, her first date with Mike is at Lucia's wine bar. Mike is muscled, trim, an unlikely looking professor of philosophy, and yet that is what he is. He rests his well-exercised forearms on the table, his hands reaching out beyond its median, almost touching her glass. They do not order the good French food Lucia's is famous for, but each drinks two glasses of red wine. At the



end of the evening, she demurs when he asks to see her again. She says she must think it over. She is still nursing a bruised heart and has a momentary distrust of the energetic interchange they have had, of Mike's blue eyes, of the entertaining argument that has sizzled over the table. It all seems too insubstantial.

But she agrees, and the next week they drink beer and dance together to African music at the Blue Nile. They do not order the good Ethiopian food the Blue Nile is famous for, and this lack of food causes her to arrive home a little tipsy. She sits and sinks her head in her hands. "Oh god," she notes to herself. "Oh god," she repeats, "take notes,

you're falling in love." She is shaking and buzzing; it's how she feels when she is getting a little hypoglycemic—that low-blood-sugar high, a chemical imbalance that will require his presence to keep in check. Later, her inner social psychologist wonders if perhaps she was simply hungry and misattributed the symptoms? So easy to do!

They see each other a few more times. She stays the night at his house. He is always in a rush in the mornings and sends her off without breakfast. Should this have been another clue? He stays at her house—leaves at 5:30 in the morning. He must grade papers, he says. He misses, therefore, a key component of her seduction toolkit: the great English breakfast fry-up. He is always rushing away from her, to class, to play basketball, to work out. "I must keep this body luscious," he says one early morning when she is lamenting his rapid departure to the gym.

It's just as well they do not eat together. One night he says he will take her out to eat. It's a cold fall night, the bitterness of the approaching northern winter cuts its way into the air. He picks her up in his slate blue fifties Volvo, which matches almost exactly the color of his eyes. He loves his car. She admires it. They arrive at a Chinese restaurant near the university where, he brags, he lived on nine thousand dollars a year for four years. This was his favorite restaurant then—he was a regular here, and the owners know him. They get out of the car, and as they do, he reaches into the glove compartment and pulls out a screwdriver. "Just a minute, I need to fix something—the carburetor's running rough." She watches as he pops the hood. She catches her breath. The engine is dazzling in the dark night. It is burnished, pristine, silver. Every part of it glistens and gleams, ethereally, bizarrely, *frighteningly* clean. He leans in and lovingly tweaks its diamond-bright parts with the screwdriver. She waits, getting more and more chilled as he caresses this sparkling, polished metal. She thinks of the well-worked muscles of his luscious body, the buffed hard edges of his engine. Suddenly, the hair on the back of her neck is electrified. Instinctively, she realizes that one must never date a man who is in love with his car. Is this an American cliché? Well, it is true nonetheless. The car gleams but never responds—an ideal that no woman can hope to achieve.

The glum interior of his favorite restaurant and the cornstarched food-glue, floating amid bits of damp celery, confirm this thought. Across the road, she happens to know, is a Chinese restaurant that serves crisp and salty jellyfish, whole roast fish crackling from the oven, and bitter green *gai lan* soured in oyster sauce. She understands that she has been starving. The philosophy professor will never feed her.

No Non-Ex-Gfs, Please

Then comes Sonny, who on their first date cooks the über-midwestern first date meal. Salmon and asparagus. At least he knows what asparagus is. Salmon because she might not eat meat, and even if she does, there is something so distinctly *male* about red meat at this point in Minnesota culture, particularly among the middle classes (which they both decidedly are), that it is pretty much off the heterosexual first-date menu. So, no gaffes like red meat. You can be pretty safe with a nice piece of salmon from the health food co-op. And he is so hip that it turns out he's the chairman of his local co-op. For a while she likes shopping there, until it dawns on her that she'll run into one of his ex-girlfriends. Well, she thought they were ex...

Let us enumerate. There's Sonia, who works across the street from him. Marcia works in the office right next door to his. She has a small child, and he has broken up with her because, no, he can't face raising any more children. Once, with admirable simplicity, he puts it like this: "They get all the attention." And there's Tricia, who works right *with* him, in his company. They broke up because he befriended Marcia when she was pregnant and single. This "friendship" continued rather extensively after the birth of the soon-to-be-attention-seeking child, until Tricia finally discovered that, like Sonia, she couldn't put up with him either.

She returns, then, to her old co-op where, some years earlier, over the bitter arugula, she had announced to the first man she dated after her marriage had come to a theatrical end that she would never, ever get married again. She stayed with that man longer than she should have because he was really quite a good cook. Berry pie. *Sambar*, a south Indian soupy lentil and eggplant stew engulfing hot-popped mustard seeds, causing just a little gasp as you catch the sultry aroma. His cooking, however, wasn't enough to entice her into a legal contract.

Perhaps the peak with Sonny was the Valentine's Day meal. He'd had a busy day. Delivering flowers, he said, to a woman he was trying to recruit to his company and who told him what a nice man he was. He was nice. Sometimes too nice. Later she realizes he must have bought and delivered flowers to at least the three exes. So Valentine's Day had been busy for him. Busy!

She has written him a poem about the oyster-shaped muscles on his back. (Face it, only their bodies are compatible—when will she learn?) He arrives late to pick her up, and they rush off to a new and well-reviewed seafood restaurant—though fresh seafood in the Midwest is an oxymoron. They eat oysters. Drink wine. Eat fish piled up on elegant,

overpriced, and underflavored bits of vegetable. They drink more wine and eat chocolate torte. They drive home. She is woozy and cannot get out of the car. "Let me sit a minute," she says. Then suddenly she bangs open the door, flops her head out over the gutter, and hurls out every last thing he has just paid for.

He gamely helps her out, cleans her up, and leads her into his house. "I can't make it up the stairs," she says. "Yes you can!" he says brightly, like an encouraging coach. "Just go to the bottom of the stairs—you'll be inspired."



Indeed, there are rose petals scattered up the stairs. It is charming. She laughs and crawls up the stairs, one step at a time. The rose petals lead to the bed, and she manages to take off her shoes, open the covers, and fall into the rose-petal-covered sheets. She feels happy and pleased and only slightly sorry for him before she passes out cold.

Things with the über-midwestern-date-meal man ended badly. Marcia stalked her. Left a charming floral card under her windshield wiper, which she found on the morning after a Sonny night. Marcia wanted to talk. They talked at a playground with the necessarily attention-seeking blond-haired cherubic child running to and fro. Apparently, Marcia and über-midwestern-date-meal man still shared a "special relationship" (nice diplomatic language! Like Blair and Bush joining forces to invade Iraq?), and their "special relationship" continued despite the pesky attention-seeking

child. Oho! A gf who is not so ex! She joins the list of genuine ex-gfs, vowing a good clean break. This she manages, enjoying the memory of Valentine's Day and sticking, steadfastly, monogamously, to her own co-op where she continues to admire their crisp, iron-rich, and ex-gf-free greens.

Whereupon She Puts Her Restless Feet in His Hands

She first met Will ten years ago. He has recently let it be known that he is single again, and she replies to his e-mail with similar information. He comes to her annual New Year's dance party, arriving early to help "clean and chop, whatever you need me to do." At her doorstep he looks older than she had remembered and considerably larger around the middle. He presents her with an organic apple crisp he has made that requires space in the oven, which space he has previously booked via e-mail.

At the kitchen table he chops and cleans as promised, asking carefully for instruction on the exact dimensions required for the carrots and pita bread and pickled red peppers to which he is assigned. As always in Minnesota, the guests bring potluck. You cannot tell them not to; they would feel ill at ease, as if arriving naked and unwashed. The party is a success. The apple crisp, along with the many other dishes, has been admired and eaten. Champagne has been happily popped and poured.

At the end of the party, he says to her, "Give me your feet. They must be tired. You have been on them all night."

It's true—she has cleaned and cooked and danced and talked and cleaned some more, and her feet are tired. He rubs them. A small elf-like man is still there. He smokes cigarettes and plays the piano quite well and has brought a recording of himself singing a sad love song. He plays it now, when everyone has gone, except for himself, Will, and the eleven teenagers who are bedded down in a pile in the basement, where they have had a parallel party with only a modicum of bad behavior. The cigarette-smoking pianist has stayed in vain. He had hoped for a cuddle, but though he is sweet, he is somehow indescribably unsuitable. Perhaps, it was his earlier confession that he boils a pot of spaghetti every Sunday night and lives on it for the rest of the week.

But Will has demanded her feet, and she has willingly given them up to his hands. They catch up a bit on the last couple of years. They recount relationship stories. She tells him of her persistent rootlessness—her life lived on multiple continents, her restlessness. She cannot answer his simple question, "Where do you consider your home to be?" "I have no home, or perhaps too many," she says. Although

she has lived in north Minneapolis for twenty years, it still does not feel like *home*. “I am a citizen of the world” is her brave reply to questions of home. He considers this quietly. “I have found,” he says, rather formally, “that a relationship can be a home.”

They begin dating soon after. She visits his home—a small, rented farmhouse sitting on well-tended farmland. Directly out of the bathroom windows, she can see black-and-white cows nuzzling together at the hay, where they stay until the summer, when they are let out to graze on the pretty stripes of contour-farmed land. He serves her a chicken he raised two years earlier and has kept in the freezer tightly wrapped in clean white paper. She knows this because he has



taken her down to his basement especially to show off the contents of his freezer, gesturing manfully to his hand-reared provisions. Two years is a long time to keep a chicken, she thinks to herself, but it is delicious—the flesh is firm but tender, the flavor rich and sweet, and he has prepared it slowly and with care, which is generally how he does things.

She tells him that, city girl though she is, she has always wanted to raise chickens. It is a fantasy she has long held, thinking of the French village in Burgundy she has visited since childhood and the luscious-looking chickens, geese, ducks, and rabbits that coexist with the villagers and their gardens. Villagers of all ages water both gardens and fowl every evening (before eating supper garnered therefrom) by dipping watering cans into the old mill stream and hiking them across the road and into the low-walled gardens, where each plant or animal is personally known.

On their third date he presents her with a McMurray Hatchery catalog. She is thrilled. He invites her to choose some chicks. They can raise chickens together. By the sixth date they are discussing the benefits of electric fencing. He says that though it seems cruel to shock the birds, it is best because they learn quickly, and it keeps them in and the predators (foxes, coyotes, raccoons) out. The chickens must be kept safe, he says, and warm. For that there is an old farm shed that he will fix up for them.

Emboldened by her enthusiasm for all things home-grown, he presents her at her next visit with a duck from his freezer, already marinating by the time she arrives. She is quite happy. She loves duck! “But I didn’t know you raised duck,” she comments. “I thought you and Sue [ex-gf, but safely ex, she has on good authority] just had chickens?”

“Yes, but this is from before, when I lived on the hobby farm with Peggy.” She performs a rapid calculation. Will has been a serial monogamist, like herself, and has achieved solid long-term relationships, though never a marriage, which, also like herself, he is somewhat opposed to on principle. This shared principle is the same one her free-loving (though thrice-married) Communist grandfather held: “Why should the State approve a good friendship?” In any case, she’s looking at the rather craggy duck and doing a bit of arithmetic. It has not escaped her sharp writer’s eye that Will is rather thrifty. He saves things. His paper bags are folded and stacked under the sink. He washes all his plastic bags, with a particular fondness for ziplock baggies. He has an entire drawer of yogurt containers, cataloged by type and size. Some months later, when she is stung by bees while working in the chicken shed and asks if he has an antihistamine because her ear and neck are beginning to swell a little alarmingly, he rifles through his bathroom closet and produces instead an enormous trash bag crammed full of miniature hotel toiletries collected over several decades, and all of them entirely useless for this particular emergency. But, meanwhile, she is still adding up years. She is hungry, as she’s driven all the way from the city to visit him, and so she is a little concerned. This duck, apparently, predates his last long relationship. “How old is the duck?” she asks cautiously, not wishing to offend, but only willing to take carefully calculated risks.

“Um.” He looks up at the ceiling, thinking. Somehow, she suspects, he knows the answer will not put him in a flattering light. “Um,” he says, his beard wobbling just a bit, and his voice breaking ever so slightly, “let’s see. I was with Sue for *twelve* years...” His eyes swivel to meet hers. And off he goes tracing back his combined relationship/fowl/freezer history. Then, brightly, “It’s about fourteen, I think...But it’s

been in the freezer the whole time!” He pauses. “Sue didn’t like duck.” Then dolefully, “I’ve just been waiting for someone to share it with.”

She bravely advances on the duck when it is served. It is, to put it mildly, a trifle tough. A bit gamey? She eats the green beans, frozen decently from last summer, enjoys the garlicky organic roast potatoes. Chews politely on a very small duck bone, periodically dabs the corners of her mouth clean (pursing her lips nicely like Charlie Chaplin delicately eating his stewed leather boots), and leaves the rest uneaten, trying to hide it beneath her napkin. Equally politely, he tries not to notice.

Will saves all the bones from their meals. The rest of the food waste goes into the compost, or later, when they actually do have chickens, he gloriously dumps it on a metal tray in the chicken yard. The chickens come running, their flat-footed running—pok pok, pok pok—keeping them limber and fit. The first ones in find the mango peel from the fruit they have cut up for breakfast. They pok pok pok away, juicy yellow fruit in beaks, and her salivary glands remind her that this meat will taste very good. As for the old bones from dinner, she asks Will what he will do with them. “These are for the coyotes,” he replies. “I leave them by the side of the road. Except once the buffalo rancher thought I was dumping garbage and cussed me out. So now I have to leave them under cover of darkness.”

Her slight distaste for his thriftiness (reminiscent of the Depression generation, which he cannot claim to be of) is offset by the warmth of his kindness, even to the coyotes, and his grave concern for the safety of the chickens. He is also (unlike the ice-cold philosophy professor) an eager consumer of her tomato, mushroom, avocado, egg, alfalfa-sprout, and toast seduction special, a California-influenced version of the classic English fry-up. To this end they jointly purchase six layers among their fifty-three assorted chickens. Because who knows...perhaps this is a relationship that will last until winter when laying begins? And then, well, with fresh eggs...anything might be possible. She can go out to the shed and thaw her cold fingers around eggs kept warm in straw, nudging the hens aside, clucking to them and soothing them so they don’t peck. After all, they should be happy hens—they’ve been fed mango, crushed oyster shells to strengthen their own, and other good things. She can collect the four eggs a day and bring one to her face and feel the shell’s heat and inhale the dusty smell of the hen’s nest.

At least she won’t go hungry. N+1? Well, the food is good in the here and now. For this year at least. And then she’ll see what she can learn about breeding the next generation of chicks. N+1 in chickenville, with cows across the way and a buffalo ranch down the road. Her days of eating *belons* in Paris are long gone and far away, but maybe prairie oysters lie ahead, just beyond the horizon. ☺