

Dishing

Break out the monocles and tweezers, recession deniers! It's time to eat in a fancy restaurant.



The invitation was a big score for a moocher like me. An exceedingly well-upholstered friend in a major Texas city had asked George and me to celebrate his birthday at a swankoriffico restaurant that we couldn't have afforded to valet park at. I was looking forward to some miso-glazed salmon that my subprime income would never have qualified me for when, precisely one week before the big night, the economy vaporized.

Seven days of Great Depression retrospectives followed. We all learned that the country had been swamped by unearned swank. By the time I slinked into the restaurant, where wineglasses, silverware, candles, chandeliers, and the glycolically peeled faces of the diners gleamed with a Gilded Age lambency, I felt as if I should be wearing spats and a monocle and lighting cigars with \$100 bills.

When the tuxedoed waiter insisted upon settling my napkin onto my lap for me, I checked the window for peasants with pitchforks and torches. This was precisely the sort of scene that had made Marie Antoinette such a crowd-pleaser. The nerves and guilt didn't last long, however. Underwrite a few glasses of a particularly cheeky pinot noir for me and I stop caring where you've drilled or just how predatory your lending practices might be.

At the table, our host decided that we'd all have the "tasting menu," explaining, "When you order off the regular menu, they always give you too much."

"Too much" was not a concept I had been raised to associate with food. As a survivor of the competitive feeding frenzies that passed for mealtimes in my large, ravening family, complaining about a restaurant that gave you "too much" was like moaning about the bank that cashed your check, then burdened you with the correct number of wallet-bulking bills. Still, I did like the sound of "pairings of wine" and "thirteen courses."

A team of synchronized waiters brought out the first course. The foodies at the table went into shuddering raptures. A few of the assembled epicures took out pens, which

made me wonder what was wrong with the many forks supplied until they began writing little compare-and-contrast essays about the food. This gave me test anxiety. Since I'm a stress eater, I didn't know what to do.

Our host asked me how I liked my Wagyu beef carpaccio. Good clue; I had been curious what the translucent reddish sliver on my plate was. The white and red peppercorns that this shaving of meat hid beneath were boulders by comparison. (I thought my waiter might have lost a tinted contact.) Ever the grade-grubbing cheat, I sneaked a quick peek at the notes of the gourmet next to me and then rhapsodized about the sliver's "velvety marbling" and the "taste bud trance" I was pretending to experience.

Such a lie. My taste buds had been trained in childhood to distinguish two flavors: sweet and not sweet enough. These were the only flavors my family could all agree upon. Operating a failed chicken ranch had left my | **CONTINUED ON PAGE 180**

A COURSE IS A COURSE, OF COURSE, OF COURSE: But thirteen courses left me hungry for more. And less.

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father with a lifelong hatred of “that filthy bird.” Growing up on a farm in Indiana caused my mother to distrust fish. This left us with the hot dog and the hamburger. Though not technically sweet foods on the order of my family’s all-time favorite, sweet-and-sour pork, the dog and the burger could be transformed into a sweet food with sufficient applications of ketchup and pickle relish. While it’s easy to understand why I didn’t develop a gourmet palate, it’s harder to explain why we all didn’t die of diabetes and scurvy.

The next course was a “mini-loin” of quail. (The “mini” was inserted, no doubt, to differentiate it from the great steaming haunches of quail reserved for the Lumberjack Special.) The mini-loin needed a pair of tweezers. If you get a nutcracker with a lobster, surely you should be supplied with a pair of tweezers for cracking into something the size of a dung beetle.

More courses followed, all of them in portions usually reserved for controlled substances. We had tabs of butter-poached lobster, a microdot of seared artisanal foie gras, a gram of suckling pig with house-made bou-din noir and roasted sunchoke, a syringe of pumpkin velouté with brown butter. Fla-

vors were combined and concentrated into nutritional antimatter. Confits, sauces, coulis, mousses, and lots of “reductions.” Foods so dense that they created a black hole from which no light, only concentrated taste, could emerge. There was also cucumber and seaweed compressed into a cube, thus rendering a crispy, watery thing into a chewy, desiccated thing. Much like frying a Twinkie, it made me realize that this was possible without answering the larger question of why.

“So nonlinear,” one of the note takers explained.

Nonlinear, the kind of out-of-the-box thinking that brought us schizophrenia, explained the Dada-esque combinations of ingredients: peaches in olive oil with a lemon vinaigrette, sea bass draped in a melon and celery brunoise, lobster medallions wading in coconut water laced with vanilla. Many of these ingredients were designated as “heirloom,” in case anyone missed the family jewels aspect of this dining experience.

But the major expense with the tasting menu was not inherited vegetables; it had to be the Louis Quatorze level of pampering. Though I could have lived without waiters flapping out my napkin like a sandy beach towel and Zamboni-ing the tablecloth every time a crumb went astray, I did take a perverse

feminist delight in the whole production. It pleased me to see teams of men, serious as heart surgeons, fussing ardently over all these dollhouse offerings. The pampering was extreme, what with your meat being cut up for you and slurps of wine and tempting nibbles appearing as if by magic. Or by mom.

A dozen courses later, I was still hungry and thinking longingly of the vats of nonlinear combos I’d grown up on: macaroni and cheese, spaghetti and meatballs, beanies *avec les weenies*.

The thirteenth course was dessert. As I was pipetting up molecules of thyme-infused ice cream and cucumber sorbet with a cappuccino of forest mushrooms, I had reason to recall why thirteen is the most cursed of numbers. The birthday boy grabbed the check (good), then whipped out a calculator (bad).

Before we could say “balloon note,” we were presented with our portion of the bill. The total came with piercing insights into how sublime both my taste buds and bank balance really were, as well as the true essence of a “reduction.” They left me with one last question: “Brother, can you spare a mini-loin?”

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