

I SAW A SIGN the other day outside one of those Chinese-Japanese hybrids that are beginning to pop up around town, advertising “Discount Sushi.” I can’t imagine a better example of Things to Be Wary Of in the food department than bargain sushi. Yet the place had customers. I wonder, had the sign said “Cheap Sushi” or “Old Sushi,” if they’d still have eaten there.

Good food and good eating are about risk. Every once in a while an oyster, for instance, will make you sick to your stomach. Does this mean you should stop eating oysters? No way. The more exotic the food, the more adventurous the serious eater, the higher the likelihood of later discomfort. I’m not going to deny myself the pleasures of morcilla sausage, or sashimi or even ropa vieja at the local Cuban joint just because sometimes I feel bad a few hours after I’ve eaten them.

But there are some general principles I adhere to, things I’ve seen over the years that remain in my mind and have altered my eating habits. I may be perfectly willing to try the grilled lobster at an open-air barbecue shack in the Caribbean, where the refrigera-

are not. In fact, if you see the chef sitting unshaven at the bar, with a dirty apron on, one finger halfway up his nose, you can assume he's not handling your food any better behind closed doors. Your waiter looks like he just woke up under a bridge? If management allows him to wander out on the floor looking like that, God knows what they're doing to your shrimp!

“Beef Parmentier”? “Shepherd's pie”? “Chili special”? Sounds like leftovers to me. How about swordfish? I like it fine. But my seafood purveyor, when he goes out to dinner, won't eat it. He's seen too many of those three-foot-long parasitic worms that riddle the fish's flesh. You see a few of these babies—and we all do—and you won't be tucking into swordfish anytime soon.

tion is dubious and I can see with my own eyes the flies buzzing around the grill (I mean, how often am I in the Caribbean? I want **to** make the most of it!), but on home turf, with the daily business of eating in restaurants, there are some definite dos and don'ts I've chosen **to** live by.

I never order fish on Monday, unless I'm eating at Le Bernardin—a four-star restaurant where I *know* they are buying their fish directly **from** the source. I know how old most seafood is on Monday—about four **to** five days old!

You walk into a nice two-star place in Tribeca on a sleepy Monday evening and you see they're running a delicious-sounding special of Yellowfin Tuna, Braised Fennel, Confit Tomatoes and a Saffron Sauce. Why not go for it? Here are the two words that should leap out at you when you navigate the menu: "Monday" and "Special."

Here's how it works: The chef of this fine restaurant orders his fish on Thursday for delivery Friday morning. He's ordering a pretty good amount of it, too, as he's not getting another delivery until Monday morning. All right, *some* seafood purveyors make Saturday deliveries, but the market is closed Friday night. *It's the same fish from Thursday!* The chef is hoping **to** sell the bulk of that fish—your tuna—on Friday and Saturday nights, when he assumes it will be busy. He's assuming also that if he has a little left on Sunday, he can unload the rest of it then, as seafood salad for brunch, or as a special. Monday? It's merchandizing night, when whatever is left over **from** the weekend is used up, and hopefully

sold for money. Terrible, you say? Why doesn't he throw the left-over tuna out? The guy can get deliveries on *Monday*, right? Sure, he can . . . but what is preventing his seafood purveyor **from** thinking exactly the same way? The seafood vendor is emptying out *his* refrigerator, too! But the Fulton Street fish market is *open* on Monday morning, you say!! He can get *fresh!* I've been **to** the Fulton Street market at three o'clock on Monday morning, friends, and believe me, it does *not* inspire confidence. Chances are good that that tuna you're thinking of ordering on Monday night has

been kicking around in the restaurant's reach-ins, already cut and held with the *mise-en-place* on line, commingling with the chicken and the salmon and the lamb chops for four days, the reach-in doors swinging open every few seconds as the line cooks plunge their fists in, blindly feeling around for what they need. These are not optimum refrigeration conditions.

This is why you don't see a lot of codfish or other perishable items as a Sunday or Monday night special—they're not sturdy enough. The chef *knows*. He anticipates the likelihood that he might still have some fish lying around on Monday morning—and he'd like **to** get money for it without poisoning his customers.

Seafood is a tricky business. Red snapper may cost a chef only \$4.95 a pound, but that price includes the bones, the head, the scales and all the stuff that gets cut and thrown away. By the time it's cut, the actual cost of each piece of cleaned fillet costs the chef more than *twice* that amount, and he'd greatly prefer **to** sell it than toss it in the garbage. If it still smells okay on Monday night—you're eating it.

I don't eat mussels in restaurants unless I know the chef personally, or have seen, with my own eyes, how they store and hold their mussels for service. I love mussels. But in my experience, most cooks are less than scrupulous in their handling of them. More often than not, mussels are allowed **to** wallow in their own foul-smelling piss in the bottom of a reach-in. *Some* restaurants, I'm sure, have special containers, with convenient slotted bins,

which allow the mussels to drain while being held—and maybe, just maybe, the cooks at these places pick carefully through every order, mussel by mussel, making sure that *every* one is healthy and alive before throwing them into a pot. I haven't worked in too many places like that. Mussels are too easy. Line cooks consider mussels a gift; they take two minutes to cook, a few seconds to dump in a bowl, and *ba-da-bing*, one more customer taken care of—now they can concentrate on slicing the damn duck breast. I have had, at a very good Paris brasserie, the misfortune to eat a single bad mussel, one treacherous little guy hidden among an other-

wise impeccable group. It slammed me shut like a book, sent me crawling to the bathroom shitting like a mink, clutching my stomach and projectile vomiting. I prayed that night. For many hours. And, as you might assume, I'm the worst kind of atheist. Fortunately, the French have liberal policies on doctor's house calls and affordable health care. But I do not care to repeat that experience. No thank you on the mussels. If I'm hungry for mussels, I'll pick the good-looking ones out of *your* order.

How about seafood on Sunday? Well . . . sometimes, but never if it's an obvious attempt to offload aging stuff, like seafood salad vinaigrette or seafood frittata, on a brunch menu. Brunch menus are an open invitation to the cost-conscious chef, a dumping ground for the odd bits left over from Friday and Saturday nights or for the scraps generated in the normal course of business. You see a fish that would be much better served by quick grilling with a slice of lemon, suddenly all dressed up with vinaigrette? For *en vinaigrette* on the menu, read "preserved" or "disguised."

While we're on brunch, how about hollandaise sauce? Not for me. Bacteria *love* hollandaise. And hollandaise, that delicate emulsion of egg yolks and clarified butter, *must* be held at a temperature not too hot nor too cold, lest it break when spooned over your poached eggs. Unfortunately, this lukewarm holding temperature

is also the favorite environment for bacteria to copulate and reproduce in. Nobody I know has *ever* made hollandaise to order. Most likely, the stuff on your eggs was made hours ago and held on station. Equally disturbing is the likelihood that the butter used in the hollandaise is melted table butter, heated, clarified and strained to get out all the bread crumbs and cigarette butts. Butter is expensive, you know. Hollandaise is a veritable petri dish of biohazards. And how long has that Canadian bacon been aging in the walk-in anyway? Remember, brunch is served only once a week—on the weekends. Buzzword here, “Brunch Menu.” Translation? “Old, nasty odds and ends, and twelve dollars for two eggs with a free Bloody Mary.” One other point about brunch. Cooks hate brunch. A wise chef will deploy his *best* line cooks on Friday and Saturday

nights; he'll be reluctant to schedule those same cooks early Sunday morning, especially since they probably went out after work Saturday and got hammered until the wee hours. Worse, brunch is demoralizing to the serious line cook. Nothing makes an aspiring Escoffier feel more like an army commissary cook, or Mel from Mel's Diner, than having to slop out eggs over easy with bacon and eggs Benedict for the Sunday brunch crowd. Brunch is punishment block for the "B" Team cooks, or where the farm team of recent dishwashers learn their chops. Most chefs are off on Sundays, too, so supervision is at a minimum. Consider that before ordering the seafood frittata.

I *will* eat bread in restaurants. Even if I *know* it's probably been recycled off someone else's table. The reuse of bread is an industry-wide practice. I saw a recent news exposé, hidden camera and all, where the anchor was *shocked* . . . *shocked* to see unused bread returned to the kitchen and then sent right back onto the floor. Bullshit. I'm sure that some restaurants explicitly instruct their Bengali busboys to throw out all that unused bread—which amounts to about 50 percent—and maybe some places actually do it. But when it's busy, and the busboy is crumbing tables, emptying ashtrays, refilling water glasses, making espresso and cappuccino, hustling dirty dishes to the dishwasher, and he sees a basket full of untouched bread, most times he's going to use it. This is a fact of life. This doesn't bother me and shouldn't surprise you. Okay, maybe once in a while some tubercular hillbilly has been coughing and spraying in the general direction of that bread basket, or some tourist who's just returned from a walking tour of the wetlands of West Africa sneezes—you might find that prospect upsetting. But you might just as well avoid air travel, or subways, equally dodgy environments for airborne transmission of disease. Eat the bread.

I *won't* eat in a restaurant with filthy bathrooms. This isn't a hard call. They let you *see* the bathrooms. If the restaurant can't be bothered to replace the puck in the urinal or keep the toilets and floors clean, then just imagine what their refrigeration and work spaces look like. Bathrooms are relatively easy to clean. Kitchens