

Chilean sea bass? Trendy. Expensive. More than likely frozen. This came as a surprise to me when I visited the market recently. Apparently the great majority of the stuff arrives frozen solid, still on the bone. In fact, as I said earlier, the whole Fulton Street market is not an inspiring sight. Fish is left to sit, un-iced, in leaking crates, in the middle of August, right out in the open. What isn't bought early is sold for cheap later. At 7:00 A.M. the Korean and Chinese buyers, who've been sitting in local bars *waiting* for the market to be near closing, swoop down on the overextended fish-monger and buy up what's left at rock-bottom prices. The next folks to arrive will be the cat-food people. Think about that when you see the "Discount Sushi" sign.

"Saving for well-done" is a time-honored tradition dating back to cuisine's earliest days: meat and fish cost money. Every piece of cut, fabricated food must, ideally, be sold for three or even four times its cost in order for the chef to make his "food cost percent." So what happens when the chef finds a tough, slightly skanky end-cut of sirloin that's been pushed repeatedly to the back of the pile? He can throw it out, but that's a total loss, representing a three-fold loss of what it cost him per pound. He can feed it to the family, which is the same as throwing it out. Or he can "save for well-done"—serve it to some rube who *prefers* to eat his meat or fish incinerated into a flavorless, leathery hunk of carbon, who won't be

able to tell if what he's eating is food or flotsam. Ordinarily, a proud chef would hate this customer, hold him in contempt for destroying his fine food. But not in this case. The dumb bastard is *paying for the privilege of eating his garbage!* What's not to like?

Vegetarians, and their Hezbollah-like splinter faction, the vegans, are a persistent irritant to any chef worth a damn. To me, life without veal stock, pork fat, sausage, organ meat, demi-glace or even stinky cheese is a life not worth living. Vegetarians are the enemy of everything good and decent in the human spirit, an affront to all I stand for, the pure enjoyment of food. The body, these waterheads imagine, is a temple that should not be polluted by animal protein. It's healthier, they insist, though every vegetarian waiter I've worked with is brought down by any *rumor* of a cold. Oh, I'll accommodate them, I'll rummage around for *something* to feed them, for a "vegetarian plate," if called on to do so. Fourteen dollars for a few slices of grilled eggplant and zucchini suits my food cost fine. But let me tell you a story.

A few years back, at a swinging singles joint on Columbus Avenue, we had the misfortune to employ a sensitive young man as a waiter who, in addition to a wide and varied social life involving numerous unsafe sexual practices, was something of a jailhouse lawyer. After he was fired for incompetence, he took it on himself to sue the restaurant, claiming that a gastrointestinal problem, caused apparently by amoebas, was a result of his work there. Management took this litigation seriously enough to engage the services of an epidemiologist, who obtained stool samples from *every* employee. The results—which I was privy to—were enlightening to say the least. The waiter's strain of amoebas, it was concluded, was common to persons of his lifestyle, and to many others. What was interesting were the results of our Mexican and South American prep cooks. These guys were *teeming* with numerous varieties of critters, none of which, in their cases, caused illness or discomfort. It was explained that the results in our restaurant were no different from the results at any other restaurant and that, particularly among my recently arrived Latino brethren, this sort

of thing is normal—that their systems are used to it, and it causes them no difficulties at all. Amoebas, however, are transferred most easily through the handling of raw, uncooked vegetables, particularly during the washing of salad greens and leafy produce. So think about that next time you want to exchange deep tongue kisses with a vegetarian.

I'm not even going to talk about blood. Let's just say we cut ourselves a lot in the kitchen and leave it at that.

Pigs are filthy animals, say some, when explaining why they deny themselves the delights of pork. Maybe they should visit a chicken ranch. America's favorite menu item is also the most likely to make you ill. Commercially available chickens, for the most part (we're not talking about kosher and expensive free-range birds), are loaded with salmonella. Chickens are dirty. They eat their own feces, are kept packed close together like in a rush-hour subway and when handled in a restaurant situation are most likely to infect other foods or cross-contaminate them. And chicken is boring. Chefs see it as a menu item for people who don't know what they want to eat.

Shrimp? All right, if it looks fresh, smells fresh and the restaurant is busy, guaranteeing turnover of product on a regular basis. But shrimp toast? I'll pass. I walk into a restaurant with a mostly empty dining room, and an unhappy-looking owner staring out the window? I'm not ordering shrimp.

This principle applies to anything on a menu, actually, especially something esoteric and adventurous like, say, bouillabaisse. If a restaurant is known for steak, and doesn't seem to be doing much business, how long do you think those few orders of clams and mussels and lobster and fish have been sitting in the refrigerator, waiting for someone like you to order them? The key is rotation. If the restaurant is busy, and you see bouillabaisse flying out the kitchen doors every few minutes, then it's probably a good bet. But a big and varied menu in a slow, half-empty place? Those less popular items like broiled mackerel and calf liver are kept moldering in a dark corner of the reach-in because they look good on the

menu. You might not actually want to eat them. Look at your waiter's face. He knows. It's another reason to be polite to your waiter: he could save your life with a raised eyebrow or a sigh. If he likes you, maybe he'll stop you from ordering a piece of fish he knows is going to hurt you. On the other hand, maybe the chef has ordered him, under pain of death, to move that codfish before it begins to *really* reek. Observe the body language and take note.

Watchwords for fine dining? Tuesday through Saturday. Busy. Turnover. Rotation. Tuesdays and Thursdays are the best nights to order fish in New York. The food that comes in Tuesday is fresh, the station prep is new, and the chef is well rested after a Sunday or a Monday off. It's the real start of the new week, when you've got the goodwill of the kitchen on your side. Fridays and Saturdays, the food is fresh, but it's busy, so the chef and cooks can't pay as much attention to your food as they—and you—might like. And weekend diners are universally viewed with suspicion, even contempt, by both cooks and waiters alike; they're the slackjaws, the rubes, the out-of-towners, the well-done-eating, undertipping, bridge-and-tunnel preheater hordes, in to see *Cats* or *Les Miz* and never to return. Weekday diners, on the other hand, are the home team—potential regulars, whom all concerned want to make happy. Rested and ready after a day off, the chef is going to put his best foot forward on Tuesday; he's got his best-quality product coming in and he's had a day or two to think of creative things to

through the rush.

If the restaurant is clean, the cooks and waiters well groomed, the dining room busy, everyone seems to actually *care* about what they're doing—not just trying to pick up a few extra bucks between head shots and auditions for *Days of Our Lives*—chances are you're in for a decent meal. The owner, chef and a bored-looking waiter sitting at a front table chatting about soccer scores? Plumber walking through the dining room with a toilet snake? Bad signs. Watch the trucks pull up outside the restaurant delivery entrance

in the morning if you're in the neighborhood. Reputable vendors of seafood, meat and produce? Good sign. If you see sinister, unmarked step-vans offloading all three at once, or the big tractor trailers from one of the national outfits—you know the ones, “Servicing Restaurants and Institutions for Fifty Years”—remember what institutions they're talking about: cafeterias, schools, prisons. Unless you *like* frozen, portion-controlled “convenience food.”

Do all these horrifying assertions frighten you? Should you stop eating out? Wipe yourself down with antiseptic towelettes every time you pass a restaurant? No way. Like I said before, your body is *not* a temple, it's an amusement park. Enjoy the ride. Sure, it's a “play you pay” sort of an adventure, but you knew that already, every time you ever ordered a taco or a dirty-water hot dog. If you're willing to risk some slight lower GI distress for one of those Italian sweet sausages at the street fair, or for a slice of pizza you just *know* has been sitting on the board for an hour or two, why not take a chance on the good stuff? All the great developments of classical cuisine, the first guys to eat sweetbreads, to try unpasteurized Stilton, to discover that snails actually taste *good* with enough garlic butter, these were daredevils, innovators and



desperados. I don't know who figured out that if you crammed rich food into a goose long enough for its liver to balloon up to more than its normal body weight you'd get something as good as foie gras—I believe it was those kooky Romans—but I'm very grateful for their efforts. Popping raw fish into your face, especially in prerefrigeration days, might have seemed like sheer madness to some, but it turned out to be a pretty good idea. They say that Rasputin used to eat a little arsenic with breakfast every day, building up resistance for the day that an enemy might poison him, and that sounds like good sense to me. Judging from accounts of his death, the Mad Monk wasn't fazed at all by the stuff; it took repeated beatings, a couple of bullets and a long fall off a bridge into a frozen river to finish the job. Perhaps we, as serious diners, should emulate his example. We are, after all, citizens of the

world—a world filled with bacteria, some friendly, some not so friendly. Do we really want to travel in hermetically sealed pope-mobiles through the rural provinces of France, Mexico and the Far East, eating only in Hard Rock Cafés and McDonald's? Or do we want to eat without fear, tearing into the local stew, the humble taqueria's mystery meat, the sincerely offered gift of a lightly grilled fish head? I know what I want. I want it all. I want to try everything once. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, Señor Tamale Stand Owner, Sushi-chef-san, Monsieur Bucket-head. What's that feathered game bird hanging on the porch, getting riper by the day, the body nearly ready to drop off? I want some.

I have no wish to die, nor do I have some unhealthy fondness for dysentery. If I *know* you're storing your squid at room temperature next to a cat box, I'll get my squid down the street, thank you very much. I will continue to do my seafood eating on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, because I know better, because I can wait. But if I have one chance at a full-blown dinner of blowfish gizzard—even if I have not been properly introduced to the chef—and I'm in a strange, Far Eastern city and my plane leaves tomorrow? I'm going for it. You only go around once.