

Gourmet

2000s Archive

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70S INTRODUCTION

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The 1970s were intimately connected with getting, spending, and the self. Everywhere in America, assorted remnants of the '60s counterculture were being drawn into highly marketable cults of either nostalgia or radical shock experimentation (both of which were increasingly visible in restaurant décor). People did not know whether the best economic response to the compass needle of the times was alarm at the rising cost of living or shop-until-you-drop bravado. They did, however, know that there was more and more to shop for. An amazingly expanded spectrum of products was being offered for sale in specialty foods stores, cookware shops, and a new breed of urban neighborhood grocery. Ingredients that the magazine had recently thought not worth insisting on (short-grain Italian rice to make risotto, for example), or felt obligated to explain to uninitiated readers before 1970 (e.g., fresh coriander, or cilantro), were proliferating in specialty foods shops within a few years. By 1980, it would have been hard to find a single citizen who didn't at least recognize the word *wok*.

At GOURMET, this translated into an intense emphasis on *things*. The magazine began carrying profuse photographic displays of suggested Christmas gifts every December, as well as travel features headed "Shopping in Venice" (or in Madrid, or in Copenhagen, and so forth). The Gourmet's Menus photographs, painstakingly set up by a team of skilled stylists and gloriously shot by Luis Lemus, showcased extraordinary ensembles of china, silverware, fabrics, and other merchandise.

GOURMET was also the beneficiary of a growing popular interest in gastronomy—something that had been becoming steadily more apparent since the early '60s. Culinary trends were now frequently emblazoned in mainstream news headlines. Some of their trajectories can be traced in the magazine—for example, the beginnings of the mineral-water fan club (as portrayed by Joseph Wechsberg in 1970), the advent of food processors (the subject of a 1975 feature), and, more significantly, the first culinary changing of the guard acknowledged by gourmet since its inception. Nouvelle cuisine and cuisine *minceur* would speedily erase from many minds the notion that the best chefs were the true keepers of the ancient traditions. The nascent foodie community began hailing an age without precedent, one in which the chef fearlessly seized the roles of auteur, pathbreaker, and lifestyle enhancer. In 1972, a young wine merchant, Gerald Asher, began to share his personal experience in a new column called Wine Journal—a distinct departure from the usual snobbery attached to the topic. Though his initial focus was still France, his third column—about French country wines and the foods they go with—signaled a less predictable approach. Veteran Caroline Bates, who had recently moved to the West Coast, was assigned to conduct a California branch of Spécialités de la Maison. It was a timely and welcome acknowledgment that the American restaurant scene could no longer be envisioned as confined to New York. Bates's eclectic coverage would furnish rare glimpses into the profound ethnic changes in post-'60s America.

Yet GOURMET's pages also started to reflect a certain understanding that expanding horizons and exciting novelties might not be all they seemed. The magazine had, inescapably, entered middle age. The disciplined writing of fine contributors telling people what to see in Hong Kong or Australia didn't open magic windows in the same way as the idiosyncratic prose that had enthralled the less traveled readers of the '40s. The exotic was now becoming old hat; one of many North Africa stories that appeared during the '70s bore the all-too-revealing title "Tunisia Beyond Couscous." Ten years earlier, couscous had been an unusual term and Tunisia a relatively offbeat destination.

Early on, the most perceptive writers began to sound what seem, in retrospect, notes of disenchantment or at least unease. By 1971, Donald Aspinwall Allan (then the Spécialités de la Maison reviewer and a versatile all-round contributor) was sadly contrasting the riches of the old Pike Place Market in Seattle with the "relentless worldwide spread of huge merchandising complexes"—meaning supermarkets. "The road into town could be in Ohio or anywhere else in the world," Lillian Langseth-Christensen wrote from Bangkok in 1970, and in the same year former associate editor James Beard (who had left after a falling-out with Earle MacAusland in 1950 and then been welcomed back in triumph in 1969) mused, "Much of the fun and excitement is lost when you can pick up a menu and order the same lobster dish in California as in Damariscotta, Maine. That, I suppose, is what we mean by progress." What they were trying to express was a paradoxical sense of loss in the midst of plenty.

In Ouchy, the cleanliness and the signs reading "*change*," an abbreviation for "Come on folks, change your money and spend it merrily," remind visitors that this is Switzerland, where the postman and the cash register always ring twice. —Joseph Wechsberg,

"Le Beau-Rivage: Switzerland's Snug Harbor," September 1974

"Chincoteague Bay oysters," a friend told us, "are probably what God had in mind when he created the oyster." —Peggy Hardigree,

"Fishing the Delmarva Peninsula," July 1979

Following an early English custom, many Charlestonians still observe what is locally called the two o'clock dinner. The first course, a delicate liverwurst in aspic, was followed by a cup of she-crab soup. (Even today street vendors in Charleston call out "she crab" loudly and charge more for it than they do for he crab.) —James Villas,

"Down in the Lowcountry," March 1973

If the quality controls the people developed to make Cognac had been extended to French government, France would be running the world. —Richard Condon,

"Cognac & Cigars," December 1975

In Taiwan, one sentence that was often repeated when friends greeted each other was "*Ni ch'ih pao le, mei yu?*" ("Have you eaten or not?") Clearly, I had come to the right place. —Nina Simonds,

"Chinese Cuisine: Seasonings," January 1979

The Bhutanese have such gentle manners that it was clear that the only raised voices we would hear during our stay would be our own. —Stephanie Stokes,

"Bhutan: A Realm of Shangri-La," September 1976

Local mineral water tastes like liquid in which rusty iron chains have been immersed. Peter Ustinov has said it tastes like gunpowder. —John Bainbridge,

"Diary of a Leningrad Weekend," April 1978

After Marie Antoinette appeared in public with a potato flower in her hair, and Louis XVI with one in his buttonhole, and it became known that potatoes were served at the royal table, the lowly tuber was regarded as quite à la mode. —James Beard,

"Potatoes," May 1971

I would like the Plat plain / With lucid leek and shredded shamrock / A tensile turnip, a complacent tomato, / And one preternatural potato. —Senator Eugene J. McCarthy,

"My Companion Orders Dinner," August 1975

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