

## 1. The Fewest Idiots

My heart jumps like a toad in a potato sack when the arriving passengers pour into the gate. My neck rockets backward and the airport ceiling shadows fly like Raffaella's hair. The loudspeaker crackles—Italian first, then English—to placate the delayed. They will clean the plane, then we will board. I watch the yawning arrivals shuffle past my chair. Decide which are Italian and which are American by the way they hold their mouths. Some mouths simply look as if they've been exposed to better tastes than others.

I throw my arm around my backpack, resist the temptation to whisper sweet nothings to its zippers, and lean forward. In my lean, between my shoes, I see Barolo, Italy and Il Gioco dell'Oca, Raffaella's farmhouse bed-and-breakfast. I see Pongo the Great Pyrenees sprinting over Il Gioco's driveway stones; Michele, Raffaella's father, pointing at me, roaring, "Chicago! Chicago!"; Adriana, her mother, shaking tomato-wet hands over her head at the outdoor grill; Raffaella touching my shoulders; her son, Niccolo, throwing a rock at the dog.

My chest swells right here in O'Hare as I remember Raffaella's words when, during my first trip to Barolo, I departed the region via Satti bus after a mere four days. Though I certainly didn't earn the designation, I felt like a member of the family and, kicking my backpack against the bus stop sign, Raffaella said to me, "If you ever want to come back and work the wine harvest, I will talk to some people for you."

These words stained my brain like iodine. I went back to Chicago, then moved to Alaska. Three years passed like a hiccup while I scrambled eggs and fried sausage at Juneau's Channel Bowl Café. It was when Al, a 77-year-old ex-goldpanner, after a yolkyful of over-mediums, espoused his philosophy, *In a world full of idiots, you have to go to the place with the fewest idiots*, that Raffaella's offer rang itself over my frontal lobe. Then, Al looked up, took a sip of his coffee, ran a hand over the length of his gray beard, scowled, and spit his drink back into his "Alaska Ship Chandlers" mug.

"Terrible!" he bellowed, "No taste!"

That night, from a payphone on the Wharf, I called Raffaella. When she picked up with her classic "Pronto," I nearly lost my lines: my pleading (but not-too-pleading) speech about staying with her indefinitely—maybe the entire six months spanning Barolo's fall and winter, more reverently known as truffle season and the grape harvest. I'm hesitant to admit it, but I think I even said something about cleansing the soul.

Growing up in my family, food was the thing that emerged from the microwave, steaming and soggy. A rubbery omelette. A desiccated matzo ball in watery broth. A steak going green. A corpse of broccoli. But my mother treated our crap with ceremony. It was with bad food that we dealt with tragedy or comedy or mediocrity. For my birthday, microwaved hamburgers with iceberg lettuce; for my father's, microwaved lamb shanks. It was always something that once had a bone or an entire skeleton. We loved meat. In my family, to die young and full was expected. We gracefully upheld the pillars of heart disease and diabetes. Saturated fat and clogged arteries kept us warm

through the winter. In my family, enjoying food meant overeating. I became a fat teenager.

The winter of 1986, I tried so hard to be cool. This was my first year in high school, Bon Jovi's "Slippery When Wet" had just come out, and the December temperatures in suburban Chicago were way above average. You could see the sidewalks through the ice. Girls would come to class in shorts or skirts and teachers would scold them for their weatherly indiscretion. I tried so hard, but Bon Jovi was this foreign thing—this upsweep of mislabeled heavy metal, rooted in AquaNet hairspray.

My father had brought me up on classic rock—Chicago's 105.9 WCKG and the rough sexy DJ voices of Patty Hays and Kitty Lowie. The way they talked about Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull, their voices gruff and throaty, carrying the mysteries of age and cigarette, was enough to make a male high school freshman dismiss Bon Jovi, and, in turn, his coolness, as sonically trivial.

When driving together, my father and I would pick up McDonalds (he would remove the buns from his two Big Macs and press the four patties into his mouth, one hand twisting the steering wheel), and listen to Simon and Garfunkel and the Eagles. We dissected "I am a Rock" for its metaphor and contexts, and "Witchy Woman," tying the allure of the invisible Patty and Kitty to the windblown black of Stevie Nicks.

But this wasn't cool. Not in 1986. I knew damned well that if I couldn't quote Bon Jovi with some study-hall regularity, I'd never make it to the upper echelon of Adlai E. Stevenson High. The song that year was "You Give Love a Bad Name,"—*Shot through the heart!* and I soon would be, by a rosemary sprig. But I hadn't yet found food, my hopeful catalyst into coolness and, at the time, I had to rest with Zeppelin, my

thirteen-year-old feelings uncontrived and implacable, hidden in the folds of those short winter skirts.

Given his Big Mac habits, my father was an Adkins advocate before Adkins was Adkins—before it was good for you, then bad for you, then really bad for you. My mother catered to this. Our dinners were spent at the table, the kitchen television always on, politely watching my father struggle through troughs of chicken wings, rib tips. He drank his water from a plastic bottle, one of those with an extended straw-like appendage. (In the refrigerator, he distinguished his water bottle from my mother's by putting a rubberband around its middle). He would stuff his mouth full of meat, swallow, put his hands flat on the tabletop, and regain his breath. *Whooo-whooo-whooo*. Then, he would bow his head to the water bottle's straw, not exerting the effort to lift it to his lips, sip a few, then return to the troughs. *Whooo-whooo-whooo*. This, I thought, was eating. As a child, I equated fullness with discomfort. If I wasn't uncomfortable, I wasn't full.

As I grew older, and my own breathing shortened with each Friday football game in the neighborhood park, and my grandfather died at 66, I began to wonder: what was the matter with fruits and vegetables? Somehow, I didn't anymore want to be part of a familial food culture that made of the tomato the devil's candy. If I couldn't get into Bon Jovi, perhaps I could get into the four food groups and a little exercise.

I began running, slowly, around the block twice a week. Though barely five feet tall and quite round, I had my eye on a slot on my high school's high-jump team. That over-the-bar descent onto that giant sponge of a mat just looked like too much fun.

I read cookbooks and food magazines, revising my approach to edibles and their role in my survival. In the bathroom, I would thumb through the back of *Chicago*

magazine's dining guide, circling the interesting places in red pen—the ethnic haunts, the then-nebulous four-star establishments granted the clandestine designation of *fine dining*.

I began to check them off.

When the Food Network was launched, I watched it voraciously, taking notes.

When I left for college, I left my most expensive graduation gift behind—the microwave.

I began cooking—fucking up, almost succeeding, fucking up. I got serious, reading Chef Thomas Keller's treatise on trussing a chicken, Charlie Trotter's manifesto on the potato.

After moving to Alaska, I waited for Ferran Adriá's "El Bulli" cookbook to drop below a hundred bucks on Amazon.com. When it never did, I read all the free articles about it.

My friends got into cooking. My male friends grew their hair long, my female friends shaved their heads. We told ourselves we were these rebel chefs, self-important culinary militants who were mediocre line cooks at best. At worst, we were over-seasoners. A handful of salt. A liter of cumin. We made up jailhouse stories for each other, though none of us had seen the interior of a cell. We drew prison tattoos on each other's forearms with Papermate pens.

We called ourselves a catering company and got a few gigs—small Alaskan New Year's parties, aunts' birthdays. We tried to make our own stocks, prepped feverishly. We discussed for half-hours how the onion was supposed to be chopped. How each piece was to be a uniform arc. We read articles on the importance of proper seasoning, then seasoned our food improperly. So meticulously, we served our flawed food, received our polite compliments.

I took restaurant jobs—dishwasher, prep cook, server, garde manger, grill, stockboy for the wine. Watching the other chefs work the line, I realized my militancy was an illusion. These people were for real. In the restaurant kitchen, the hierarchy trumped the collegial. I was tired of being yelled at. I would never really be a chef—didn't have the calloused tear ducts for it—and began to wonder: Could tasting be a talent?

So I tasted. A lot. Eventually, I shed my excess fat, uncovered the illusive concept of moderation. A concept that was about to be deconstructed, rearranged, and rebuilt by Italy.

As the airport loudspeaker crackles, the entire gate stands as one, all of us travelers on the same ark, ready for an ocean of wine, and for boarding. The indefinite status of my stay prohibits me from taking a room at Il Gioco (financially-speaking, of course), and I look at my backpack and envision the olive green tent coiled tightly inside. Per Raffaella's suggestion, I am to set up my lodging in her outdoor garden, just around the corner from the luscious animal-fat aromatics of Adriana's hallowed outdoor grill. She is allowing me to camp on her property for free.

I watch as the elderly and the children-riddled families approach, then disappear into the jetway. I think of steel beasts and their bellies and of Jonah and Pinocchio. He was Italian wasn't he? When they call my row, I stand even before the English translation. I don't need it anymore. I am dumping the crutches. I am starting to heal. My chest opens like a Pentecostal hymnal, a bottle of wine. Against the gray sky, the plane shines like a bullet. It is September.

