

The Cook as Tourist

My mother always said you could tell a great deal about a community by its markets and its newspapers. That being said, whenever we traveled the first thing we bought when visiting a new city or hamlet was a newspaper. If there were several, we bought them all. After all, they represented different points of view.

Almost invariably on these trips we'd end up in some food emporium or other, be it supermarket or specialty shop. My father, who was an inveterate grocery shopper and bargain/quality hunter, easily could be persuaded to stop in such places.

By the time I graduated from college, the mold was rather firmly set. A degree majors in journalism and history spurred my own curiosity to peruse the local papers. My fascination with food was still in its pupal state, but it was definitely there.

It was certainly a pleasure, when we married, to find that my husband had these curiosities. Together and apart we've plunged into new towns, first buying the papers, then heading for the markets. Sometimes, we've found merely a small community supermarket where locals have let a chair grocer dictate taste, but more often it has led us up some fascinating trails. Certainly the basement food section of a large department store in Taipei or the East Gate Market in Seoul (worth an essay of its own that I wrote once) or the open market in Kuching, Borneo were exotic highlights, as were my singular forays into open markets in France.

The great frustration, of course, is that there you are with fabulous, fascinating ingredients and no way to explore them except with your eyes and nose. It's the nexus of frustration and freedom.

I haven't solved the problem for France yet. I long to have some American friend with a well-equipped apartment in Paris say "oh why don't you take my place for a week while I'm Deauville? (or Paradou or Vonnay or Vezelay or wherever)", but it hasn't happened yet. Anyway, then I'd have to practice my market French and (heaven help me) haggle for sport.

We have, however, found a delightful solution for our relaxation vacations in California's Monterey Peninsula. Not only does the area abound with quaint bed and breakfast hotels, but it is also populated with establishments that offer rea-

sonably equipped cottages or suites with kitchens. The area also abounds with delightful raw materials to titillate any serious cook: artichokes from Castroville, mushrooms of various kinds grown inland in the county, local fish and shellfish, and garlic from Gilroy. Local custom meat counters offer fine red meat and poultry, although I've yet to find an easy source for feathered or furred game.

Cooking in a rented suite or cottage might seem to cramp the style of someone who has all kinds of ingredients and equipment at her fingertips at home. After all, the wonderful batterie de cuisine collected over more than 30 years has been left behind, along with fresh herbs and bottles of wine. Yet the very act of simplification brings new insight. There's no temptation to mask a delicate flavor with a complicated and interesting sauce if the ingredients for the sauce aren't worth buying just for a short visit.

On a recent visit, we arrived to check in at 2:00 p.m. and after a leisurely walk on the beach retreated to a large, well-equipped local supermarket we frequent when we're in town. The initial foray produced a box of aluminum foil and paper napkins for sealing butter and blotting ingredients, an onion, a bunch of parsley, a bunch of scallions, a small head of stalk celery, a lemon, and a bunch of spinach from the produce department. The custom meat department produced chicken fajitas, a quick solution for a tired person who had been traveling all day. Fajitas can always be sautéed or stir-fried and the seasonings adjusted to the occasion. A visit to a nearby wine shop supplied us with a bottle of Edna Valley Chardonnay in a recent year— young but delightfully drinkable.

I always travel with a few tools and supplies of my own when I know I'm going to rent facilities that include a kitchen. I wouldn't expect any rental unit to stock the kinds of knives I like. The one we rented last had no cutting knife (board for that matter). I had packed a small 6-inch chef's knife, an old Sabatier from the days before the company sold its name with a carbon-steel blade and a zip-zap ceramic steel, a small Inox serrated knife for cutting tomatoes and breads, and an L.L. Bean spreader, flexible bladed, serrated on one side. I'd also packed a pair of tongs and two wooden spoons. (One's nice, but you can toss and stir fry with two.) My other packed supplies included a small bottle of cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil and Champagne vinegar, both of which I might have bought locally but not in such small quantities, a pepper grinder loaded with white peppercorns (for fish, shellfish, and anything else), and a bottle of dried thyme leaves.

Dinner "at home" our first evening was stir-fried fajitas, the store's seasoning enhanced with a dribble of olive oil and a tiny splash of vinegar, and a spinach salad with added color from carrots and scallions.

On another evening we had quickly sautéed Petrale sole, fresh and glistening from the Liberty Fish market on Fisherman's wharf with another spinach salad and two kinds of sautéed fresh mushrooms: crimini and shiitake.

Of course eating in all the time is no holiday even for the most devoted cook. It's fun to pepper the sojourn with a taste of eating in and eating out. After a lunch at Carmel's marvelous Rio Grill, and dinner on Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey, one day we were ready for lighter fare of our own the next day.

When you plan to cook on holiday, don't anticipate that you'll be greeted by a fully equipped kitchen in your rental spot. When anticipating a cook's holiday I always travel with three knives, a small cutting board (a lightweight cutting mat also works), a can opener, two wooden spoons, a tablecloth (checkered), cloth napkins (an elegant splurge), two small silver candle holders, and candles. Buy fresh herbs when you get there, and don't be afraid to try something new.

If you travel to cook, always pack your knives in your checked baggage. And then expect to be questioned. It's simply a part of our lives these days.

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