

Markets, as in "Going Marketing"

Probably because my parents enjoyed shopping for food and took me with them, some of my most pleasant experiences as a child were "marketing". (As you may now realize, this has nothing to do with Wall Street or Futures or the Nikei. This is the simple act of visiting one's food suppliers, something that once was a pleasant social experience instead of the dull, sterile, impersonal experience of grabbing a few things at your local chain supermarket.)

I remember going with my mother to Fruitland, a green grocery in my small upstate New York city, where we would get fresh fruits and vegetables. Among all the wonderful-smelling goodies I could barely see because I was so small, were lugs of unshelled almonds. Because I was somewhat of an anomaly—an interested little child, the owner would let me have almonds to eat. Somehow we cracked the shells with our fingernails. How could we have done that? It doesn't matter, the almonds were wonderful.

Two doors from Fruitland was an A&P, which resided in an old building that was originally the Opera House in a day when my little city had been a center of industry — and grander place. I remember especially that the market had beautiful hardwood floors. The produce department there was dismal. The rear door always smelled of overripe vegetables and some kind of cleaning grains that they spread on the floor before they swept out. The meat department, however, had real live people behind the counter and cases of ready-cut chops, roasts, and ground meat. This was during World War II, and when one saw a steak one was never quite sure whether it had come from an old Holstein-Friesian heifer from some's local dairy herd. Once we had a steak that was so tough when broiled that my mother gave up and attempted to turn it into a pot roast. After hours of cooking it was still tough. It must have gone to the cat or been ground up for another dish. Rarely did anything like that go out in the garbage. But back to the A&P. It had the most wonderful coffee grinder, and when my parents shopped there I would go and stand next to the grinder just to sniff the wonderful aromas. The scent itself was warm and delicious and made me yearn for the day when I would be grown enough to enjoy the liquid that was the end result of the grinder's noisy activity. A&P sold three grades of coffee: something in a yellow bag that we never bought, something called "Red Circle," and something snazzy in the black bag called "Bokar". In my limited world, Bokar was hot stuff. Years later I would still remember its scent fondly as the stimulus that finally led me to explore Yemini, Ethiopian, and Jamaican Blue Mountain, and Kona beans.

Around the corner was a fascinating shop called Bassett's that supplied us, on Saturdays, with cold cuts for sandwiches. They made their own, I think, and I was spoiled for such stuff, but it wasn't until I reached adulthood and was living in New Jersey that I again found such a place. Bassett's had cheese, too. It was American cheese, but it was serious American cheese, cheddar made on the farms of New York State and its neighbors. Bassett's had specialty items, too, like sardines and other fascinating mysteries that a 4-year-old wasn't ready to fathom, but it smelled good there and always promised something fun for lunch.

We had our share of Velveeta at that time, as did everyone. We made do with such things (or was it because they were being heavily marketed (as in pitched to the public in this case), That Velveeta was quite enough to last me for a lifetime, along with Cheese Whiz. Ration books were a part of life in World War II. Getting sugar was a treat. But in the country around our little city were lots of producers who kept us in vegetables and eggs. We probably had more than our major-city cousins.

Our city was divided by a river. Once it had been two towns. As a result there were two business sections and two market centers. The old city on the east side of the river had some elegant homes in the Italianate style and most of the protestant churches, except for the Congregationalists. The city on the west side had been a bedroom community for workers and middle management for a woolen mill and a paper mill. The east side, in addition to housing top management and the oldest city schools, was home to a "felt" mill (a paper mill that used rags as fibers), a high-end paper company, a very fine rifle manufacturer, the original creator of ceiling fans, a machine-tool company, a major chocolate company, and a company that made paper containers for food. By the time I was a child, the town had incorporated into one city linked by an "Upper Bridge", which was upstream from the "Lower Bridge". For years, however, the populace on each side of the river had its own constituency of shops. We lived on the east side. All the markets I have mentioned so far were on our side of town, but we occasionally crossed the river to visit a small meat market run by a gentleman who made fabulous sausage and from whom my mother used to buy superb racks of pork for roasts.

Later I remember a place called that imported food, largely from Italy. It had, as I recall, a somewhat checkered reputation. I loved the scent of various kinds of Sicilian sausages and cheeses and fresh dill and large cans of olive oil and olives that store offered. At the back was a really scuzzy bar (that was long before scuzzy interfaces). It was a cheap, depressing, barebones tavern that smelled permanently of stale beer. It had a separate entrance on another street. I

must have been around 8 when my father took me to the importing store to find some anchovies. We had summon the proprietor from the bar, which meant actually going into the barroom. A young woman was sloppy drunk at 2 in the afternoon, slouched on a bar stool with a small child playing at her feet. It was my first glimpse of the real world. My mother was aghast later when she found that my father had taken me there; I thought it was fascinating. As is so often true with children, I grasped instantly a problem in society that adults thought I wouldn't understand. I had great compassion both for the little child and for the woman.

Sometime later, perhaps when I was in college, the importing store moved to a main street and into expanded quarters. The bar remained behind on Second Street, if it was not torn down for street widening. I never checked. The new shop held barrels of pickles, olives, and pickled tomatoes and peppers. Four-foot-long Provolone cheeses hung from the ceiling along, with yard-long salamis that smelled so good I wanted to nibble on them. The shelves held tins of anchovies and sardines and mineral water and other ingredients from Europe. It was exciting. Something in that place made me tingle the way I later felt when I walked through open markets and specialty shops in Europe and Asia.

The importing store had second aspect: it was said to be the front for the local Mafia operation. In a small town, if your dad is one of the "town fathers", he is likely to know that sort of thing. I did not doubt my dad's intelligence sources. Kids in my high school had already verified it. The local card and dice games were run by the father of my assistant editor on the high school paper. As I recall, the police once threatened to shut down the importing store, much to the consternation of those who legitimately bought ingredients there (and sometimes played the numbers at the same time).

As a small child, I often visited my paternal grandparents in a larger, well-established city farther north. On those visits, I occasionally got to visit a marvelous market occupied a shop at one end of a lovely, 19th-century closed arcade. That market had a pretty wonderful green grocery department and a bakery with scents to blow the mind. The city once had the largest number of millionaires for a city of its size in the country. It had, before my time, harbored a great deal of wealth, an insurance company (still there) and several paper mills, along with a large factory that made air brakes. It was also a county seat. Long before I visited the posh suburbs of New York in Connecticut or the Philadelphia Main Line, I saw homes of similar size in the town where my grandparents lived. The demand was there for top quality, and top quality ingredients were available, delivered to the door. While my grandmother didn't live in one of the great

houses, she lived in a large, solid one. When she was still in her 60s and I was little, she used to take me "marketing", to use her term, her basket over her arm. We stopped for meat here, vegetables there, bread somewhere else. When I go to the Farmer's Market on Sunday mornings, I carry a basket much like hers and my visits remind me of her.

Grandma had high standards. When we had festive birds for special holidays, she had my grandfather drive her to a special poultry farm to get them. For years I thought it was just out of town. Recently I calculated it on a map and discovered that it was more like 30 miles. And that was 30 miles long before the Interstate was built. The chickens and capons or turkeys she got were wonderful. It wasn't until I visited the Bresse region in France, much later in life, that I realized how special those North Country birds had been. When Georges Blanc asked me if I had ever tasted such a wonderful chicken as the one he had prepared for me I said "yes, at my grandmother's home, in an area where chickens were raised much as they were in Bresse." He was somewhat taken aback. The French are chauvinistic and not as knowledgeable about the rest of the world as they should be. I'm sure it had not occurred to M. Blanc that well-cared-for free-range chickens once existed quite accessibly in parts of the United States.

As an adult in New Jersey I had access to several markets that I long for now. One was a German pork store. There a meat man of Scottish descent spoke German to his customers and sold them all kinds of specialty items, including specialty cold cuts. He and his son taught me a lot about cooking when I was first learning. They consistently tried to sell me more meat than I thought I needed in a time when we all ate more meat than we do now. The experience wasn't all joyful, however. I once found a cigarette butt in a pound of chicken livers. After I parted from my first husband, I never went back. My former husband's mother was a caterer who used that market. She was also an active gossip who often embellished tales (if she didn't make them up out of whole cloth).

Another market that produced wonderful things was a shop where two operations shared the same facilities: a green grocer on one side and a grocer and meat man on the other. It had been founded at the end of World War II by two veterans—thus the name: The Victory Market. It was the green grocer we all patronized because he brought in all kinds of specialty items and out-of-season produce. One had to be alert, however, since the proprietor could not keep his hands off his female customers. Sometimes it got very annoying. Today he'd probably be hauled into court for sexual harassment.

I also remember my first experience with a New York butcher. It occurred on Long Island, and I was put in training for the experience by the mother of my boyfriend at the time who thought that if I was going to be interested in food and live the New York City area I had better be able to hold my own with a classic butcher. Sam was such a person and he held forth in the middle of Baldwin on the South Shore. Sam was a darned fine butcher. The house I visited was a gourmet household with high standards, and they patronized Sam regularly. Sam was also an outrageous flirt. It was tremendous fun to see if one could give it back to Sam as fast as he could dish it out. I'm sure that today there are women who would be offended. Frankly, I had fun. It was good training for dealing with a Brooklyn butcher who moved west to the city where we now live and needed tough talking to even cooperate.

It was while I was living in New Jersey that I discovered a fish market on a rundown avenue in a shabby part of town operated by a family that had its own boats. With today's pollution concerns, we know that the safest fish comes from far out at sea, but what we got there was superb: the freshest whole red snapper dressed for stuffing, boned shad, bluefish, stripped bass. I looked forward to my Friday visits, for that was when the greatest variety was in the market. Living in the desert made me long for such a place. It only arrived a year ago at the hands of a wonderful man from Azerbaijan named Yuri who is a wizard at getting fresh fish and shellfish or nearly anything else one might want. We even refer to the market sometimes as "Yuri's", which would no doubt drive the proprietors wild if they knew. This market also has wonderful meat and poultry, and I bought live lobsters from Yuri for Christmas Eve.

I love "marketing" and that personal interchange—talking with my suppliers. I have found that recently I have returned to my parents' and grandparents' shopping habits. Except for staples that are best bought at a supermarket, my favorite places to shop for food are closer to the markets or marketplaces of my childhood: the warehouse for excellent meat and smoked fish, Yuri's for fresh seafood, meat, and poultry, and the Farmer's Market for produce. We live and dine by the seasons. When we want the finest sausages we drive across town to a sausage shop at least 10 miles away because it's worth it. And when we really want a treat, we go to the southern part of our city to the supermarket that caters to the Mexican-Hispanic community, where everybody talks with everybody else, where fresh tortillas are made in house, where there is a churro stand out front, and where a person can still get cuts of meat only seen in old cookbooks. Above all, though it's people who become friends and the quality of the good that are important in the "marketing experience," and those are the same things we bring to our tables for true enjoyment.

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