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American Feast

Napkin Notes: Jonathan Gold and the search for what's real

By Clark Wolf

Splitting his time between Guerneville and Manhattan, acclaimed consultant Clark Wolf graces these pages with the occasional diatribe from the periodic local.

The first ever Pulitzer Prize for food writing (restaurant criticism, actually) was recently snagged by a sweetly grumpy culture-vulture who looks a little like an out-of-work former Viking--not the football kind but, rather, of the long, stringy red-hair and scraggly beard (without the horned helmet) variety. And he writes his "Counter Culture" column for what we here at the *Boho* lovingly refer to as an "alternative" publication.

The *L.A. Weekly's* Jonathan Gold is a brilliant writer, a true lover of all--or most--things food, and a total hoot. He's also a first-rate journalist, which is high atop the list of qualities that separate him from the many run-at-the-fingertips blogazoids out there filling up the web waves with seriously questionable content. Glad they're out there. Wish they had an editor--and some education (even home-schooled). But there are a host of other good reasons why this major prize and what we can learn from a Gold palate are so valuable to us all and represent such a seminal moment in a 30-year battle for the kinds of core cultural values all Americans might actually be able to communally embrace.

This is a warp-speed jump from frump--from the dull-as-dust home economics foisted on young bridal wannabe's in a post--World War II country longing for order, or a pot with two chickens at the very least. This acknowledges that well-constructed applied thinking--otherwise known as criticism--can be hugely engaging, personally moving and profoundly valuable (and hilariously funny), even when practiced on something as universal (and, to some, as mundane) as eating and drinking.

This is particularly true when the guy with the magic pen is a former classical music critic (and sometimes cellist) who knows his way around many forms and all levels of culture and doesn't restrict himself to that sometimes isolating world at the top of the food chain otherwise painfully known as "fine dining." Gold loves *everything* good and appears effortlessly deft at putting it all into context, telling a story and making real flavors and deep feelings come to mouth and mind, all the while surviving large quantities of alcoholic adventure.

He's a cultural anthropologist rummaging through heaps and piles of immigrant paraphernalia until he hits a vein of something precious, dusts it off and passes it around. Like all good critics, he's a devoted local and an industry booster, ever hopeful that the melding pot of the Southern California enclaves he inhabits will reveal wonders that will help form and change the way we live.

Gold's been doing it for more than 20 years, paying more attention to the work and quality of his colleagues and editors (and food) than to the climb up some hierarchical ladder, once again giving us hope that experience and wisdom--knowing how to, among other things, avoid botulism rather than inject it--have real currency for an aging populace surrounded by this year's hot-shots, short-cut artists and size 00 role models.

So what does this all mean to the rest of us? For starters, it's helped to elevate a few things. Obviously, writing about food has come a long way since the hot topic was how to use decorated jello molds to accent your backyard barbecue. You've got your Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma*, a book about what we eat, why and what it might mean; your Bill Buford's *Heat*, one man's adventures in another man's kitchen, himself a famous chef; your biographies of Alice Waters by real biographers; your autobiographies in installments by Ruth Reichl, now editor-in-chief of *Gourmet* magazine; and your Proustian social history of foodism *The United States of Arugula* by *Vanity Fair* contributing editor David Kamp.



Anne Fishbein

Unmasked: Since winning the Pulitzer, Jonathan Gold's image has increasingly been banded, blowing his cover as a restaurant critic.

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There's even a well-regarded and wonderfully written new book by a guy who washed dishes all across the country, evocatively called *Dishwasher: One Man's Quest to Wash Dishes in All 50 States*. I mean, we're really starting to look into the nooks and crannies, powered by the dedication of first-rate writers, serious journalists, scientists, articulate farmers (see Wendell Berry on the agrarian life) and the occasional performance artists (otherwise known as wackos with energizing viewpoints). It's all finally part of the greater conversation of American living.

Then there's the food itself. I used to say that new cuisines were discovered in this country when an upper middle-class white guy with an expensive certificate from an aggressively marketed culinary school dipped into what was often called a ghetto and came back with a new ingredient list he then applied to refined Western European--basically French--cooking. I called it Assorted White Guy cuisine. You know: upscale Tex-Mex, upscale Indian or Greek, mangled Pan-Asian, to name a few.

These days, we're actually taking a good look at and a hearty bite of those foods--if not traditionally made, then certainly more directly presented--by good cooks from the actual cultures of origin. Chefs from Mexico are cooking the foods of their region. Mateo Granados and his brilliant Yucatan tamale cart, which he also uses to cater all over Sonoma County, will soon open his own big-time restaurant nearby. This is very good news.

But this trajectory has also affected the place and value of the food in the mix. Why do we expect what we sometimes call "ethnic" spots to be so low-priced when we know that first-rate ingredients are not cheap? Sometimes it's because the ingredients themselves are undervalued in the marketplace, such as less well-known cuts of meat or those veggies not traditionally found in the frozen-food section or, say, jicama, which is plentiful but doesn't end up in Mom's shopping cart too often. Sometimes it's because the place has the whole family working, which can be great but loses its internal charm as the family hits the second or third generation and the grandkids want to go high-tech or would rather work at Starbucks than be under Grandma's watchful eye.

And sometimes it's all those formica tables and florescent lighting that Jonathan Gold tallies in the Southern California wilds of Gardena and Alhambra. The dollars are clearly not in the décor, no uniforms are by Ralph Lauren, there's no graphic design by some cutting-edge firm or a website that sings and flips and barks and tweets while you're desperately just trying to find the freakin' phone number and cross street. The money goes to food. Just food, glorious food.

A century ago, some 70 percent of the folks who prepared and served us our food were what the Census Bureau considered immigrant, ethnic or other, using restaurant work as their way into our world. A hundred years later, a whole new 70 percent of the people preparing and serving our meals are still easily defined as immigrant, ethnic, other. In his writing, Gold captures the spirit of a system of cultural integration that seems to work and keeps our world vibrant, alive and thriving. No wonder his writing touches us. No wonder he's won awards. No wonder he's chosen to revel in and share with us what he finds and devours.

Makes you wonder why anyone would study or write about--or live for--anything else.

Clark Wolf is the president of the Clark Wolf Company, specializing in food, restaurant and hospitality consulting.

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