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Ordinary Riches

In praise of the grande-luxe simple life

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.

My friend Michele's idea of total luxury is standing out in the warm sunshine on a woody roadside, chowing down on something good from a nearby taco truck and knocking back a cold one.

Mahatma Gandhi, on the other hand, considered the notion that the ultimate in luxury was total abstinence. Nada. Nothing. Bupkis. Doing completely without was, to him, having it all.

Well, to each her or his own, but as we dig into this season of wretched excess, it seems reasonable to ponder our preferences and those realities of our luxurious lives we might sometimes foolishly overlook, forever losing their precious value.

Sometimes luxury is relative: a long, lazy morning in bed after a hard week's work. Sometimes, as it so often is the case with food, it's all about how much there is and how hard it is to get me some.

In the 1800s, pots and pots of river sturgeon caviar sat free for the scarfing on saloon bars all throughout California's Gold Rush country. Its salty tang fired up a mean thirst and was cheaper than peanuts, and easier to clean up after. It was a toss-off and a come-on, now as nearly extinct as Caspian beluga.

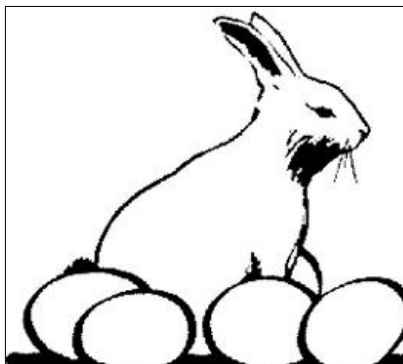
Then there is the recent big-deal story about an organic farm in the heart of the Napa Valley. Turns out, amid the internationally owned and funded vineyards and the heart stopping estates, somebody forgot the need to grow tomatoes. The rich folks got hungry for something good to eat, so a farm was front-page news. I believe we could call that a cultural or values correction. And a good thing, too.

I have a friend who's a famous movie star (I will *not* drop the name). I was her youth group leader in high school. She's semi-retired, or removed from "the show business" as we call it, because she can afford to be.

For her, life's greatest luxury is having the freedom and joy, not the job; to be on hand to make a morning and later an evening meal for her younger child and her husband when he's around, each and every day.

Another pal, the widow of a retired financier, took the plunge just before turning 60 to become a now-treasured organics farmer of meticulous and brilliant result. Hard, dirty work is her life's luxurious reward.

Nature's plenty is fragile, no matter how hard we try to pretend that abundance is a birthright. When we organize our growing of food, it's called farming. When we industrialize it, much is lost--or warped or poisoned. And getting back to simple purity, or the purely simple, is no mean feat.



Oh, lighten up: Clark starts talking cream-top milk, and we get all nostalgic for fertility images, OK?

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Way back in 1980, I was at the apex of a revelation, standing in the middle of a fancy grocery in San Francisco that was the result of every available foodie's dream. I was selling cream-top milk in bottles, hand-gathered wild mushrooms and the newly christened free-range chickens.

Even then it was widely accepted that the so-called simple pleasures of really fine food were, at times, shockingly expensive.

These days, we're thoughtful enough to consider how food is grown and made and how everyone along the way might be treated in the process; fair trade considerations make us feel more comfortable with a \$4 Frappuccino (for one prime and empty-calorie-filled example).

About that time in the '80s, I was visited by a major New York City reporter who trailed me around the shop and asked probing questions about some of what she felt were the highlights of our emporio d'excess. Picking through what we then called precertification organics, she happened on a tub of fresh bean curd. "What do you do with tofu?" she intoned.

"Nothing in public," I snapped back.

We've been friends since. But the point was that even simple, homey--and at the time considered funky/hippie--blocks of tofu could elicit a range of conflicting responses, from the rarified to the righteous to the obscure.

I've let go of my real interest in caviar, now that even a small amount from the deep end of the Caspian Sea (which I prefer to think of as Persia) doesn't seem like such a good idea, and is, in a few ways--locally, nationally and internationally--illegal. (Historically, though, for some that has been of additional allure.)

These days, my personal indulgences seem to include antioxidants. I really do love to pop for in-season, Southern Hemisphere (Argentina, Chile, New Zealand) blueberries--organic where possible--that can go for as much as six bucks a half pint. I know there's airfare and carbon use across the world involved, but it's still money going to farmers, cheaper than a small glass of decent wine and probably better for me than a lot of things.

Which brings me to foie gras. Gavage, the practice of fattening a bird's liver by some serious feeding, was discovered, not invented, by the Egyptians (you know the ones) way, way, way back when they found that birds self-readied for the long and strenuous (pre-Jet Blue) migratory flight across Europe and Asia. It was a found luxury, not easy to predict or control, a little like the precious morel mushrooms that seem to migrate on their own, unpredictably.

There has been a lot of fuss about the abusive handling of animals that become our dinner. I'm all for thoughtful care, but as the lively chef Mario Batali said recently, "I'm happy to be at the top of the food chain."

In my experience, and obviously my opinion, there are far more critical issues we as a community, a nation and a world need to address. Ascribing human feelings to animals is self-serving and disrespectful--most assuredly to the animals, especially in as much as they're sometimes better served and indulgently overfed than our school kids, who scarf processed muck at the mall, at home and at recess. Have you never seen a bird feed its young? It's down the gullet. It's yet another perhaps unpleasant moment in nature some would prefer to ignore, but it's real life.

But most importantly at a time of year and history when it's so critical to pay attention to achieving peace wherever it may be found, I urge family and friends to enjoy the greatest luxury of all: the freedom to choose what we do, who we are and how we express it. To choose what pleases us and nourishes us when we gather at the table--limiting or eliminating whenever possible our intrusion on the practices and the beliefs of others.

So, enjoy your line-caught, heirloom, free-range, organic, artisan holiday Tofurky. And please pass me my foie gras.

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

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