

# Which Way to the Vomitorium

*by* Jane Hammons

Though I've lived in Berkeley for nearly 30 years, until recently, I had eaten at Chez Panisse only once—at a wedding reception back in the early '80s, shortly after moving here from New Mexico. At the time, I'd never heard of the restaurant, but the reverential tone with which people said *Chez Panisse* made me a little nervous as I tried to remember what the size and placement of forks signaled about how to proceed through a meal. When I saw that Chez Panisse was serving crawdaddies (the menu called them crayfish, but I know a crawdaddy when I see it), I relaxed. I didn't eat the ugly creatures when my brother fished them out of irrigation ditches back on our farm near Roswell, and I wasn't going to eat the one dangling delicately from my champagne flute. I was content to watch the wedding guests, cautiously but deferentially, munch mudbugs while sipping their bubbly.

My twenty-first century Chez Panisse experience, at the invitation of a friend and on her dime, began with an aperitif made with fennel, which I didn't much care for, but sipped earnestly the way I drink V-8—with the understanding that I will be transformed into a better person if I ingest the right things.

I like a lot of the right things. Growing up on a farm, I frequently picked meals straight out of the field in front of the house. For breakfast I might choose a cantaloupe, a couple of green chiles and a handful of tomatoes. Back in the kitchen, I'd quick-roast the chiles over the flame of a gas burner on the stove, peel them, and scrape out the seeds and membranes before putting them on a plate. After halving the cantaloupe and scooping out the seeds, I ate the melon from the rind with a spoon. The tomatoes I ate like apples, the sun-warmed juice running down my arm. I am familiar with garden

fresh, locally grown produce. I own the Chez Panisse Vegetables cookbook. I know chicories from cardoons. Like any normal person, I like good food. But I do not worship it. And while I'd rather my food not contain deadly chemicals or be otherwise bad for me, I don't (apologies to Michael Pollan) research every meal.

After the aperitif came glasses of wine and four olives on a plate for my friend and I to share. A stingy little portion I feared might portend what was to come. But I couldn't have been more wrong.

My friend's empty aperitif glass was whisked away by the waiter, who let mine sit half full on the table even after he arrived with another glass of wine and a lovely endive and smoked haddock salad. The unfinished aperitif remained until the empty salad plates were removed, replaced by thick, crusty bread and little crocks of butter. The bountiful table was crowded and the constant serving and removing of plates made it hard to converse, which was the main reason I had accepted my friend's invitation. We hadn't seen each other in three years. In that time she had divorced and remarried. I was curious.

But after the bread, a shallow bowl of thick handmade pasta and fresh clams in a creamy sauce commanded our attention. Along with another glass of wine. It was Fish Friday and to be honest, I wasn't really looking forward to another fish dish. Maybe the problem is that I just don't like fish all that much. Or maybe the problem is Fish Friday. Dutifully, I ate the beautiful pasta and delicious clams, after which the main course arrived, accompanied by yet another glass of wine. A handsome, fist-sized piece of cod was flanked on one side by bright green leaves of sautéed spinach and on the other by a paler green mound of pureed artichokes, thick with garlic and cream. I lingered over the spinach, tasty in its simplicity.

If I'd been somewhere else, I would have asked the waiter for a go-bag. I am not your average size 14 American woman: however, I'm no petite thing. I know how to finish a meal. But I was feeling sick and wondered where my fellow diners were packing it away. Maybe, like those French women who Mireille Guiliano claims never get fat, they had a gastronomical secret.

When I asked the waiter not to serve me anymore wine, my friend smiled and said something about the decadence of the meal, which prompted me to ask her if she had ever seen *La Grande Bouffe*. She had not, so I made the mistake of explaining that it was a French movie in which a group of men repair to the countryside and eat themselves to death, while also destroying the household plumbing with their numerous trips to the toilet after gorging on beautiful cuts of meat, luscious fruits, crusty hunks of bread, vegetables in creamy sauces, cakes, pies, and other pastries, all prepared in a country kitchen. Unwilling to correlate what we were doing at Chez Panisse with the gluttony in the film, my friend smiled politely, looked away and commented on the hat a woman at the next table was wearing. But I had to wonder if Chez Panisse were required to print up the fats, carbs and calories on the menu board, how would this meal compare to one at McDonald's?

Having conjured images of Marcello Mastroianni, handsome as he was, groaning on the toilet, I was ready to go home. But no. A pretty crockery dish filled with pears and figs found its way to the table. The fruit was soon joined by delicate slivers of cheese and thin slices of bread. This was preparation for dessert, a fig tart, which three hours earlier I had looked forward to.

By the time we were served an apple tart instead, I wasn't disappointed, I just thanked the lord that dessert had come at last. The tart was dressed up with a buttery scoop of something French that boiled down to homemade ice cream. I declined coffee thinking a liquid so warm and thick might make me hurl. Mindreader that he was, the waiter suggested a different beverage, another French concoction that turned out to be a warm lemon flavored water in a clear pot full of bright green leaves served in small clear glasses. The presentation was beautiful, and if I hadn't been so stuffed, I'm sure I would have enjoyed more than its aroma. But I left my glass untouched and prayed for the meal to end.

Mercifully a tiny plate of petite star-shaped cookies and slivers of gold-flecked chocolate arrived. Like peppermints served on the check tray, this signaled the end. As my friend paid the hefty bill and

we got up to leave, I felt as though someone had taken my rib cage and spread it open with the Jaws of Life. I was in pain trying to contain all that I had eaten.

In 1923 Aldous Huxley was slapped with an *erron* citation by the OED for having misused the word vomitorium (it really means a passageway to a theater, not a place where decadent, overfed Romans puked their guts out in order to continue eating). Even knowing this, I engaged in a little erroneous thinking of my own when I stepped out onto Shattuck Avenue and wondered—which way to the vomitorium? I wasn't looking for a theater. I needed a place to heave my gourmet cookies.

