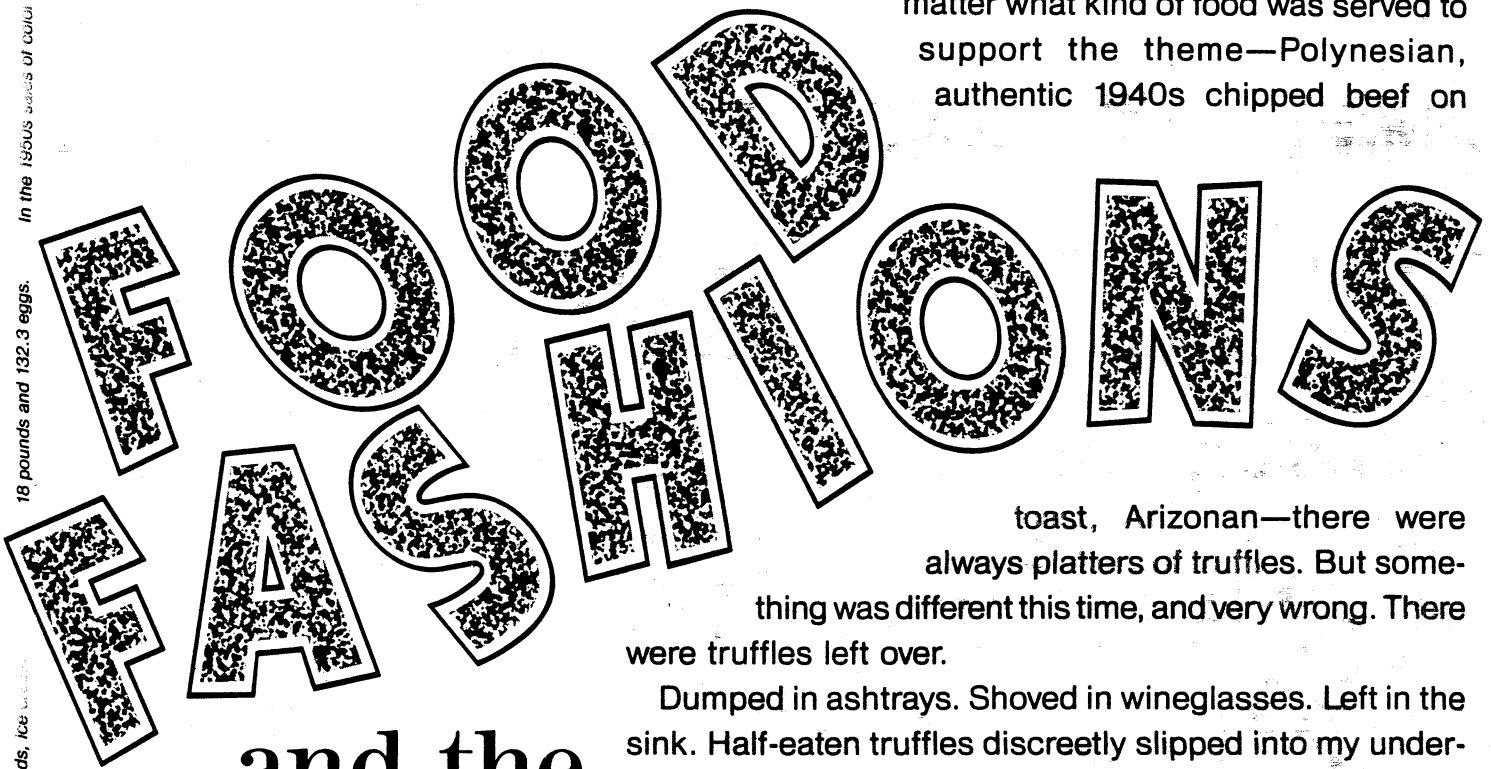


In 1955 the per-person consumption of beef was 82 pounds, refined sugar 112.5 pounds, coffee 15.3 pounds, ice cream 10.5 pounds, and margarine 1.5 pounds. In the 1950s 50 percent of total U.S. egg production was used for food.

I KNEW SOMETHING WAS UP AT MY FIFTH ANNUAL PEARL HARBOR DAY PARTY. THE INSTITUTION OF THESE PARTIES HAD FIRST STARTED WHEN I WAS WORKING AT COCOLAT, AND NO MATTER WHAT KIND OF FOOD WAS SERVED TO SUPPORT THE THEME—Polynesian, authentic 1940s chipped beef on



toast, Arizonan—there were always platters of truffles. But something was different this time, and very wrong. There

were truffles left over.

Dumped in ashtrays. Shoved in wineglasses. Left in the sink. Half-eaten truffles discreetly slipped into my underwear drawer. No more than one truffle per projected party-goer had been budgeted, yet there were still so many truffles uneaten that the surplus had to be brought to work the next day, where it was guaranteed that almost anything could be made to disappear within a few hours. Even more suspicious, the two boxes of Mrs. Fields cookies brought

as hostess presents got eaten within 20 minutes of their arrival

at the party. It was as much a signal of change as the switch from hard liquor to white wine in the hands of guests.

Cleaning up at 2 a.m., being forced to shove truffles back into their unglamorous plastic bag, made it clear that things had changed.

There were clues. A fellow who was a futurist by avocation, advertising vice-president by trade, a trendmeister if there ever was one, was changing his eating habits.

and the Budweiser Effect

The Return of Comfort Food

He and I talked about how people seemed to be reverting to foods of their childhood. He agreed, and ordered up



another Budweiser. That was the key. Chocolate truffles were the victims of the Budweiser effect.

Consider the fate of Budweiser itself. In spite of the growth of microbreweries and the national distribution of San Francisco's own Anchor Steam beer, Budweiser—the bland, the safe, the comfy—seems to have become the drink of choice for young moderns. When out to lunch at a chi-chi Mexican restaurant one day, a former foreign correspondent who's been everywhere and eaten everything, confidently talked about his 10 years of living

February 1, 1950 outfielder Ted Williams becomes the highest paid baseball star in history signing a Boston Red Sox contract for about \$125,000. 1958 stereophonic records come into U.S.

abroad and his days covering politics in Washington. Did he order the Corona? The Dos EXX? No. He went for the Budweiser, as, it seemed, had every other table of beer drinkers at this Embarcadero establishment.

But when chocolate truffles first arrived on the food scene more than 10 years ago, people were excited about fine dining, Tuscan cuisine, taking classes with Julia Child's assistant. Glut and reaction inevitably set in, however, so the trend has turned back to the more familiar. Diners that really couldn't have looked that way

planning to open seven more diners in the Sacramento Valley by the end of this year, investing upwards of a million dollars on the decoration of each restaurant. The clientele was expected to be mainly teenagers drawn by the flashy neon and cars-in-the-wall decor. However, customers have turned out to be of all ages. "People who lived during the '50s just love it," says general manager Ted Schutz. "Usually in these flashy places you don't encounter food this good," he explains. He attributes the quality of the food to the fact that co-owner Kim Marlett, a

People define what a culture is, truly; American regional cuisine is spaghettios, not jalapeño jelly smeared on blue cornmeal muffins.

back then are springing up, evoking a 1950s that never was with a hyperrealistic gloss that would outshine a Robert Bechtle painting. Urban sophisticates unabashedly pass over the sauce bordelaise and order meatloaf and french fries with gravy. Hold the Côtes du Rhone and St. Pauli Girl and bring on the Bud.

"People just can't eat sauce bordelaise—or truffles—everyday," says Doug Biederbeck, general manager of San Francisco's Fog City Diner. People eat out more, and so think about what they really like—which could very well be a barbecued hamburger. Referring to the proliferation of cookie stores, and not neighborhood truffle shops, Biederbeck commented that "you probably can't take the cookie out of the person, but you probably can take the truffle out."

Another diner specialist, Steven Weiss, son of the owner of the original Mel's drive-ins, decided it was time to bring back Mel's after cashing in on avocado and sprouts in the string of Haven restaurants he and his brother put together in the late 1960s and '70s. At the reborn Mel's, which also has its own stable of five-day-a-week patrons, he uses for the most part the same recipes and menu offerings of the '50s chain. Meatloaf and chicken pot pie are big winners, the type of Mom's home cooking everyone seems to wish their mother really did cook. Pastrami sandwiches can be had, though they weren't available in round one; however, chicken fried steak was not carried over to the new incarnation.

A deluxe 1950s diner redux, The Fabulous Fifties Cafe, opened with much fanfare last August in Carmichael, a suburb of Sacramento. The owners are

Singapore-born Chinese woman, learned to cook American food from Betty Crocker cookbooks when she came to the U.S. "That's what we serve, basic good food," says Schutz. "People drive across town for the meatloaf and mashed potatoes," adds regional manager John Edgar. "We're one of the few restaurants that has real mashed potatoes."

At yet another culinary outpost, Oakland's speciality food and wine shop Curds and Whey, chocolate chip cookies sell pretty well at the counter that's been around for almost two decades. Tuna salad and the formerly frowned-on beef stews, turkey noodle soups and chilis are a big hit, "the standard staples that people seem to like," says general manager Sharon Krieger.

So the evidence against the chocolate truffle piled up. The futurist had explained that once trends become visible, reach the stage of stories in *Time* magazine and shelf space in shopping malls, they have crested. So truffles now show up in delicatessens along Interstate 5 in Bend, Oregon. They're featured in the Christmas Neiman-Marcus catalog. They appear in Fanny Farmer candy shops under what would be known in the computer industry as an OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) agreement, wholesaled from a San Francisco truffle company. Marsha Guerrero, food center manager at the Ketchum Communications public relations agency, reports that she was asked to come up with a recipe for truffles using a powdered instant breakfast-like diet food manufactured by a multinational food processing company. Her recipes are "the stuff that goes out to *Family Circle* magazines." So truffles have reached the

Menu

BETTES

Ocean View Diner

Souffled
Apple Brand
Pie like

FOOD LIKE

sorry state of becoming mainstream. Guerrero adds that when she is stressed out, however, she goes in for the comfort food of ice cream. Not truffles.

Jo Policastro, the brains behind the new Maltese Grill restaurant just behind the Sheraton Palace, in San Francisco, reaches for an Almond Joy. With a candy bar, there is the benefit of early association. As she puts it, truffles are "an elitist experience. Once they become common, they lose their appeal. What people want is the bourgeois representation of peasant food;" the truffle doesn't fit this. The way graphic designer and cookbook author Thomas Ingalls (*The Grill Book*, *The Fish Book*) explains it: "First everyone was into the *abbondanza* look and then things turned to spa cuisine, everything overstyled. Now it's back to basics with a plate that looks full."

The success of Berkeley's Bridge Creek and Bette's Ocean View Diner are further proof. Susan Conley, kitchen manager and general partner at Bette's since its opening in 1982, says that they "don't try to surprise people by making exciting party food." Instead, the kitchen turns out carefully constructed BLTs from homemade bread and mayonnaise, with bacon cooked to order.

Dan Strongin, executive chef for the Andronico's Park and Shop grocery stores, agrees that people are getting away from food "looking for an interior decorator." Using the company's sales reporting system, he's determined that potato salad and coleslaw are the in-store deli's biggest sellers. "People are getting back to what's enjoyable in food, and what's enjoyable are the same things that

**People like
downhome food
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have been enjoyable for hundreds of years." People define what a culture is, truly; American regional cuisine is spaghettios, not jalapeño jelly smeared on blue cornmeal muffins.

People like downhome food and are no longer ashamed to admit it. Truffles becoming passé are part of the backlash against fancy foreign food; trade deficits notwithstanding, in the Age of Reagan, it's good to be an American. After all, who could imagine Bruce Springsteen eating truffles?

Truffles have had company in the realm

BITTERSWEET

IT ALL STARTED SOON AFTER I GOT BACK FROM SIX MONTHS OF POST-graduate travel in Europe. Friends, knowing my proclivity towards skipping class on rainy days to stay home and perfect cookie recipes, told me that there was now a place on Berkeley's north side that specialized in chocolate baked goods. They suggested that I check the rumor out. The place turned out to be Cocolat; they turned out to be hiring. And after my companion pushed me behind the counter with the remark 'she's a great cook,' and following my admission to the proprietor that I made my own *Reine de Saba*—the signature chocolate almond cake from Julia Child's *The French Chef*—I was taken on, six weeks after the place went into business.

It quickly became apparent that we Cocolat employees were participating in something significant. I would overhear customers talking about how, having met on a train somewhere between Vienna and Venice and discovering that they both lived in Berkeley, a friendship was cemented because they discovered they both adored Cocolat truffles. *Chez Panisse*, *The Cheese Board*, and *Pig by the Tail*—one of the first charcuterie-fancy takeout shops ever—had been in the neighborhood for awhile, but ours was the only store where customers would wait patiently until we opened the doors at 10 a.m., and piteously rap on the windows after 6 p.m., hoping we would make an exception.

Our celebrity status pursued us all over town (total strangers coming up half-accusingly, half-admiringly, saying "you work at Cocolat, don't you?") and across time and space: a decade later I found myself sitting in a sushi restaurant on Manhattan's Upper West Side, peaceably minding my own business, when the fellow at the table next to me said 'you used to work at Cocolat, didn't you?' Somehow chosen from the piles of daily applications, picked out from the people who sent over audition cakes or who had attended exclusive cooking schools, we practiced noblesse oblige behind the counter.

We entertained them as we served up slices of linzer torte and chocolate decadence, chatting about our boyfriends and our terrible childhoods as the eager trufflehounds stood waiting three deep on weekends and in the late afternoon. We assumed that they regarded coming into the store itself as a chance to participate in a kind of performance art that would become much better known over the next 10 years as food became a serious fashion statement. For my part I took it on myself to plan customers' dinner parties, telling them they couldn't possibly want the Grand Marnier buttercream with their *canard aux cerises*—instead I recommended the plain house chocolate cake as a foil.

And being present at the creation of Cocolat, of the Berkeley and California food scenes, meant freedom without concern for the dictates of the market, something only possible in the early days of the Gourmet Ghetto. We were too hip. We played KSAN—then in its rock'n'roll glory—very loudly and if the customers didn't appreciate it, they weren't with-it enough to buy our always-scarce truffles. In genoise batter up above our elbows, staining our shoes with chocolate, we were blasé with a food-weariness it would take non-Cocolat workers years to catch up with.

Truly, the truffles were the heart of what Cocolat was about. Years before the business existed as a storefront, the chocolate truffles alone were sold through another exclusive Berkeley food outlet. So we weren't altogether surprised when one of our trufflemakers was stolen by one of the largest resellers to start a rival truffle business. Truffles were important.

PAULINA BORSOOK

of trends. One compatriot is the houseplant. In the late '60s, there were plant stores cropping up in every neighborhood, only to disappear as supermarkets started offering creeping charlies for sale. Houseplants are now a cultural commonplace, they no longer have the exalted status of being What's New, What's Happening, and What's Now. Same goes for truffles. In sheer volume, the number of metric tons of truffles shipped is probably vastly greater than it was in the early '70s, doubtless in no small part to their being available at the local grocery store's gourmet counter, and not just in a select wine and cheese store that you have to drive across town to get to. But when the Doubletree Inn hotel chain advertises to attract business travelers in PSA's in-flight magazine, the print copy mentions the thick chocolate chip cookies served gratis to conventioners on their coffee breaks, not the truffles served on their buffets.

Likening their fate to that of the houseplants, Fog City's Biederbeck says that truffles have entered both the vocabulary and the diet and are not going away. "We're not turning back. We had to go through truffles to change our palates, so that we could learn to cook simple food done better." As Guerrero says, after all "people are now eating iceberg lettuce.



The return to simple flavors is a relief." Sort of like the man praying in *The New Yorker* magazine cartoon of a few years back, on his knees saying "Lord, I don't ask for much, but let it be of good quality."

Nellie Donovan, longtime manager of the Stanyan Street branch of the San Francisco Real Food Company, says the former health foods store has transformed itself into an outlet where fashion-conscious eaters can buy chocolate as well as oat

bran. Good chocolate, though, without preservatives. Fruit juice-sweetened Creme Glacé and sugar-laden Haagen-Däzs ice cream bars sell about equally well. Attracting a clientele with a broader cross-section of the population, the shop has changed its position to somewhere between natural foods and gourmet to reflect the change in the market: "Instead of buying their healthy foods here, and the chocolate up the street at Safeway, people can get their chocolate here—without the prices of a gourmet store," Donovan explains.

Decorated truffles still do sell at Curds and Whey and at the Woodside Bakery. As for the next Pearl Harbor Day party, I'm undecided. Not having the truffles would mark the end of an era, but it has been years since I've eaten a truffle, and I don't know anyone anymore who goes out and buys them on their own. Would my guests expect them? Would serving truffles mark the affair as déclassé, or would the partygoers be disappointed, wanting them to be there for form's sake? Maybe I should accept the return to the past, and turn the party into a dignified afternoon event where only savories and canapes are offered. ■

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