

# Think I'll Give Up Living and Take Up Shopping Instead

by Patricia Vigderman

tragedy. There is the hasty exit that she and her husband had to make from Spain when they wanted to stay on at the coronation of King Juan Carlos after Franco's funeral. There have been the sudden reversals of fortune, like President Marcos's (no less!) cancelling their visit while their plane was halfway to the Philippines. Even better, on their route back to Chile, the airport workers of the Fiji islands refused to roll out even the flight stairs, let alone the red carpet, and the plane was forced to sit long, impatient, hot hours on the runway. When the Pinochets and their escorts finally descended, they were submitted to a barrage of eggs, fruit, and vegetables from the irate populace.

Now, in the last absurd act, Mrs. Pinochet is received at the White House. She can claim that there is one place on this planet—outside Paraguay and Pretoria—where she is most definitely welcome. Let that be a lesson to Mrs. Allende!

It is well to smile at all this.

And yet, behind this tea party extravaganza, behind all these comic comings and goings, there lurks a real tragedy. Pinochet may be a buffoon, but he wields the power of life and death in Chile. Reagan may be ridiculous, but he is the one who can decide if Mrs. Allende can come into this country to speak to the citizens.

The real tragedy is that it is these men—while their ladies exchange compliments and biscuits—who decide the fate of Chile, who are writing the script so far. The real tragedy is Chile's.

Mrs. Allende's presence in the United States would have made that tragedy visible. I can only hope that another script, another play, another ending is being prepared. I can only hope that the presence of my people, the people of Chile, will make that tragedy—and that farce—disappear, along with Pinochet. I can only hope that soon it will be those men and women—and not those in the White House—who will occupy center stage. ■

*With Nicole's help Rosemary bought two dresses and two hats and four pairs of shoes with her money. Nicole bought from a great list that ran two pages, and bought the things in the window besides. Everything she liked that she couldn't possibly use herself, she bought as a present for a friend. She bought colored beads, folding beach cushions, artificial flowers, honey, a guest bed, bags, scarfs, love birds, miniatures for a doll's house and three yards of some new cloth the color of prawns. She bought a dozen bathing suits, a rubber alligator, a travelling chess set of gold and ivory, big linen handkerchiefs for Abe, two chamois leather jackets of kingfisher blue and burning bush from Hermes—bought all these things not a bit like a high-class courtesan buying underwear and jewels, which were after all professional equipment and insurance—but with an entirely different point of view. Nicole was the product of much ingenuity and toil. For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chic factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; half-breed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent rights in new tractors—these were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole, and as the whole system swayed and thundered onward it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying, like the flush of a fireman's face holding his post before a spreading blaze. She illustrated very simple principles, containing in herself her own doom, but illustrated them so accurately that there was grace in the procedure, and presently Rosemary would try to imitate it.*

—F. Scott Fitzgerald  
Tender Is the Night  
1933

Fifty years ago F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote a brief description of a shopping trip that managed to include not only all its seductive foolishness, but its lavish imperialist economics too. The passage is an insight into American consumption that links it inextricably with a vast and brilliant glamor. Since the publication of *Tender Is the Night* the same thundering system has car-

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ried us along. We should not be surprised, therefore, that we are nurturing among us an impressario called Dino Di Laurentiis who has bought up a small shopping mall on New York's upper west side and turned the whole thing into a showcase for Italian food aesthetics.

This "foodshow," as he calls it, evokes cries of moral outrage, even as it draws the moralizers through the brass, wood, and glass doors of the renovated Endicott Hotel. The food is not only designed rather

than cooked, it's designed for people who are unacquainted with hunger, and who are ready to look at food as an Italian art form. The floor is covered in expensive blue and rust tiles, and each food section has a brass plaque identifying the food. *Pane*, it says over the bread; *formaggio* over the cheese, and so on. It's a first class trip to a foreign land.

I went one morning with a friend named Liz who had grown up a block away. I had called her the night before to find out if I'd have to dress for the occasion. She pointed out that we were only going to the old Endicott Hotel, former single room occupancy residence and center for the drug trade. She had a few other disgusted remarks for the way the gentrification of the whole avenue was generating homeless people. "Just wear blue jeans," she added helpfully, "so you look like you live in the neighborhood."

The neighborhood in question is Columbus Avenue between 81st Street and 82nd Street, and in fact I once did live there. In the mid-1960s the dusty blocks that spread



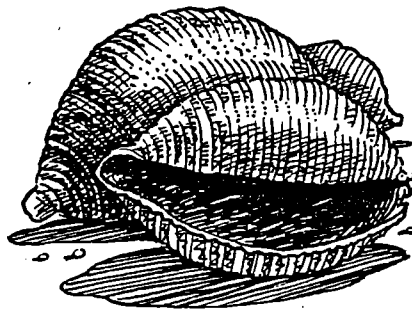
Jon McIntosh

out behind the Museum of Natural History were solidly Hispanic, and although the streets were lively enough, shopping was not a main activity.

A block up the avenue was a seedy Associated supermarket where my roommate and I bought our food. Lettuce was 19¢ a head, expensive that summer because there had been a drought. We lived on 82nd Street and ate supermarket chicken baked under a sauce of mushroom soup. Occasionally we patronized the bodega on the corner, but it made us nervous. The regular customers tended to make kissing noises as we went by. Furthermore, much of the merchan-

dise was unfamiliar: dark, bean-based products, and something called "cerveza," which I thought maybe meant brains.

The bodega is still there, and it's still called La Perla del Sur, but it's really a mini-mart. The narrow aisles are crowded with canned soups and cat food and small boxes of washday products. A sign on the



refrigerator says the imported beer is in the third aisle. No mention of cerveza at all. The only thing I remember from before are bunches of bananas hung up in the window like washing on a line.

The old Associated is still there too, and still pretty seedy, but the lettuce is now 99¢ a head and there are big bins of granola and brown rice in front of the produce. On the corner of 83rd Street is a discount shoe store called Foot Fetish. This will be the next block to go, although it may be a while before anyone tries to match the splendor of the Endicott Hotel.

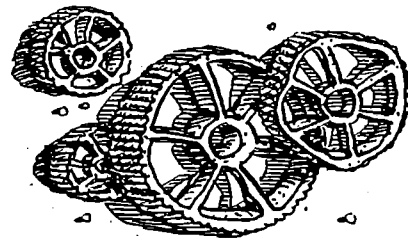
The elaborately tricked out foodshow is only the most conspicuous of the consumption extravaganza on the Endicott's former first floor. The other businesses include a children's clothes shop where even the corduroy overalls look like they're waiting to be painted by Velasquez, and a flower shop where you can put a single flower on your Visa card. The facade of the entire block is burnished wood, with a big glass bubble over the entrance to the foodshow.

I found Liz in front of the foodshow's bread section, dealing with a loaf of green spinach bread shaped like an alligator. It had a small piece of bacon between its

jaws and wicked slit eyes made of almonds. She was trying to sort out her disapproval and pleasure as she guided me up a short flight of steps to a brass sign that said *salumeria* (that's Italian for deli).

Liz is really the last person to moralize, and in the face of abundance she is as susceptible to desire as anyone. But the alligator of gentrification eating its way up the west side seemed out of control. We stood silently in front of a case of smoked meats and sausages. The neighborhood hasn't simply changed population, she feels. It's as if tectonic plates had slid into each other, heaving up a lascivious little crowd of pâtés and a plate of large black truffles where there used to be human life.

There is, of course, human life here now, but we are all tourists.



We are here to be dazzled, to spend our money on souvenirs. The DDL foodshow sells us \$130,000 a week in souvenirs. Never have we been so free to choose.

The pasta alcove, for example, in addition to the several brands in imported Italian packages, has a case of fresh pastas: asparagus fettucine, carrot fettucine, beet linguine, parsley spaghetti, mushroom linguine, and frozen tortellini in aluminum take-out dishes. A man of about fifty was unable to stop smiling as he bent over the delicately colored strands. "Which is the most popular flavor?" he asked, almost chuckling at the possibilities.

"Plain," said the woman at the counter; and then, rising to the occasion, "tomato."

"Tomato," he said, delighted. "Tomato."

At the back are fourteen kinds of virgin olive oil, and vinegars, some cloudy with essence of lemon.

Chocolates are shaped into walnuts and snails or carved with horses heads. There are little tarts, each with a slice of glazed strawberry, kiwi fruit, and tangerine. Near the pastries is a little stand-up coffee bar, just like in Italy, with a brass rail, where you can buy espresso,

blue ceramic bowl on the counter.

The real heart of this track-lit palazzo, though, is the display of prepared food under the great glass arch toward the back of the hall. Here the food artists have spread out a surrealist fantasy of ef-

round dish of glazed onions has penetrated to the onion soul. Distracted, we turn away, only to be struck by a halleluja chorus of dried hot dark red peppers hung over the meat counter.

"How long would one of those wreaths last?" asks Liz, stunned.

"Almost forever," is the nonchalant reply. *Ars longa*, of course. The organizing principle in this arcadia of the perishable is eternity.

Why, then do we feel that the place is an outrage? Perhaps for the girls in the tomato factory, for the ones working late on Christmas Eve. For the men mixing toothpaste, for the trains and planes that bring Dino Di Laurentiis back and forth across the continent and the Atlantic. For the pace of change that pits a clothesline full of bananas against a Sistine Chapel of glazed fruits.

And yet, says Liz, who has lived almost all of her life in New York, "In twenty years, I'll probably be protesting when some condo developer wants to tear all this down."

Through a square jar of olive oil in which half a dozen rounds of Tomini cheese were soaking I watched the cheese man weigh something and punch out a price ticket on a digital scale. No money changes hands near the food. At the front of the store are three marble check-out counters. Three. That's all. For \$130,000 a week of business. At 11:30 on a weekday morning only two were open, and the line to pay trailed up the steps of the former lobby of the former Endicott Hotel.

We are a race of creatures, I thought, whose instincts are too rough for this glorious Italian experience. We are now standing in line like trout facing upstream heading into the cash register because we don't know what else to do.

When we are truly ready for this food experience, however, there will be no need for cash registers. We'll step easily back through the looking glass onto Columbus Avenue, and the men in the bodega on the corner will make kissing noises, and we'll stop and kiss them as we pass by. ■

*To arouse the slow or timid browser, the foodshow's pasta counter offers occasional recipes detailing the triumph, intrigue, and excitement of refined gluttony. Herewith, verbatim, the latest perfect, luscious, superb, and tempting triumph:*

#### "WHAT'S COOKING AT DDL"

Our Italian chefs have found the perfect temptation. Luscious chocolate combined with the triumph of our own superb pasta. Here is the most intriguing way to create this excitement in your own kitchen.

#### Recipe for Chocolate Pasta

- 1 lb. chocolate pasta
- ½ cup of creme di cacao
- ½ cup of chocolate chips
- ½ cup of hazelnut chips
- ½ cup of chopped fresh strawberries
- ½ cup of dry white raisins
- ½ cup of kahlua

Boil the pasta 1½ to 3 minutes and drain. Place in a large bowl and mix with above ingredients. Place individual servings and top with a dollop of whipped cream. Serves 4."

*But are you supposed to throw the stuff against the wall to see if it's done?*

aperitifs, beer, croissants, and at lunchtime authentic Italian sandwiches with one thin slice of meat.

Some of the people who are behind the counters are out-of-work actors, and others are people with ambitions in the food business. They all dress alike, though, in proletarian white, with red kerchiefs for the women and ridiculous red chef's hats for the men. The man behind the cheese counter seems professional, but which profession it was impossible to say. He was proprietary about the ricotta experiments going on in the kitchen, forthcoming about the scamorza with fresh butter filling, and he sold Liz two little egg-shaped pieces of fresh mozzarella from a

fortless edibility. Two suckling pigs lie sweetly on the marble counter, their crisp little heads turned modestly away from the customers. One of them is cross-cut at the midsection; its insides are revealed to consist of a nugget of pork surrounded by a pâté stuffing. A whole salmon is spread on a platter, but from head to tail it's been sliced, and each slice cooked and cased in aspic and decorated with a mayonnaise rosette and a glazed mussel, itself illuminated with a strip of pimento. "The painted partich lies in every field, / And, for thy messe, is willing to be kill'd."

Platters of zucchini are laid out to look like herring. Little artichoke mousses, fennel in tomato sauce. A