Furthermore, she observes a marked trend of 40-plus divorcees now embarking on their first lesbian relationship. The only chapters in the report that express any real contentment are those where women describe lesbian or celibate lifestyles. Hite notes the value women place on friendships with women and how it is often only sisterly support that makes life with men bearable.

So what is going on here? What remains the point of sticking with men? I think the Hite report undoubtedly downplays the role of continuing material and cultural inequality between men and women in promoting heterosexual choice. At the same time, it presents a challenge to those radical feminist analyses that say if women had equal access to the same means of existence as a man then it would indeed be a case of naked emperors. This might well be so if women were claiming only to be buying into the action and lifestyle of men and not, as Hite insistently demonstrates, offering, indeed demanding, to love and be loved by men as well. So doesn't there have to be “something” about men, besides the real social props of patriarchy, that makes them objects of desire to women, however strange that seems?

The questions that resonate throughout the report remain the puzzles about men that women are always posing to each other: Is he really worth it? What did I see in him? Why ever do we bother with them? And if we reject, as Hite does, the currently fashionable notion that women are masochists who somehow “love too much”, then it is getting rather urgent that we come up with some good answers for why women go on making a heterosexual choice.

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Culinary Conquests

Alexander Cockburn digest the connections between exotic food and imperialism ...

We drove south on the San Diego Freeway, past the neon sea of LA International Airport, through the purple twilight to Manhattan Beach and the restaurant they call the Saint Estephe.

I was well armed, for beside me at the wheel of the Nissan Sentra was a man I'll call Mercator, a professor of political science at UCLA, undiluted in his radical convictions, awesome in appetite, his palate trained in Mexico, Paris, Budapest, Moscow, and the Upper West Side of Manhattan; in the back seat was his wife Augusta, a child of Portuguese colonialism, nourished on the caldo verde of Lisbon, the muamba of Angola, the feijoada of Brazil.

We'd heard of the Saint Estephe a few weeks earlier, with reports filtering in of a successful fusion of New Mexican with New French cuisine. As we rolled along the freeway I brought reports of the food fancies of New York, of gastrofads bursting like comets in the twilight, gone in an eye-blink: the mustard mania, the vinegar madness, the peppercorn frenzy; American tongues darting at the spinning globe, at Szechwan, Osaka, Bangkok, Hanoi, and now, most recently, at Mexico and the great American Southwest.

Mercator addressed the inside of the Sentra as though it were a lecture hall. 'You ask, why this frenzied food faddism, this orgy of gastroglobal eclecticism? Consider. There is a
familiar pattern in which food in the imperial, mother countries is influenced by, even replaced by food from annexed, or colonial or even neo-colonial areas: Algerian or North African or Vietnamese food in France; Indonesian or Surinamese food in Holland; Indian food in Great Britain. In pre-revolutionary Russia, the best food came, still comes, from the Transcaucasus, from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and central Asia. Why?

Augusta answered: 'Food from imperial countries is inherently bland. Being in temperate areas the imperialists are less likely to be using interesting condiments and spices, and besides they're so busy imperializing the world that they have no time.'

'What about French food?'

'Stolen from Italy via the cooks of Marie de’ Medici, when she crossed the Alps to marry Henry IV. The cuisine of France is oversold. English food? Bland beyond belief. Think of it, the least imperial countries in Europe have the best good: Italy and Hungary, which is the crossroads of eastern Europe.' Augusta fell silent, and Mercator, peering for the exit sign to Manhattan Beach, resumed:

'How else can we account for the mania here for Third World food? I could point to the ready availability of cheap raw materials as an essential component of colonialism. As a student of our political culture I could cite liberal guilt over colonial repression, the frumpies — formerly radical, upwardly mobile professionals — saying to themselves, "If we can't fight for their causes, the least we can do is eat their food."'

Mercator suddenly swerved the car into the exit ramp and there was a startled glare from behind as a Buick wooshed past us into the red ribbon of taillights streaming south. I thought of the cult of Vietnamese food, of the success in lower Manhattan of two restaurants, dowdy Saigon and modish Indochine. 'Don't trust liberal guilt,' I said. 'It's always two-edged. What could not be conquered in the Mekong Delta is consumed at the table; in an anthropological paradox the defeated devour, symbolically, the victors.'

We drove down Sepulveda Boulevard. The Saint Estephe was in a shopping mall and at last, to our left, we saw the gray expanse of Manhattan Village Mall. Obidient as only California drivers are, Mercator obeyed the NO U-TURN, NO LEFT TURN signs. As we searched for a legal left turn Augusta brooded further on the appeal of Third World cuisine: 'It is the exoticism of the subordinate. You and I read qualities into a culture that conform to the stereotypes and reinforce our dominant position vis-a-vis that culture. The English, for example, eat Indian food. They tell each other that the true Indian eats fiery curries to make himself cool in a hot climate. What they are really saying is that the Indian is impervious to pain and hence can be treated abominably; because they think that the Indian must be silly to think he can get cool in this way. The Dutch say that the Indonesians eat such mountains of rijsttefel that they cannot work hard, proving they must be lazy. Take this craze for Mexican food...'

But at last Mercator had made his legal turn, gone back along the boulevard, and was parking in front of an undistinguished concrete structure labeled Saint Estephe.

The cooking was modern French technique, nouvelle in presentation with some polite, though restrained, bows in the direction of the American Southwest, mostly in the higher hucksterism and bad faith of the menu's language. It spoke of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, the civilization of the first American Indians, the small villages of Hispanic settlers and the natural foods — corn, chile, beans, wild herbs, pumpkins, pinon nuts, squash — that had 'blended together to make America's first historic cuisine.' The Saint Estephe, the menu suggested, has concocted 'a modern Southwest cuisine' by taking these raw materials and adding new interest, inspiration and refinement.

We ordered blue corn tortillas served with smoked salmon and two types of American caviar. They were cocktail canapes, resting on white plates and set off against a trim of small red peppers. A snap of Mercator's jaws and they were gone. We had a tiny cassoulet of sweetbreads with pinto beans and wild rice. The only element here the Southwest could claim for its own would be the pinto beans, but the dish was good. As our third hors d'oeuvre we had 'New Mexican style raviolis stuffed with carne adobada, served with a cream garlic chevre sauce' — four pale squares, a mini-UN of ingredients: Southwestern filling, Italian envelope, sauce from a peasant product of the eastern Mediterranean.

Contented as we waited for the main dishes, perched in the western edge of one of the largest Spanish-speaking cities in the world, we debated the fashion for Mexican food and the meaning of the Saint Estephe.

'After all,' Mercator pointed out, 'though Mexico has some of the most sophisticated food in the world, in the United States we basically eat what the cowboys have round the campfire: beans, enchiladas, rice, and tacos. What's being enforced is the peasant stereotype, a version of pastoral. The classic Mexican leftover dish is ropa vieja, literally "old clothes". You tell us it's on the menu of the Cafe Marimba in New York for $14.95. That's like selling a hot dog with sauerkraut for $10. Now the colonized are not only exotic but also threatening. Mexico conjures up an image of illegal immigrants flooding across the Rio Grande, of perilous external bank debt, of drug smuggling. It has these dual connotations — quaint but threatening. Hence you get attempts at domestication and cultural pacification via a pastoral version of Mexican cuisine and, even less threatening, the notion of New Mexican food. New Mexico isn't going to threaten America. It is America.'

'Yes, it is the very image of repressive tolerance!' said Augusta, who had just been reading Marcuse. 'The proliferation of Third World food is a concession to immigrants,
allowing them a toe hold in the American dream. You integrate the Third World into American cuisine while at the same time segregating it from American society. As an immigrant you have the vicarious pleasure of seeing your food move out of the gastro-ghetto into middle-class respectability in a fancy restaurant where you might be lucky to work as busboy.

The main dishes came: the menu’s ‘fresh prawns from Arizona served Southwest bouillabaisse style, flavored with nopalitos and chile pods’, though entirely unrelated to bouillabaisse in any style the prawns were great and the little bits of nopal cactus served as signifiers of the Southwest as surely as an ox skull on a whitewashed wall signifies Georgia O’ Keeffe. Signifier of the Southwesternness of the supreme de volaille was jicama, Mexico’s retort to the daikon radish, this year’s crisp texture of choice though, in the Saint Estephe’s presentation, pointlessly shredded. The saddle of lamb had its signifying posole, and the New Mexican carte d’identite of the veal chop was established by a sopai pilla — a square pouch of puff pastry from which one tears a corner to pour in honey.

We ate and we drank and as we did so parties of sober-looking men in suits and ties came in to eat, straight from the office evidently even though it was now well past nine, Hughes engineers, aerospace executives, traders and guardians of the Pacific rim. As the hefty bill arrived I told Mercator and Augusta of the feeding frenzies of the East Coast: bogus regionalism disguised as the ‘new American cuisine’. In New York at Jams, for example, Norwegian salmon with jicama and green-pepper concasse; sauteed foie gras salad with jicama, sherry vinaigrette, and deep-fried spinach; red-pepper pancake with salmon and Oestra caviar.

Mercator raised his hand. ‘Stop, please! It’s the same here in Los Angeles, as you well know. Probably worse.’ But it was my privilege to give myself the final word. ‘The last refuge for an elite frantic to define itself, yet with nothing creative to say, is conspicuous, relentless consumption of commodities of which the most basic is food. The British elite, at the height of their empire in the late nineteenth century, conspicuously consumed meals which were vast in size and, amid their belches, proclaimed, “We gorge, therefore we exist.” Today, the conspicuous consumer in the United States knows that to gorge is to die. He renders his orgies of consumption — hugely expensive to be sure — more theatrical. He nods to the humble New Mexican pueblos with a blue corn tortilla. He winks at the Orient with a cumin seed, at China with a water chestnut, at Japan with a dried bonito shred. He consumes the world by symbols and the more he eats down the more he pays up. Ideally our conspicuous consumers must ingest all these symbols at the same time, for then truly they can fold their napkins with a contented sigh and say, “We are the world”.


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Up the
Ho Chi Minh
Trail

Twenty years after Tet, how is Vietnam now? From the old American embassy to the cellars of Saigon, all a leftie tourist would need to know.

I stand in the arrival hall at Tan Son Nhat Airport, watching nervously as suitcases and boxes mount in zig-zag pile on the concrete floor. I tell myself to stay calm. On my first ever trip to Viet Nam, I have lost my luggage. The heat is rising and the sweat is running in rivulets down my legs and into my $34 black rubber-soled sandals. A feel ridiculous. I look out the doorway. The round concrete hangars that once housed US planes stand empty on the edge of the tarmac.

Twenty years ago Tan Son Nhat was the scene of a major attack by the National Liberation Front forces during the Tet offensive. In 1968 I wore beads, patchouli, jeans, Indian shirts and long cotton skirts. I had a Che Guevara poster in my bedroom and burned incense at parties. I went to demos with friends and a year later I screamed with 100,000 others outside Sydney Town Hall when Hall Greenland yelled into the microphone “Fuck Gorton, fuck Nixon and fuck the war”.

The Air France flight from Bangkok has just landed. I watch fascinated as customs officials in khaki uniforms and peaked caps with red hatbands poke self-consciously through the luggage of the Vietkieu, the local name for Vietnamese who live abroad. An immigration officers meticulously examines the passport of an elderly Vietnamese woman in an expensive grey silk dress.

Customs regulations allow each passenger to bring in tax-free 1,000 cigarettes, 50 cigars, or 250 grams of tobacco; one litre of liquor; and one litre of “eau de vie”. Forbidden are opium, arms, explosives and cultural articles incompatible with the social regime of Viet Nam.