

8.1.04 Food

Cold Fusion

Fruit-flavored ices are chilling out on New York City dessert menus.

By Jonathan Hayes

A few years back, I spent a couple of weeks in Oaxaca, Mexico. It was, of course, an eating holiday, but to ease the languors between breakfast on the *zócalo* and lunch at wherever, I arranged French conversation lessons with a likable chap named Hervé. His existence in the town was pure Magic Realism, predicated on the notion that eating Oaxacan *chapulines* — fried grasshoppers — has the same mystical someday-you-will-return effect as a coin tossed over the shoulder into the Trevi Fountain. On a youthful dare, a visiting Hervé had downed a cricket or two a couple of blocks from the *zócalo* in Benito Juárez Market; when I met him years later, he was living in Oaxaca, still blinking with surprise, giving French classes to pass the time.

He was a good guy, a Gascon (I think) with an excellent palate and a gargantuan appetite for life. All life — marine life, plant life, mammals, arthropods, etc., preferably with butter and garlic. He considered Oaxaca a gastronomic heaven, and we bonded over his contention that *mole negro oaxaqueño* would be better showcased with duck, since it overpowers the hapless chicken it usually accompanies. For my formal last meal during my stay, I invited him to dine at a restaurant that specialized in regional foods dating back to before Christopher Columbus dropped anchor in the New World.

Eating in Oaxaca is like eating in France, with high highs and grisly disappointments; that final afternoon provided both. We began with large, deep-fried fish ovaries the color and mealy texture of corn sticks, which arrived at our table in a venomous fume of rotting fish. As I chewed, I imagined the roe sacs basking torpidly on the griddle-hot rooftop of a Oaxacan bus as it wound its way slowly from the distant shore to the mountain city.

It was a relief to move on to the *estofado de iguana*, chunks of iguana in a tomato-based sauce, a kind of reptile cacciatore. The meat tasted a bit like chicken, of course, but also a bit like fish and, most strikingly, like rabbit. Unfortunately, the iguana is small enough that no matter which cut you're eating, you're always



Ice and easy: A spoonful of boney and a few thyme sprigs

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al pancake then driz- garnished latter I away, but dessert it alinary cli- favorite: ca by the h, had de- of *cazaca*- e city. The dding his entertain- when the nsformed

we went y," on the e Basilea me 17th- that cle- thrill of n cooling of the day, eat fruit rns violet. ly lovely: ned milk, cal fruits na, and a urela Mar- ves in her of Oaxa- quite so swallows d-colored on a hot, ngs you'll and the

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the dessert menu like kudzu, new flavors boldly forcing aside the ef-fete panna cotta and the hoary molten chocolate cake. At Trinity in the Tribeca Grand, for example, the chef, Franklin Becker, features a tasting of three different melons glazed with three different liqueurs and served with three sorbets (each of which combine two different flavors — Thai basil-lemongrass, ly-chee-pickled ginger and Muscat grape-sugarcane). Becker's sorbets have even colonized the cocktail menu, with a kir royale based on cassis sorbet and a Bellini with white-peach sorbet in the works.

This makes good business sense; since a good sorbet contains nothing but fruit juice or purée with sugar, the cost is low. To pastry chefs, though, the issue goes far beyond kitchen economics; a good sorbet captures the essence of a fruit. To make a sorbet is to perform alchemy, to transform a perfectly ripe, sweet piece of fruit into a distillate of itself. There is a purity of nature and chemistry at work that is equaled only by fine perfumery.

If you're the sort who talks seriously about purity and sorbets, you'll soon find yourself at Jon Snyder's Laboratorio del Gelato on the Lower East Side. Snyder, who co-founded Ciao Bella in the 80's, makes sorbets that consist of nothing but fruit, sugar and water, with an occasional pinch of vitamin-C powder to prevent browning. His discourse is a earnest sussurus of mantras like "respect the fruit" and "in season," "perfectly ripe, where possible, organic," "ideally tree-ripened." When I proudly told him that I would be including a recipe I whipped up myself, a pantry sorbet made from canned lychees, the syrup infused with kaffir-lime leaves prior to puréeing and freezing, his face creased with pain; his was pretty much the reaction I would get from my mother were I to say, "Mother, bored with the single life in Manhattan, I'm off to tour the fleshpots of the Orient, and I don't expect to be back until I've found a wife."

The thing is, Jon's piety and asceticism are completely balanced by his beautiful ices. He makes approximately 100 different gelati and sorbets, almost all single flavors. His sorbets are simple to make. They're nothing but water, sugar, air and a flavoring agent. If a food can be made into a liquid, it can be made into a sorbet. As a general rule, the

pastry chef Bill Yosses of Josephs restaurant recommends a mixture of 85 percent fruit juice or purée and 15 percent sugar and water. If your sorbet mixture is too sugary, it won't set properly, yielding a sweet, fruity slush. (Tell your guests it's a "fruit snow.") Too little sugar, and it'll be icy (a "granita"). Make sure that your sorbet mix is as cold as possible before going into the machine — most of us have those weeny freezer-canister dealers, though they still do the job. And trust me: if the end result isn't the prettiest thing in the world, it'll still taste pretty nice. So experiment! Mess things up! What's the worst that can happen? A couple of dollars down the drain? A trifle, when you bid for perfection! Let your imagination guide your creating hand.

When he's invited to a dinner party, Yosses sometimes picks up a blend of beet and apple from his neighborhood juice bar, running it in his ice-cream machine for a quick intermezzo sorbet. And Sam Mason, at WD-50, offers a fantastic "liaison" course (between the savory and the sweet) of celery sorbet with peanut-butter Rice Krispies and cinnamon-poached raisins. The dessert was inspired by a snack he used to eat growing up in the South: a celery stalk slathered with peanut butter and then topped with raisins. "Ants on a Log" — an insect-studded dessert that Hervé would have loved.

Tomato-Water Sorbet With Mint

(FROM BILL YOSSES, JOSEPHS RESTAURANT)

- 6 ripe heirloom tomatoes (about 2½ pounds)
- 2 teaspoons Fleur de Sel or any good salt
- 12 branches mint leaves, stems removed
- ½ stalk of lemongrass, chopped fine
- Freshly ground white pepper.

1. Remove stems from tomatoes and place in a food processor with the salt. Run for 30 seconds until well broken up, but not a purée. Add the mint. Run for 10 more seconds.
2. Place a cotton cloth (a thin towel, not cheesecloth) in the bottom of a bowl and pour the contents of the food processor into it. Bring the corners together to

form a p string. (already towel 3 liquid an in a cool to drip i

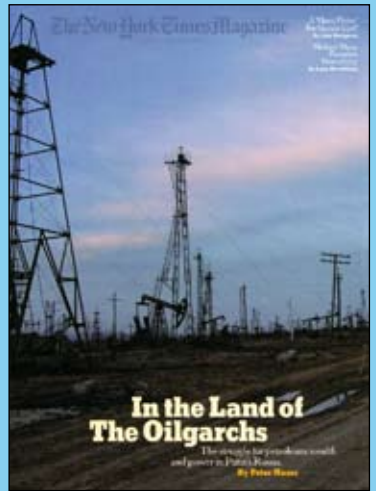
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