

your work has paid off in the bounty of the harvest. No, this felt more like something for nothing, a wondrous and unaccountable gift.

BY THE END of the afternoon we'd all ended up down by Beaver Creek, and at around four we made our way back to the car. We changed our soaking socks on the tailgate and filled the entire cargo area of Anthony's SUV with morels, trying as best we could to hide them from view. No reason, really, but a big haul of mushrooms just isn't something you want to advertise. (Earlier that afternoon a couple of mushroom hunters in an old conversion van stopped to ask if I was having any luck. For no good reason I had lied through my teeth.) We'd found sixty pounds of morels, it turned out—a personal best for Anthony and Ben. Before we climbed into the car to head home, Paulie took a picture of the three of us holding a crate loaded with morels, an obscenely huge one propped up on top of the pile. We were filthy and exhausted, but felt rich as kings. It was a Friday, and as we drove out of the forest, we passed dozens of cars and vans and trucks driving in; the word on the Eldorado flush was apparently out on the Web, and the weekend morel hunters were arriving in force. That meant the price—now twenty dollars a pound—would probably collapse by Monday, so Anthony wasted no time. He started working the cell phone, calling his chefs in Berkeley and San Francisco, taking orders for delivery tonight, and by the time we hit traffic outside of Stockton, all the wild mushrooms had been sold.

TWENTY

THE PERFECT MEAL

Perfect?! A dangerous boast, you must be thinking. And, in truth, there was much about my personally hunted, gathered, and grown meal that tended more toward the ridiculous than the sublime. I burned, just slightly, the crust of the cherry galette, the morels were a little gritty, and the salt, which in keeping with the conceit of the meal I'd gathered myself in San Francisco Bay, tasted so toxic I didn't dare put it on the table. So I seriously doubt that any of my guests, assuming I was out of earshot, would declare this a "great meal." But for me it was the perfect meal, which is not quite the same thing.

I set the date for the dinner—Saturday, June 18—as soon as my animal was in the bag: Wild California pig would be the main course. Now I had a couple of weeks, while the pig hung in Angelo's walk-in, to coordinate the entrée with whatever else I could find to serve. In planning the menu the rules I imposed on myself were as follows (and the exceptions thereto follow what follows):

1. Everything on the menu must have been hunted, gathered, or grown by me.
2. The menu should feature at least one representative of each edible kingdom: animal, vegetable, and fungus, as well as an edible mineral (the salt).
3. Everything served must be in season and fresh. The meal would reflect not only the places that supplied its ingredients, but a particular moment in time.
4. No money may be spent on the meal, though already purchased items in the pantry could be deployed as needed.
5. The guest list is limited to those people who helped me in my foraging and their significant others. This included Angelo, Anthony, Richard, and a friend named Sue who took me on an unsuccessful chanterelle hunt on Mount Tamalpais. Plus, of course, Judith and Isaac. Unfortunately, Jean-Pierre was in France. There would be ten of us in all.
6. I would cook the meal myself.

As the rules suggest, the meal was a conceit—an ambitious, possibly foolhardy, and, I hoped, edible conceit. My aim in attempting it, as should be obvious, was not to propose hunting and gathering and growing one's own food as an answer to any question larger than the modest ones I started out with: Would it be possible to prepare such a meal, and would I learn anything of value—about the nature or culture of human eating—by doing so? I certainly don't mean to suggest that anyone else should try this at home, or that a return to finding and producing our own food is a practical solution to any of our culture's dilemmas surrounding eating and agriculture. No, little if anything about this meal was what anyone would call "realistic." And yet no meal I've ever prepared or eaten has been more real.

1. PLANNING THE MENU

I had better start by getting out of the way some of the exceptions to the foregoing rules and various compromises forced upon me by reality, personal limitation, and folly. This was a meal far richer in stories than calories, and some of those stories, like the one about the salt, did not end well.

Early in my menu planning I had learned that there are still a few salt ponds at the bottom of San Francisco Bay. You can see them flying into SFO, a sequence of arresting blocks of color—rust, yellow, orange, blood red—laid out below you as if in a Mondrian painting. The different colors, I learned, are created by different species of salt-tolerant algae and archaea; as the seawater evaporates from the ponds, the salinity rises, creating conditions suitable for one species of microorganism or another.

On the Saturday before my dinner an exceptionally game friend and I drove down to a desolate stretch of shoreline beneath the San Mateo Bridge. After an interminable trek through acrid and trash-strewn wetlands, we found the salt ponds: rectangular fields of shallow water outlined by grassy levees. The water was the color of strong tea and the levees were littered with garbage: soda cans and bottles, car parts and tires, and hundreds of tennis balls abandoned by dogs. Here, I realized, was the West Coast's answer to the Jersey Meadowlands, a no-man's-land where a visitor would not be wrong to worry about stumbling upon criminal activities or the washed-up corpse of a murder victim. This was definitely the sort of place where you could see too much . . .

. . . of anything, that is, except salt. This year the winter rains had persisted well into spring, making the ponds deeper and less saline than they would normally be in June. So instead of scraping snowy white crystals of sea salt off the rocks, as I'd anticipated, we ended up filling a couple of scavenged polyethylene soda bottles with the cloudy brown brine. That night I evaporated the liquid in a pan over a low flame; it filled the kitchen with a worrisome chemical steam, but after a few hours a promising layer of crystals the color of brown sugar formed in

the bottom of the pan, and once it cooled I managed to scrape out a few tablespoons. Unfortunately this salt, which was a bit greasy to the touch, tasted so metallic and so much like chemicals that it actually made me gag, and required a chaser of mouthwash to clear from my tongue. I expect this was a case where the human disgust reflex probably saved lives. No doubt professional salt gatherers have sophisticated purification techniques, but I had no clue what these might be. So I abandoned plans to cook with and serve my own salt, and counted myself lucky not to have contracted hepatitis.

Perhaps the hardest rule to obey was the one about seasonality and freshness. Based on my experience, I would venture that the daily menus of real hunter-gatherers were limited to loads of whatever happens to be plentiful that day and very little of anything else. I had in mind a more varied and ambitious menu, but bringing to the table on a date certain freshly killed game, freshly foraged mushrooms, ripe local fruit, and just-picked garden vegetables turned out to be no mean feat, even in California. In the end I was forced to make an exception for the fungi, since there are no good mushrooms to hunt hereabouts in June. Luckily I had dried a pound of the morels that I'd gathered in the Sierra the previous month, and decided that, especially since dried morels are more intensely flavored than fresh ones, this could be the exception that proved the rule of freshness.

I also had to abandon my overly ambitious plans for a seafood appetizer: grilled abalone. Abalone is a large mollusk that grows on the undersides of underwater rocks along the Pacific coast. Since the abalone population is languishing in California, it can no longer be hunted or sold commercially, but individuals crazy enough to do so may still harvest a strictly limited number: three per day. When, a few days after I'd bagged my pig, a friend who lives on Point Reyes invited me to forage abalone with him the following week—during a once in a blue moon low tide occurring, as you've no doubt guessed, at 5:30 in the morning—I figured I had nailed down my appetizer. So I set my alarm and managed to straggle down to the designated beach at dawn, not quite believing I would have to get into the ocean.

Alas, after surviving the experience of finding an abalone, I learned that it must be eaten absolutely fresh, since freezing abalone utterly ruins its texture. Which is ironic, or something, because looking for abalone, at least on the Northern California coast, involves utterly and completely freezing yourself.

Abalone are gathered during unusually low tides by wading and diving among and beneath underwater boulders and feeling around blindly for their upside-down football-size shells with hands too numb to feel anything—except, that is, the barbed spines of sea urchins, which happen to occupy many of the same underwater crevices as abalone. And if you're lucky enough to avoid getting stuck by sea urchin spines, your probing fingers are liable to settle on the undulating slime of a sea anemone, recoiling abruptly therefrom in terror and disgust. All of this takes place beneath the bemused gaze of sea lions, the presence of whom I was informed is most welcome, since it indicates an absence of man-eating sharks: I might not have frozen myself quite so stiffly had I been wearing a wet suit that actually fit, but the only one available—my friend's grandfather's—was two sizes too small. This had the effect of cutting off circulation to my extremities at the very moment when they needed circulation more than they ever had before. I was out of the water for an hour before I regained enough sensation in my fingers to zip up my fly.

Gathering abalone was the most arduous foraging I did for my meal, and quite possibly the stupidest. I learned later that more Californians are killed gathering abalone each year—by getting dashed on the rocks, being attacked by sharks, or succumbing to hypothermia—than die in hunting accidents. Even if you're better at it than I was (my two hours in the water produced a single keeper), there's no question that you burn more calories looking for abalone than you can possibly collect, making this a perfectly absurd human enterprise. And yet one taste of fresh abalone supplies a fairly convincing explanation for the persistence of this folly.

We ate mine right on the beach, cleaning and pounding the big muscle on a rock, then slicing it and pounding it some more. We built

a fire from some driftwood, and then cooked the abalone slices in a pan with butter, onions, and eggs. We ate our breakfast sitting on driftwood logs, watching the tide come in with the day, still fresh. The setting and the abalone, which has some of the chewiness of squid combined with the richer, sweeter flavor of a sea scallop, made this one of life's most memorable breakfasts, almost (though in honesty probably not quite) worth the trouble that went into procuring it. When I got home I made abalone another way, brushing thin, well-pounded slices with olive oil and quickly grilling them over wood. Delectable, but unfortunately for my dinner guests, I had to serve this appetizer several weeks before they'd been told to arrive, making it a purely notional item on their menu.

For the real menu's appetizer, I had to turn to the garden, where there were fava beans ready to pick. I'd planted them as a cover crop back in November, and by May had scores of fat glossy pods, which I held off harvesting in anticipation of the big meal. The fava, a bean native to the Old World, is a broad, flat, bright green shelling bean that if picked young and quickly blanched has a starchy sweet taste that to me is as evocative of springtime as fresh peas or asparagus. But by June many of my beans were a bit long in the tooth, so I decided to make fava bean toasts: I'd mash the beans with roasted garlic and sage and serve them on toasted rounds of homemade sourdough bread. (The younger, sweeter beans I'd reserve for the pasta.) For a second appetizer, I asked Angelo to bring a block of the pâté he'd made from the liver of my pig.

So yes, okay, here was another exception to the rules: Angelo made the pâté. I also asked him to make the pasta for the first course: morels sautéed in butter with thyme and, for color, the tiny fava beans, over fresh egg fettuccine.

Wild California pig was the main course, but which cut and how to prepare it? Angelo recommended slowly braising the leg, in his opinion the most flavorful cut. I was curious to try the loin, and grilling outdoors over a fire seemed to me more in keeping with the season as well as the hunter-gatherer theme. Unable to choose between the two

approaches, I decided to try both. I would braise the leg in red wine (Angelo's) and homemade stock, and serve it with a reduction of the cooking liquid. The loin I would brine overnight, to keep the lean meat from drying out on the grill, cover it with crushed peppercorns, and then roast it fairly quickly over olive wood. The stock I could make earlier in the week, and the olive wood I would forage not in an olive orchard but, with Jean-Pierre's blessing, in the woodshed behind Chez Panisse.

I wanted to make my own bread and decided it would be fitting to use wild yeast, thereby introducing a second species of foraged fungus into the proceedings. I found a recipe (in an excellent cookbook called *Bread Alone*) that gave instructions for gathering wild yeast, in a process that took several days but didn't sound too difficult. For the wine I had a couple bottles of Angelo's 2003 Syrah and he offered to bring a few more.

After the main course there would be a salad, which I had originally hoped to assemble from foraged wild greens. Earlier in the spring I had found a lush patch of miner's lettuce and wild rapini in the Berkeley Hills, but by June the greens had begun to yellow, so I decided to go instead with a simple salad of lettuces from the garden.

Which left dessert, and for a while that posed a problem. My plan was to forage fruit, for a tart, from one of the many fruit trees lining the streets in Berkeley. I see no reason why foraging for food should be restricted to the countryside, so in the weeks before the dinner I embarked on several urban scouting expeditions in quest of dessert. Actually these were just strolls around the neighborhood with a baggie. In the two years we've lived in Berkeley I've located a handful of excellent fruit trees—plum, apple, apricot, and fig—offering publicly accessible branches, but none of the usual suspects had quite ripened yet, with the exception of a Santa Rosa plum on Parker Street that was already past its peak.

So I started asking around, hoping somebody might point me in the direction of a promising neighborhood dessert tree. It was my sister-in-law, Dena, who saved my dessert. She reported that her neighbor's Bing

cherry tree was so heavily laden with ripe fruit that several of its branches were at that very moment bending low over her backyard. I wasn't quite sure if picking cherries from a neighbor's tree was exactly kosher, either by my lights or the law. But isn't there some old legal principle that confers the right to pick fruit from trees overhanging your property? I did a little research and discovered that indeed there is. The Romans called it "usufruct," which the dictionary defines as "the right to enjoy the use and advantages of another's property short of the destruction or waste of its substance." Bingo! Here was a venerable legal principle that spoke to the very soul of foraging.*

With dessert I would serve a tisane, or herbal tea, made from wild chamomile I'd picked in the Berkeley Hills earlier in the spring and dried, mixed with mint and lemon balm from the garden. I also had a jar of honey made by a friend in town, the foraging in this case having been done in the Berkeley Hills by his bees.

Now I had my menu and I wrote it out on a card; this being Berkeley, I felt compelled to add a few pretentious restaurant menu flourishes:

Fava Bean Toasts and Sonoma Boar Pâté
 Egg Fettuccine with Power Fire Morels
 Braised Leg and Grilled Loin of Wild Sonoma Pig
 Wild East Bay Yeast Levain
 Very Local Garden Salad
 Fulton Street Bing Cherry Galette
 Claremont Canyon Chamomile Tisane
 2003 Angelo Garro Petite Syrah

It was still just a menu, okay, and admittedly it broke several of my own rules and leaned rather heavily on Angelo's generosity and talents, yet it promised an interesting meal and accomplished most of what I had set out to do.

* There's a Web site devoted to the principle of usufruct that offers maps to publicly accessible fruit trees in Los Angeles: fallenfruit.org.

As I looked over the menu, it occurred to me that besides representing several wild species and three edible kingdoms, not to mention the city and the country, this was a dinner drawn in large part from the forest. Here was the meal at the end of a woodland food chain, and that as much as anything else made it a little different. The pig and the morels came directly from the forest, obviously, but the cherry, too, is originally a woodland species that found its way to the orchard and then the city. (Cherry trees came originally from the forests of the Transcaucasus, between the Black and Caspian seas. The Bing cherry is a chance seedling discovered in a Willamette Valley orchard in 1875 and named for a Mr. Ah Bing, the Chinese farmhand who tended it.) What this means is that the calories we'd be consuming represent energy captured by trees rather than, as is typical now, by annuals in farm fields or grasses in pastures. The sweetness of the dessert was made in the leaves of a cherry tree; the morels nourished themselves from sugars originally created in the needles of a pine tree and then absorbed from its roots by their mycelia; and the acorn-fed pig is a walking, snorting manifestation of the oak. Reversing the historical trajectory of human eating, for this meal the forest would be feeding us again.

2. IN THE KITCHEN

I started cooking Saturday's meal on Tuesday morning, when I made the stock and started the wild yeast culture for the bread. For the stock I used bones from both my pig and, because I'd never heard of a pure pork stock, from a grass-fed steer. A neighbor had recently bought a quarter of a beeve that arrived with a big bag of bones she didn't know what to do with, so I asked if I could forage them from her freezer. Similarly, I foraged from the depths of the produce bin in my refrigerator some past-due vegetables. After roasting the bones in the oven for an hour, I simmered them in a stockpot with the vegetables and some herbs for the rest of the day.

Gathering wild yeast turns out to be no big deal. The spores of var-

ious yeasts are floating in the air just about everywhere; collecting them is a matter of giving them a place to rest and something to eat. Some species of yeast taste better than others, however, and this is where geography and luck enter in. The Bay Area has a reputation for its sour-dough bread, so I figured the air outside my house would be an excellent hunting ground for wild yeast. I made a thick soup of organic flour and spring water (the idea is to avoid any chemicals that might harm your yeast); then, after briefly exposing the mixture to the air on a windowsill, I sealed it in an airtight container and left it out on the kitchen counter overnight. By the following morning the surface of the chef, as it's called, was bubbling like pancake batter on a hot griddle, a good sign. Each day, you're supposed to feed fresh water and flour to the young colony of microbes, and sniff it. The chef should smell slightly alcoholic, sour, and yeasty—a bit like beer. The absence of bubbles is a bad sign. So is the presence of off odors or colorful scums, which indicate you've probably snared wilder and weirder microbes than you want; throw out the chef and start over. I counted myself lucky that by the second day my chef already smelled promisingly beery and breadlike.

Wednesday morning I drove into San Francisco to pick up the meat from Angelo at the forge. To get to his walk-in cooler you pass through a sequence of loftlike spaces of an almost Dickensian novelty and clutter, filled with metal scraps of every description, stacks of iron rods, ironworking tools and pieces of machinery, a small blast furnace raging heat and light, and, growing beneath an opening to the sky right in the middle of the forge, a fully grown fig tree. In the back there's a sunny kitchen with an industrial-duty espresso machine, a meat grinder, and a pasta machine and, to relieve the industrial clutter and clatter all around, big vases of fresh wildflowers. Industrial and domestic, hard and soft, metal and meat: The place was a lot like Angelo himself.

The carcass was hanging alongside a couple of others in the walk-in, amid racks holding prosciutto, pancetta, and salami in various stages of curing. Just outside the walk-in stood more racks holding oak barrels of wine and balsamic vinegar, hundreds of unlabeled bottles of

wine, and fifty-pound bags of wheat, both durum and semolina. Angelo carried the stiff carcass out to the kitchen table and, with a cleaver, began expertly to disassemble my pig. We trimmed and salted the hams for prosciutto and, with a few well-placed blows of the cleaver, Angelo separated the rib cage from the spinal column and then the loins, one on either side of the spine like saddlebags of meat. Eyeing the mounting pile of trimmings—chunks of dark red meat and strips of snowy white fat—Angelo had an idea.

"Hey, you know, we should make a nice little ragout with all these scraps. For our lunch." And so we did, pushing the scraps through the grinder, stewing the ground meat with a can of tomatoes, and, while the ragout bubbled on the stove, making a batch of fresh pasta on which to serve it. Angelo showed me how to cut handfuls of the yellowy ribbons of fettuccine as they extruded themselves from the slots of his machine.

Ready or not, this would be my first taste of my pig, and I was a little taken aback at the speed with which it had just gone from hanging carcass to ground-up scraps of meat to lunch. But the ragout was delicious and, eating it at Angelo's kitchen table, even amid the raw cuts of meat arrayed on the counters around us, I suddenly felt perfectly okay about my pig—indeed, about the whole transaction between me and this animal that I'd killed two weeks earlier. Eating the pig, I understood, was the necessary closing act of that drama, and went some distance toward redeeming the whole play. Now it was all a matter of doing well by the animal, which meant making the best use of its meat by preparing it thoughtfully and feeding it to people who would appreciate it. Later, when I looked up the spelling of the word "ragout," I learned that it comes from the French verb *ragoûter*: "to restore the appetite." This one had done that, restoring my appetite for this meat after the disgust I'd felt cleaning the animal. I was reminded of what Paul Rozin had written about a traditional cuisine's power to obviate the omnivore's dilemma by clothing the exotic in familiar flavors. I left Angelo's with two gorgeous cuts of my pig neatly wrapped in butcher paper.

By the end of the week all the meal's raw ingredients were in place: I'd picked a gallon of cherries, harvested my fava beans, prepared the brine for the pig loin, made the stock and the chef, and soaked the dried morels in warm water to rehydrate them, a procedure that yielded an earthy black liquor that I decided would be good to add to the braising liquid. On Friday night, when I made a to-do list and schedule for Saturday, it hit me just how much I had to do, and, scarier still, how much of what I had to do I had never done before, including bake a wild yeast bread, pit a gallon of cherries, make a galette, and cook a wild pig two different ways. I also hadn't toted up until now how many total hours of oven time the meal would require, and since braising the pig leg at 250 degrees would take half the day, it wasn't clear how exactly I could fit in the bread and the galette. For some reason the very real potential for disaster hadn't dawned on me earlier, or the fact that I was cooking for a particularly discriminating group of eaters, several of them actual chefs. Now, dawn on me it did, and it left me feeling more than a little intimidated.

To give you a more comprehensive idea of exactly what I'd gotten myself into, here's the schedule I wrote out Friday evening on an index card:

- 8:00 brine the loin; shell and blanch and skin the fava beans. [Favas are one of nature's more labor-intensive legumes, requiring two separate peelings, with a blanching in between.]
- 9:00 make the bread dough. First rise.
- 10:00 brown the leg; prepare liquid for braise.
- 10:30 pit the cherries. Make pastry crust; refrigerate. Preheat oven for pig, 250°.
- 11:00 Pig in oven. Skin fava beans. Roast garlic, puree favas.
- 12:00 knead bread dough; second rise.
- 12:30 clean morels; harvest and chop herbs, sauté morels.
- 1:00 harvest and wash lettuce. Make vinaigrette.
- 2:00 knead dough again; proof loaves. Prepare grill, teapot, cut flowers, set table.

- 3:00 roll piecrust, make galette. Remove pig and heat oven for bread (450°). Score loaves and bake.
- 3:40 remove bread; bake galette (400°).
- 4:00 remove galette from oven; put pig back in (250°).
- 5:00 build fire. Crush peppercorns.
- 6:15 remove leg to rest; prepare loin (lard with garlic and herbs; roll in crushed pepper). Put loin on grill.
- 7:00 guests arrive. Remove loin to rest.

That was my Saturday in the kitchen, though of course the reality of the day unfolded with none of the order or stateliness promised by the schedule. No, in reality the day was a blizzard of harried labors, missing ingredients, unscheduled spills and dropped pots, unscheduled trips to the store, unscheduled pangs of doubt, and throes of second-guessing. There were moments when I sorely wished for another pair of hands, but Judith and Isaac were away all day. Why, I asked myself when I took a ten-minute break for lunch around 4:00, had I ever undertaken to prepare such an elaborate meal by myself?

For a quick lunch I'd picked up a takeaway plastic tray of sushi—Japanese fast food—and, you know, it tasted just great. So how much better could I reasonably expect this dinner—this daylong (indeed, months-long) extravaganza, this extremely slow food feast—to taste? Did I really need to cook the pig two different ways? For dessert, why not just serve the cherries in a bowl? Or open a can of beef stock for the braise? Or a packet of fast-acting yeast?! Why in the world was I going to quite this much trouble?

I thought of several answers while I wolfed my sushi, each of them offering some sliver of a somewhat elusive larger truth. This meal was my way of thanking these people, my patient and generous Virgils, for all they'd contributed to my foraging education, and the precise amount of thought and effort I put into the meal reflected the precise depth of my gratitude. A bowl of fresh Bing cherries is nice, but to turn them into a pastry is surely a more thoughtful gesture, at least provided I managed not to blow the crust. It's the difference between a Hallmark

card and a handwritten letter. A cynical person might say that cooking like this—with ambition—is really just another way of showing off, a form of what might be called conspicuous production. It says, *I have the resources, sophistication, and leisure time to dazzle you with this meal.* No doubt there's often an element of truth to this, but cooking is many other things too, and one of them is a way to honor the group of people you have elected to call your guests.

Another thing cooking is, or can be, is a way to honor the things we're eating, the animals and plants and fungi that have been sacrificed to gratify our needs and desires, as well as the places and the people that produced them. Cooks have their ways of saying grace too. Maybe this explains why I wanted to prepare the pig two ways, and to serve Angelo's pig pâté. For me, doing right by my pig means wasting as little of it as possible and making the most of whatever it has to offer us. Cooking something thoughtfully is a way to celebrate both that species and our relation to it. By grilling one cut of my pig and braising the other, I was drawing on the two most elemental techniques people have devised for transforming raw meat into something not only more digestible but also more human: that is, cooking meat directly over a fire and, with liquid, in a pot. Both techniques promise to turn the flesh of animals into something good to eat and good to think, but each reflects a slightly different stance toward the animal. The second proposes a more "civilized" method of cooking meat, since it achieves a more complete transcendence or (take your pick) sublimation of the animal, and perhaps the animal in us, than the first. It leaves no trace of blood, which suits some meat eaters more than others, but it seemed to me I should give both approaches to the pig their due.

It was a long day of such transformations, as one after another the raw stuffs of nature—chunks of meat, piles of wild fungi, the leaves and pods of plants, and piles of pulverized grain—took on whole new forms, many of them wondrous. Bread dough magically rose and crisped; desiccated mushrooms came back to fleshy life; meat turned brown and caramelized; indigestible beans softened and sweetened; the leaves of

herbs inflected whatever they touched; and all these unprepossessing parts of things combined into what promised to be greater and more delectable wholes.

The repetitive phases of cooking leave plenty of mental space for reflection, and as I chopped and minced and sliced I thought about the rhythms of cooking, one of which involves destroying the order of the things we bring from nature into our kitchens, only to then create from them a new order. We butcher, grind, chop, grate, mince, and liquefy raw ingredients, breaking down formerly living things so that we might recombine them in new, more cultivated forms. When you think about it, this is the same rhythm, once removed, that governs all eating in nature, which invariably entails the destruction of certain living things, by chewing and then digestion, in order to sustain other living things. In *The Hungry Soul* Leon Kass calls this the great paradox of eating: "that to preserve their life and form living things necessarily destroy life and form." If there is any shame in that destruction, only we humans seem to feel it, and then only on occasion. But cooking doesn't only distance us from our destructiveness, turning the pile of blood and guts into a savory salami, it also symbolically redeems it, making good our karmic debts: *Look what good, what beauty, can come of this!* Putting a great dish on the table is our way of celebrating the wonders of form we humans can create from this matter—this quantity of sacrificed life—just before the body takes its first destructive bite.

3. AT THE TABLE

It remained to be seen whether my own cooking would redeem any of these ingredients, but by the appointed hour everything was more or less ready, except me. I raced upstairs to change and, before I had my shoes tied, heard the doorbell ring. The guests were arriving. They came bearing feast-appropriate gifts: Angelo with his wine and pâté, Sue with a bouquet of lemon verbena picked from her garden, and An-

thony with a small carafe of homemade nocino, a jet-black Italian digestive he'd distilled from green walnuts—yet another gift of the forest to our feast.

I'd been too busy worrying about the food to worry much about the company, whether this somewhat haphazard assortment of people would gel or not. A couple of paths had apparently crossed before, but most of the guests were strangers to one another; what linked everyone was foraging—and me. But as we settled into the living room with our glasses of wine, it didn't take long for the stiffness of small talk to relax into conversation and for the conversation, oiled by Angelo's excellent Syrah, to steadily gain altitude. The fava bean toasts and boar pâté drew appreciative murmurs and comments, launching a discussion about boar hunting. Anthony was curious to go some time, but warned Angelo that he doubted he could bring himself to actually shoot anything. "Maybe I could caddy for you," he proposed. When the mood in the living room seemed to have attained a sustainable effervescence, I disappeared into the kitchen to ready the pasta course.

Within minutes Angelo appeared at my side, with an offer of help; I think he was a little worried I was in over my head. While we waited for the pasta water to come to a boil, I asked him to taste the morels. "It's good, but maybe it needs a little more butter." I handed him a stick and he dropped the whole thing in the pan. (So that's how the professionals do it!)

We plated the pasta, and I called everyone to the table for dinner. Votives were lit, wine was poured, the perfume of thyme and morels filled the room, and I raised my glass for a toast. I'd actually meant to write out something earlier in the day, because I'd wanted to organize my thoughts on the meaning of the meal and everyone's contribution to it, but the day had gotten away from me. So I kept it simple. I went around the table and spoke of each person's contribution to my foraging education and to this meal that, though I had cooked most of it myself, was in the deepest sense our collaboration. I talked about Sue's unprecedented generosity in sharing three of her choicest chanterelle spots (one of them right in the front yard of an unsuspecting homeowner in

West Marin), and told the story of the afternoon we'd spent hunting mushrooms in a downpour—with nothing to show for it. I talked about Anthony's gameness in allowing a complete, and completely green, stranger to accompany him hunting morels in the Sierra. I talked about hunting with Richard in Sonoma during that first failed outing, how it had taught me the importance of preparedness, and temperance, in hunting. And lastly I talked about all the many things I'd learned from Angelo—things about mushrooms and pigs, about nature and the arts of cooking and eating well, and so much else besides. Then, worried I was in danger of melting down into sentiment, I raised my glass again and urged everyone to start.

I had actually wanted to say something more, to express a wider gratitude for the meal we were about to eat, but I was afraid that to offer words of thanks for the pig and the mushrooms and the forests and the garden would come off sounding corny and, worse, might ruin some appetites. The words I was reaching for, of course, were the words of grace. But as the conversation at the table unfurled like a sail amid the happy clatter of silver, tacking from stories of hunting to mother lodes of mushrooms to abalone adventures, I realized that in this particular case words of grace were unnecessary. Why? Because that's what the meal itself had become, for me certainly, but I suspect for some of the others, too: a wordless way of saying grace.

As you might expect from this crowd and occasion, the talk at the table was mainly about food. Yet this was not the usual food talk you hear nowadays; less about recipes and restaurants, it revolved around specific plants and animals and fungi, and the places where they lived. The stories told by this little band of foragers ventured a long way from the table, the words (the tastes, too) recalling us to an oak forest in Sonoma, to a pine burn in the Sierra Nevada, to the stinky salt flats of San Francisco Bay, to slippery boulders along the Pacific coast, and to a backyard in Berkeley. The stories, like the food that fed them, cast lines of relation to all these places and the creatures living (and dying) in them, drawing them all together on this table, on these plates, in what to me began to feel a little like a ceremony. And there's a sense in which

the meal had become just that, a thanksgiving or a secular seder, for every item on our plates pointed somewhere else, almost sacramentally, telling a little story about nature or community or even the sacred, for mystery was very often the theme. Such storied food can feed us both body and soul, the threads of narrative knitting us together as a group, and knitting the group into the larger fabric of the given world.

I don't want to make too much of it; it was just a meal, after all. A very tasty meal, too, I don't mind saying, though I don't doubt that all the words and memories and stories in which the meal had marinated gave it much of its savor, and that a guest who spoke no English might not have enjoyed it half as much. The wild pig was delicious both ways, with a nutty sweetness to it that tasted nothing like store-bought pork, though I noticed that when the platter went around for seconds, the tender slices of braised leg went faster than the pink slabs of the roast. The sauce for the leg I'd reduced from the braising liquid was almost joltingly rich and earthy, powerfully reminiscent of the forest. So were the morels and butter (or perhaps I should say butter and morels), which had a deep, smoky, almost meaty flavor. My self-criticisms were that I could have done a better job cleaning the grit from the morels, and that the galette was a shade overcooked—though the cherries themselves detonated little bursts of summer on the tongue, and no one seemed to have any trouble polishing it off.

Angelo reserved his most enthusiastic praise for my bread, which I'll admit did have a perfect crust, an airy crumb, and a very distinctive (though not at all sour) flavor—the specific flavor, I guess, of the neighborhood yeasts. It occurred to me that the making of this meal, by acquainting me with these particular people, landscapes, and species, had succeeded in attaching me to Northern California, its nature and its culture both, as nothing I'd done before or since. Eating's not a bad way to get to know a place.

There comes a moment in the course of a dinner party when, with any luck, you realize everything's going to be okay. The food and the company having sailed past the shoals of awkwardness or disaster, and the host can allow himself at last to slip into the warm currents of the

evening and actually begin to enjoy himself. For me that moment came just around the time that the platter of wild pig made its second circuit of the table and found so many eager takers. I was enjoying myself now, the words and the food in equal measure, and that's when I realized that this was, at least for me, the perfect meal, though it wasn't until some time later that I began to understand what that meant.

Was the perfect meal the one you made all by yourself? Not necessarily; certainly this one wasn't that. Though I had spent the day in the kitchen (a good part of the week as well), and I had made most everything from scratch and paid scarcely a dime for all the ingredients, it had taken many hands to bring this meal to the table. The fact that just about all of those hands were at the table was the more rare and important thing, as was the fact that every single story about the food on that table could be told in the first person.

I prized, too, the almost perfect transparency of this meal, the brevity and simplicity of the food chain that linked it to the wider world. Scarcely an ingredient in it had ever worn a label or bar code or price tag, and yet I knew almost everything there was to know about its provenance and its price. I knew and could picture the very oaks and pines that had nourished the pigs and the mushrooms that were nourishing us. And I knew the true cost of this food, the precise sacrifice of time and energy and life it had entailed. Some of that sacrifice had proven expensive to me, emotionally speaking, yet it was cheering to realize just how little this preindustrial and mostly preagricultural meal had diminished the world. My pig's place would soon be taken by another pig, and the life of these forests was little altered by our presence or what we had removed. Not just the Bing cherries but most of the meal owed its presence on our table to usufruct, which was a fact of nature long before it became an axiom of law.

Perhaps the perfect meal is one that's been fully paid for, that leaves no debt outstanding. This is almost impossible ever to do, which is why I said there was nothing very realistic or applicable about this meal. But as a sometimes thing, as a kind of ritual, a meal that is eaten in full consciousness of what it took to make it is worth preparing every now and

again, if only as a way to remind us of the true costs of the things we take for granted. The reason I didn't open a can of stock was because stock doesn't come from a can; it comes from the bones of animals. And the yeast that leavens our bread comes not from a packet but from the air we breathe. The meal was more ritual than realistic because it dwelled on such things, reminding us how very much nature offers to the omnivore, the forests as much as the fields, the oceans as much as the meadows. If I had to give this dinner a name, it would have to be the Omnivore's Thanksgiving.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE to prepare and eat a meal quite so physically, intellectually, and emotionally costly without thinking about the incalculably larger debts we incur when we eat industrially—which is to say, when we eat without a thought to what we're doing. To compare my transcendently slow meal to the fast-food meal I "served" my family at that McDonald's in Marin, the one that set me back fourteen bucks for the three of us and was consumed in ten minutes at sixty-five miles per hour, is to marvel at the multiplicity of a world that could produce two such different methods of accomplishing the same thing: feeding ourselves, I mean.

The two meals stand at the far extreme ends of the spectrum of human eating—of the different ways we have to engage the world that sustains us. The pleasures of the one are based on a nearly perfect knowledge; the pleasures of the other on an equally perfect ignorance. The diversity of the one mirrors the diversity of nature, especially the forest; the variety of the other more accurately reflects the ingenuity of industry, especially its ability to tease a passing resemblance of diversity from a single species growing in a single landscape: a monoculture of corn. The cost of the first meal is steep, yet it is acknowledged and paid for; by comparison the price of the second seems a bargain but fails to cover its true cost, charging it instead to nature, to the public health and purse, and to the future.

Let us stipulate that both of these meals are equally unreal and

equally unsustainable. Which is perhaps why we should do what a responsible social scientist would do under the circumstances: discard them both as anomalies or outliers—outliers of a real life. Or better yet, preserve them but purely as ritual, for the lessons they have to teach us about the different uses to which the world can be put. Going to McDonald's would be something that happens once a year, a kind of Thanksgiving in reverse, and so would a meal like mine, as slow and storied as the Passover seder.

Without such a thing as fast food there would be no need for slow food, and the stories we tell at such meals would lose much of their interest. Food would be . . . well, what it always was, neither slow nor fast, just food: this particular plant or that particular animal, grown here or there, prepared this way or that. For countless generations eating was something that took place in the steadying context of a family and a culture, where the full consciousness of what was involved did not need to be rehearsed at every meal because it was stored away, like the good silver, in a set of rituals and habits, manners and recipes. I wonder if it isn't because so much of that context has been lost that I felt the need, this one time, to start again from scratch.

This is not the way I want to eat every day. I like to be able to open a can of stock and I like to talk about politics, or the movies, at the dinner table sometimes instead of food. But imagine for a moment if we once again knew, strictly as a matter of course, these few unremarkable things: What it is we're eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what, in a true accounting, it really cost. We could then talk about some other things at dinner. For we would no longer need any reminding that however we choose to feed ourselves, we eat by the grace of nature, not industry, and what we're eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world.