

I'd like the stewed Tenderloin, please

Eating out at Donut World really does give food for thought

BY ED BOWERS

I once knew a woman who wouldn't go out to eat with a man unless she was going to bed with him because, she said, eating is an intimate experience. At the time I found her statement odd.

I eat out a lot. In fact, except for candy bars and donuts I secretly consume in my room in The Zoo – what I call where I live on Hyde Street, surrounded inside and out by drug-addled morons suffering various stages of dementia – I only eat out. Also, I understand that this is an art column, not a restaurant critique, so I will get to the art part. In the meantime, bear with me.

Eating in America is a social thing. People love to eat together. Often I eat solely out of necessity, but because I do so most of the time in restaurants, it is impossible for me to avoid the social thing. Every day I see people sitting at tables and lunch counters chewing on food, some of them having the time of their lives, others suffering terminal depression, a large percentage clearly out of their minds. This forces me to observe their behavior up close. Lucky me.

From what I've seen, there is a horrible racial divide in this city, and it can clearly be seen in restaurants and cafes. So there it goes. Now I'm not talking about art or food. I'm writing about racism. But I'll get back to art and food later. Please be patient.

A few days ago I was eating breakfast at 3 p.m. at the L&M Café at 1081 Market St. when two African American women approached the counter; one demanded a bagel. Unfortunately the kind she wanted was not available; this put her in a bad mood. Finally settling for another flavor of bagel, she began demanding a lot of free condiments to go with it. When the Asian woman behind the counter didn't respond right away, the African American woman took it personally and insulted the Buddha, called the woman a racist, began making more demands for free condiments, asked me, "Wasn't I horrified by the injustice of the situation? And raved on until she was finally 86'd after invoking Jesus Christ."

There are a lot of angry eaters in this neighborhood.

Two days later, at 9 p.m., I was eating a donut and having a cup of coffee at a booth in Donut World, also at 1081 Market St., when three African American teenagers – one young woman and two young men – entered, sat and began talking loudly, obviously alarming the Asian woman behind the counter. Somebody got gunned down here not long ago, so maybe she was shell-shocked.

At any rate, when the African American woman approached the counter she was told that her two loud male friends would have to get out. This of course infuriated her friends and one of them accused the Asian woman and half of San Francisco of being racist, overturned a chair, and stomped out. I could ascertain by his demeanor that he seriously was hurt, which is understandable because so many young black men who have been underfunded and undereducated in this rich country have only two things to look forward to: death by violence or a demeaning minimum wage job. I'm not sure which is worse.

The young African American woman attempted to apologize for her friends, but when the Asian woman referred to how she didn't want "...those people..." in her establishment, the young woman's radar caught racist vibrations coming at her and she got mad. I left to go to work so I don't know what happened after that.

And people wonder why I'm a nervous eater.



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

At any rate, the reader must be wondering, "What the hell does this have to do with art?"

The answer to that is simple. People think art exists only on the stage or in the museums or in books. But art is a function of the human mind, and quite frankly a lot of art is an ugly projection revealing unpleasant aspects of consciousness, painting on its neurons a myriad of concepts many of them sad, or violent, or disgusting.

But viewers, who take the time to apply thought and insight to the work at hand, get an aerial view of the production and gain insights impossible otherwise.

And that's what I would like people to do in their daily lives. Look around at what's at hand, respect it as a spontaneous creation of human mind, and try to think deeply about the meaning of this creation and the reasons behind its performance.

This is especially important if you live in the Tenderloin, considering that this is where a lot of ruined artifacts that have been rejected by the major museums have come to be stored, if you get my metaphorical drift.

But all artifacts have one thing in common: the human mind. And out of that mind comes a production in which everybody human is involved. It is impossible to avoid who we are.

Your mind is the same as my mind, just a variation on a theme. We're in this together, ladies and gentlemen, and we'd better

pay attention to the script.

The hostility and hatred between human minds is not going away by itself. We are going to have to acknowledge an intimate and unavoidable connection between each other and think deeply about why we act toward each other the way we do or this production is going to turn into a tragedy.

That is what is so great about the Tenderloin; above all other neighborhoods, the actors on this stage are playing their parts upfront and to the hilt. Ironically, in a zone full of castoffs, nobody here can afford the luxury of disconnection from others.

So the drug-addled morons, and the angry races, and the restaurant owners all eat together, one way or another. And the woman I once knew who would only eat out with a man she was going to sleep with had a point. Sharing food with someone is an intimate experience.

Except she was also wrong; the real food is human thought, and we are all unavoidably dining off the same plate.

Ironically, one week after writing this article I was having a drink at the 21 Club on the corner of Taylor and Turk in the heart of the Tenderloin at midnight when I looked up and noticed every damn race in the world standing around smiling at each other and laughing.

Did something go wrong a long time ago with the human mind? Does it have to be drunk to get along with itself? ■

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