

GOING WILD IN URBAN AMERICA

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Forty figs per day, every day, for eighty days. If you are what you eat, then I was made of some of the best stuff on earth. This I told myself often as I conversed with my reflection in the bathroom mirror. In addition to figs, I also ate apples, passion fruit, guavas, citrus, fish, seaweed, arugula, and forty or so other wild foods that I gathered and hunted in and around the town of Isla Vista, California during my last quarter at U.C. Santa Barbara. I was living off the land in an urban setting, and 'My Project,' as I called it, was the preoccupation of much of my life for ten long weeks.

It only took an hour or two per day to gather all the food I needed – figs were my staple – but whether sitting in class, at work with my archaeology professor, trying to read, hungry or full, food is nearly all I thought about. It nearly drove me crazy. Which trees would I stop at on my way home for lunch? What would I make? Oh, damn! I'll have to go all the way to the end of Trigo Road for a pomegranate! Shoot, my avocados probably aren't ripe yet! Could I make something different instead?

My mind could get little rest.

So out would come my notebook, and I would scribble down a 'shopping list' and a 'meal plan' which would temporarily ease my mind. Then, after class or work as I rode my bike home, I would leisurely fill up a bag with whatever I needed for my curry, or my salad, or my stir fry.

I cooked nothing but elaborate dishes with my wild ingredients all quarter long as I tried to convince myself that a venture into the world of fine cooking was the intellectual payoff for my obsessive thoughts. I kept a journal all the while, too, recording recipes and any interesting feelings I had pertaining to My

Project. Nonetheless, I was quite afraid of sinking to a level of wretchedness reserved for starving mongrels; I loved picking vegetables and climbing fruit trees, but I did not want my mind to be stunted by this false concern for finding food. I wanted My Project to be something of an intellectual experience, not a pointless descent into brain-dead barbarism.

And so, armed with a heavy arsenal of spices, I tried to see cooking as an art – not just a way of staying alive – and I indulged in it. I had a friend with a great vegetable garden, and the streets of Isla Vista are very well endowed with fruit trees for the picking, and so I had access to fresh cilantro, basil, occasional zucchinis, leeks, some of the best figs I have ever eaten, and several dozen other fruits, vegetables, and herbs. My meals were composed of some of the earth's finest offerings.

Nevertheless, while watching 'Emeril Live' on the Food Network channel one night around week eight of My Project, I practically broke down while watching him dance about with his portabellas, eggplants, fine olive oils, yams, rice, cherry brandy, and what not. Looking back, though, maybe it wasn't only the desire for these foods that clogged my throat with longing and made my limbs weak. Maybe it was partly loneliness and boredom. For eighty days I never ate out, left little time for friends, and lived a routine rigidly structured by the cooking of an elaborate lunch a little after noon and a two- or three-course dinner for one at around 8:00 pm. These predictable days and meals really began getting to me, and one day while in class in week five, I actually resolved that that night I would make some tortillas and beans with my regular figs and fish. I had had enough. It was four o'clock, and I could not wait for dinner.

But for some reason I lost or repressed the urge, and My Project went on uninterrupted and untarnished by store-bought foods.

I got some inspiring encouragement from a number of individuals during My Project. They would marvel at how great it was that I was doing this and exclaim that they would try some day to do something similar. They thought it was a good thing to

boycott the American market and that it was a shame more people didn't appreciate nature's bounty the way I did. These, though, were usually just acquaintances of mine. The people closest to me more often than not criticized what I was doing. They said I was becoming weird, that this obsession was taking over my life. They said that I was alienating myself, that all I ever did was gather, cook, and eat, and I think that if I'd had more close friends I only would have heard this kind of talk more often. The truth is, I almost agree. I don't believe what I did was very constructive. It was a memorable time in my life, to be sure, and it was a good thing to have tried and I'm glad I did it, but to carry on like that forever would have been, for me, social suicide.

To be an individual hunter-gatherer in America is to lead a lonely life.

During My Project I was taking an anthropology class at school called 'Ancient Food Production and Consumption.' A major point alluded to in this course was that hunter-gatherers live freer lives with more spare and leisure time than do agriculturalists. Twelve to eighteen hours per person per week are all that is needed for the famous !Kung people of the Kalahari Desert, for example, to collect all the food they need. This leaves more time for thought and relaxation than most people in our affluent society ever have, for the !Kung do not need to work to pay rent. School and work for me, too, was only a small time obligation but I was, however, even when full and satiated and liberated from the physical desire for food, held captive by thoughts of food.

I even dreamed sometimes of figs and climbing around in trees.

I would try and tell myself as consolation that I was somehow perfecting my body and soul, that I was the healthiest person in town, but everywhere and everyday I encountered other people – perhaps smarter and healthier and stronger – eating meals out of Burger King bags or Styrofoam smoothie cups, looking perfectly content and happy, indulging in the privileges of the middle and upper classes; the privilege of freedom and peace of

mind, the privilege to enjoy a comfortable life. Seeing these people who were filling their bellies up with crap yet looking perfectly content while I went about filled with fish and figs made me wonder sometimes if I wasn't the one who was full of s—.

Food is food is food, isn't it?

Observing these other people left me often feeling alone, and in deep question of my values. I found myself occasionally carrying out discussions with and even cursing myself in the bathroom mirror. 'What are you doing to yourself? What's the greater good of all this?'

I could never answer these questions. Yet, I carried on with My Project.

As exhausted and miserable as I often found myself during My Project, I did, often, enjoy myself. I woke up early – usually around six – and when I didn't already have some food, I would go out walking in the dawn to pick my fruit for a morning salad. These were quiet and relaxing times when the rest of the college community was still sleeping, and it felt like I had the whole world to myself. My generous friend Ryan two blocks away had in his yard a huge Turkish fig tree that produced a nearly endless bounty of the most heavenly fruits. The tree was about thirty feet tall, and I spent many hours in those branches, filling bags with ripe fruit or just stuffing myself. The figs were as big as small apples, green outside and bright crimson inside, and the best ones were those so ripe that they were bursting open and had actually begun to ferment inside, and that tasted faintly of wine.

Ryan's tree was the best in town, but I had good times elsewhere, too. Mostly it was with figs – there were thirty-two trees that I regularly visited, and I became familiar with seven or eight varieties, some the size of pears – but also I haunted a passion fruit vine that hung out over the sidewalk a block from my home, many pineapple guava shrubs, a pear tree, some persimmon trees, a blackberry bush, and one particularly fruitful apple tree. These all made my life a little more interesting, but I just couldn't

get enough of the town's figs. Sometimes I would go on afternoon 'fig jaunts' when I had little else to do, hitting up tree after tree, eating myself nearly sick with the ripest fruits.

It could really be quite fun.

I enjoyed the treasure hunt feel of it, going to a favourite tree and occasionally discovering a new one, knocking on the door and getting permission from the owners to pick the fruit, and seeking out the big ripe 'fatties' that were splitting open at the bottom.

Figs, though, are members of the rubber tree family. They secrete a white sticky latex that can irritate the skin, and having eaten three thousand in three months, I am all too familiar with the potential consequences. Sometimes after a fig jaunt, I would shamefully slink home, bloated and heavy, with my mouth and tongue burning and actually seeping blood. All I could do was drink some water, lie down in bed, and wait several hours for the pain to go away.

It could really be quite awful.

'How much weight have you lost?' people would so often ask me when first learning of My Project. It is a question I quickly grew weary of answering. There is an assumption in society that anyone not dining out and buying processed snacks and shrink-wrapped meats from the supermarket is at high risk of wasting away to skin and bones. During those ten weeks, though, I lost no weight and might even have put on three or four pounds. I was living well. I got my protein from spear fishing in the sea for surfperch, halibut, sheephead, opaleye, and octopus. I sometimes, too, grabbed scallops, sea urchins, and lobster. Roughage and various nutrients I got from vegetables and herbs, while the bulk of my calories came from figs and apples, many of which I pickled and canned.

I really was eating the best stuff on earth, and I was thriving on it.

At least for a while.

The climate in Southern California is remarkable. In November, while winter storms pound the North Coast and the fruit trees of the Central Valley are mostly bare, the coastal region inside of the Channel Islands is a warm, green, and rather peaceable kingdom. I was eating well and was still enjoying the long summer even at the onset of December.

However, winter did finally arrive. My last venture into the sea was on the fifth day of that month and one by one the fig trees were getting picked clean. It was a little sad – and even ominous – watching the leaves fall and the fruits disappear. It got to the point where I knew exactly how many figs were left on certain trees, and one by one I stopped visiting them. The remaining figs were less and less sweet, too.

One tree near my house produced the biggest figs I've ever seen, thick-skinned and black. The tree grew on the front lawn of an old couple's house, and they weren't particularly happy about me taking its fruit, but I did anyway. This is the tree that dragged me out of bed at six in the morning, before dawn. I would pick it over fast and clumsily before sneaking away and around the corner. It felt as though I was robbing my grandma and grandad. I was becoming reckless and shameless.

Able now to count the producing fig trees on two hands, I was not eating as lavishly as before. I was becoming anxious that I would not make it through to the end of the term, and I had developed an obsessive-compulsive determination not to succumb to any weakness or hunger. In my gathering forays I was getting more and more nervous, enjoying myself less. I worried that I might get arrested for stealing fruit and snooping around in the dark. In my hasty visits to my food sources, I was accidentally snapping tree branches and trampling vegetable gardens, and I even knocked over most of somebody's cactus plant as I stole its prickly pears from over a chain-link fence.

My journal entry for December 16, 2002, captures vividly my state of decrepitude: 'I feel as though a climactic disaster is imminent in my life if I don't leave here soon. Neighbours, I believe, are on to me. All the bridges of Isla Vista are burning. I

sneak around only in darkness now getting food. The figs are all gone. The only ones left are hard green ones that make my mouth bleed. I stole a pumpkin a few days back from the garden... It's feeding me, as are chard and avocados, a few prickly pears, and oranges. The apples are mostly gone. My frozen figs and jarred fruits are all eaten. If I had two more weeks here I'd have to reduce myself to the level of an animal, going through garbage bins at night, living in fear and hunger. I can't stand this town. I feel its walls collapsing in... I feel so dirty. I shaved off my goatee yesterday, and I considered buzzing off my long hair... I want to cleanse myself of this whole quarter, throw everything into the fires of the burning bridges.'

I really felt that I had become a shameless thief and a coward and that I had given up all my self-respect, and that I was going a little crazy, all for the sake of My Project.

Fortunately, I left town – graduated with a double degree – two days later. My dad picked me up in our van, and we ate at a horrible Mexican restaurant on the drive home to San Francisco. He was just in time. A storm had recently arrived, the wind knocking fruit off trees and the rain turning them into melting spires of bird guano – nasty business for fruit pickers. My dad was glad to see me and said he was happy to find I hadn't turned into a bag of bones. He even said I looked good. I smiled modestly and nodded.

I was made purely and solidly, through to the bone, down to my heart, of the best stuff on earth.

Hot and Spicy Fig Soup

*1 cup fresh orange juice + seeds of 1 large pomegranate
pinch of cinnamon + pinch of nutmeg
pinch of allspice + 3 cloves
8 very ripe figs*

Bring orange juice and pomegranate to boil in a pot, add spices for a minute, then add figs. Simmer until the figs are soft and permeated. (Add honey if you have access to a beehive.) Eat as a soup. Serves 1.

Halibut Baked Fruit

*1 coarsely chopped pear + 1 chopped apple
8 ripe figs + 1 generous piece of fresh halibut, cut into one-inch pieces
salt & pepper + balsamic vinegar*

Mix all fruit, fish, and spices in a small ceramic baking dish. Bake at 350°F for twenty minutes or until fruit juices are bubbling and fish is done. Put in broiler for several minutes if a crispy surface is desired. Sprinkle with balsamic vinegar before eating. Serves 1.

Scallop and Fig Curry Salad

*Meat of eight scallops, simmered in water and soy sauce for 30 seconds
5 ripe figs, quartered + 1 small bunch of arugula
10 mint leaves + 1 avocado
rice wine vinegar + white pepper
Curry sauce of two chili peppers, 2 cloves of garlic, a chopped, 1-inch
piece of ginger, leftover fluid from scallop-sauté, 1 tbs. yellow curry
paste, all simmered in a pan for several minutes.*

Pour curry sauce over scallops and figs. Finely chop the mint and arugula, mix with coarsely cut avocado meat. Use as a garnish. Drizzle with vinegar, sprinkle with pepper. Serves 1.