

Eating Ivy

MY CHILDHOOD TABLE REFLECTED the contradictions peculiar to my family's place in the world. While we were safely ensconced in a suburban New Jersey town, we were close enough to Manhattan to succumb to its gravitational pull. Often we ate what many middle-class families in the 1970s ate: Meat. Potatoes. Frozen vegetables. Variations on the quiche. Occasionally, my mother concocted, out of many brightly colored cans, something that was supposed to resemble chow mein. But many times we ate better. We were introduced early to bagels and lox, to pizza with crust sublimely thin, to homemade sausages, even to the simple goodness of griddle-fried corn muffins. We had no fear of butter or garlic, and we learned to love cheeses that weren't wrapped in plastic. There was even some evidence that New Jersey might, after all, have reasonably laid claim to being the Garden State. In the summer we could drive a few short miles to Mrs. Prince's farm stand for fresh Jersey tomatoes, sweet white corn, ripe peaches. In the fall we trekked to an orchard to pick bags of McIntoshes and Winesaps. And twice each winter, an older man I knew only as The Farmer arrived at our front door, clad in denim, bearing an enormous home-cured ham that we ate first for its gorgeous, salty steaks and then in my mother's split pea soup.

But like most of the pleasures of young life, I took the pleasure of food entirely for granted. I knew little and thought less about the food I loved, and it would be many years before I even suspected that food could reveal almost as much about the world as the books that were my first love. While the range of foods we ate awakened my young appetite, it wasn't until I was halfway through college and had met a man named Barton Rouse that I learned how to eat.

Barton was the chef at Terrace Club, one of the twelve private eating clubs at Princeton University that dictate, for better or for worse, the social and gastronomic life of

Princeton undergraduates. Eleven of these clubs line Prospect Street. Housed in imposing Colonial or Tudor or French Gothic mansions, they are homes far too grand to be used in the service of and run entirely by undergraduates, but that is Princeton and its legacy. In my undergraduate years most of these houses were in a state of glorious repair. Now, I imagine that many were not dissimilar from the homes from which some of my classmates had come. But back then I was naïve, ignorant of the class distinctions that ran like a fault line beneath the campus. Some of the clubs had polished wood floors, rooms paneled in English oak, oriental carpets, spectacular terraces, and, one, a sculptured fountain gracing the center of a beautifully landscaped garden. Some had grand staircases, fully furnished parlors, and elegant dining rooms in which students ate on long formal tables. At the time I was an undergraduate, about half of these clubs were selective; members engaged in a more or less brutal process of "bickering" in order to gain admittance. Three of them were exclusively male.

Terrace Club was the one club that didn't grace that sedate, tree-lined street. Literally and figuratively, Terrace was located around the corner. For one thing, it was nowhere near as grand as the others. A smaller Tudor structure on the corner of Prospect and Washington Streets, its grounds harbored no gardens, its carpets were fraying, its entryway was just a crowded, narrow hall. When I joined Terrace in the spring of my sophomore year, the club had something of a stigma. A dark and somewhat sinister reputation hovered around its humble façade. Rumors circulated of illicit drug use, alternative sexual practices, holes in the living room floor. No one quite knew—nor did most want to know—exactly what went on at Terrace. But none of that mattered much at the time.

That spring, two of my friends and I had joined an unsuccessful and demoralizing campaign protesting the all-male policies of Ivy Club, Cottage Club, and Tiger Inn. We were not the first women to challenge these policies, but in a place as steeped in tradition as Princeton was, our

Left: A Barton Rouse menu. From *Eating Ivy II: A Tribute to Barton Rouse* (*Princeton Terrace Club*, 1995).

familiar claims were still controversial, and so when bicker week rolled around, only three of us sat in Ivy's Green Room, a small but elegant receiving parlor, wondering what to do next. Over the coming days we mingled with a few brave sophomores on the central staircase, spoke affably in the library with many junior and senior members. But while some—and even some of the officers—welcomed, in their most gentlemanly and Princetonian fashion, the debate we brought to them, we were largely ignored. Our presence at bicker made us minor campus celebrities, but it also alienated some of our closest male friends for whom entrance to Ivy Club meant the world.

That week solidified something I had long suspected about my beloved university but never consciously allowed myself to articulate: it was still, in many ways that mattered profoundly, an old boys club. Ironically, I had chosen to attend Princeton precisely because of the romantic aura that surrounded it. I was certain that in Princeton's gothic halls I would find a community of young writers who cared about Books, who would live with me a Life of Ideas. No matter that I had read *The Great Gatsby* half a dozen times. In my misprision, *Gatsby's* dark legacy—indeed that of the entire Fitzgerald canon—was transformed into a romantic elegy for lost love. And I misread Princeton, too, for the clubbiness of Princeton's social world revolved around neither books nor ideas. Yet it never explicitly occurred to me that the country club was not designed for me. That it was not was revealed slowly and, then, only in sundry and subtle ways. One knew, for instance, within the first weeks of freshman year whose families had campus buildings named after them, which students were the children of royalty, which had inherited extraordinary wealth. These children of privilege befriended one another and traveled in glamorous packs. I don't remember anyone telling me any of these things. One simply came to know them. Such facts were as much a backdrop to campus life as the gargoyles that peered down at us while we walked to class.

As my friends and I pursued our campaign, the arguments for the policies that excluded us ranged from the sublime to the absurd: The clubs were bastions of tradition, sacrosanct; change was sacrilege; the clubs were private property, not governed by the laws of the university; young men needed a place apart from the pressures of study where they might relax, free from sexual tension. More insidious, however, were the arguments not offered. Friendships were made (and lost) in the divide between sophomore and junior years as upper-class men and women entered these houses. Clubs fostered friendship, camaraderie, loyalty, and, in some instances, vast alumni networks. It was not idle rumor that

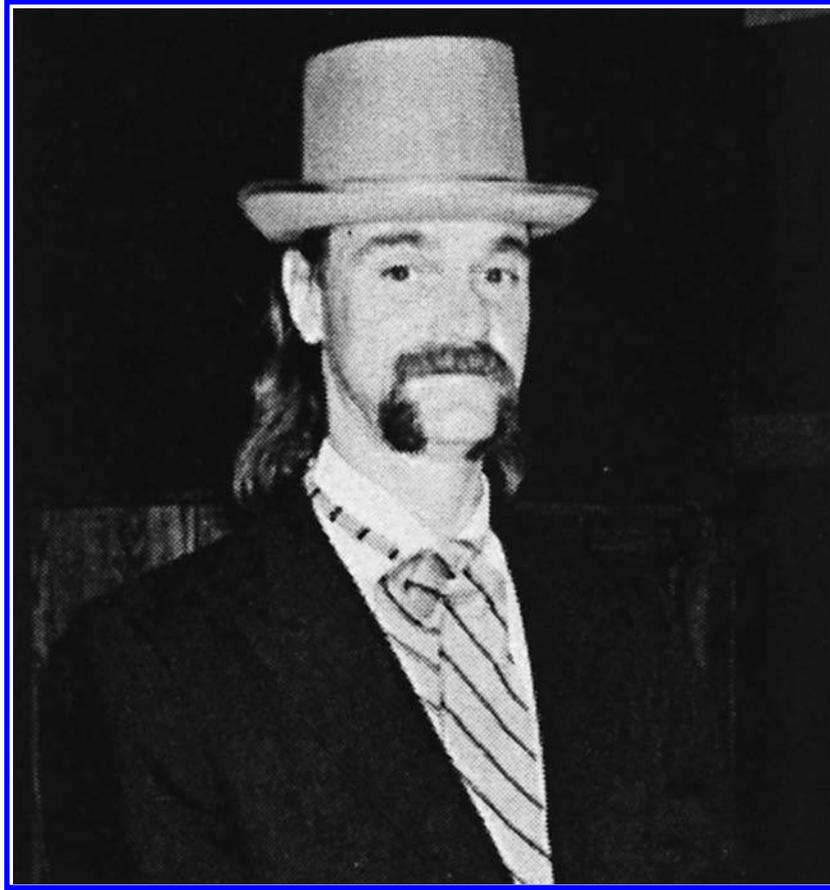
alumni phoned the clubs when their corporations and government agencies were looking for new recruits. It was this network and this privilege that we sought to enter, and it was these that were never mentioned. I became aware that the very thing that had drawn me to Princeton was the very thing I had to battle. By the end of bicker week, we were tired, disappointed, and sick to death of Princeton. We knew Terrace Club had spaces available. And it was some consolation that we had heard that the food was good.

TERRACE'S CULINARY REPUTATION was due entirely to Barton Rouse, a balding, six-foot-plus man with a mischievous grin and an extravagant mustache. His chef's white jacket and houndstooth pants draped loosely over his gangling limbs, except when the days grew warm and humid, and then his skinny legs sprang like stalks from under khaki shorts. He had an ineffable energy: even now I remember him always in motion. Born in Princeton, Barton apprenticed with the Pittsburgh Ballet, obtained a degree in choreography and child development, and then gravitated to the culinary world. Within a year of joining Terrace Club in 1984, he was promoted to head chef and charged with the task of revivifying the club's dying membership. That year only nine students joined the club, but Barton coined for them the motto "Food is Love" and began to cook his heart out. In a few short years, Barton and the club were thriving, and by 1988 Barton fed daily 180 students out of a kitchen designed to accommodate 45. While our former friends at Ivy Club were served dinner by a staff of grown men and rose when a female guest entered the room, we were served cafeteria style and didn't turn our heads when Brooke Shields walked down the food line. But seated at our old folding tables, we ate better than anyone.

Barton was a libertine born a century too late, a devotee of decadence and bad taste, and a gifted culinary artist. His motto, loosely culled from Oscar Wilde's companion, Van Johnson, was "Make the fantasy a reality and live it with abandon." But his culinary philosophy was simpler. Barton believed that

1. Food is a vehicle for getting butter, salt, and/or sugar into your system.
2. If you want it to be better, spend more money.

These principles, however, do not do justice to Barton's skill, nor to the refinement of his table. Nor do they explain the fact that Barton's kitchen was always under budget in spite of the extravagant feasts and commemorative dinners held for occasions as obscure as Michelangelo's Birthday, as forgotten as the anniversary of the Exxon Valdez Disaster, or as absurd as the announcement of Clinton's "Don't Ask,



Don't Tell" policy. There was once, after I graduated, even a dinner in honor of Barbara Bush's toboggan accident.

Barton excelled at these banquets and feasts. Extravaganzas that allowed him to "garnish till you drop," they also taught us how to eat in courses, what an intermezzo was, when to drink port. While he was fully capable of creating elegant brunches for family visiting days and tasteful homecoming receptions that showcased house specialties for generous alumni, he reveled most in the elaborate themed dinners at winter holiday parties, spring house parties, fall sign-ins. At La Dolce Vita, a spring celebration in honor of Fellini, under the tent spread over our back lawn, Barton couldn't resist serving us caviar with our cocktails. The hors d'oeuvre tables, spread out on the concrete deck, which Barton had christened the "veranda," groaned under barrels of crab legs, steamed clams, and fresh shrimp. Baskets of lettuce heads, loaves of bread, whole mushrooms, and bright fruits transformed our humble and rundown patio into an open-air market. The moveable feast continued with a champagne and sorbet palate cleanser in the terraced dining room, which, with its arc of leaded glass bay windows, was perhaps the prettiest room in the club. And finally, we ceased our gastronomic wanderings, sat in a dining room transformed by linens, candles, and florid tiger lilies, and were served a series of main courses unlike any others

Above: Photo of Barton Rouse. From Eating Ivy II: A Tribute to Barton Rouse (Princeton Terrace Club, 1995).

served at Princeton that weekend: cold poached salmon de "Coupe" with dill sauce, lobster ravioli with vodka sauce, apricot-glazed game hens, prime rib with peppercorn butter. The dessert buffet, spread out by the fireplace, featured all manner of things chocolate: bombes, tortes, fondue. We stretched on the Red Room couches, groaned, and were amazed at Barton's bounty and our extreme good fortune. And then, being the young and resilient things we were, we got up, drank some more, danced into the early morning hours, and ate brunch.

Occasionally, at these kinds of feasts, the theme extended literally to the food. To give a particularly fine example, at a tongue-in-cheek anti-Valentine's Day dinner, the food as well as the décor appeared all in red and black: Barton served us blackened rib steaks and catfish fillets, black fettuccine with sour cream and lox sauce and red and black caviar, bleeding hearts of beet salad, brandied cherry ambrosia, and mocha espresso cheesecake.

With these kinds of meals, we learned how to eat. We learned to be aware, first, of food, of where it comes from and of the whole range of sensory pleasures it provides. In Barton's spreads color and texture were as important as taste.

We learned, oddly enough, about balance and restraint. As extravagant as these meals were, we ate but we didn't gorge—there was always another course coming. We learned the art of dining: that the progress of a good meal was like a narrative and that good food must please the eye as well as the palate. And if we drank too much wine, which we certainly did, at least we began to understand that it went with the food. But perhaps most important, we learned well the social aspects of gastronomy: that cooking could be a labor of love as well as of art, that the best meals bind people together, and that good food must at least make you smile—if it didn't make you laugh out loud.

Humor and whimsy, in fact, may have been the secret third principle of Barton's philosophy. He didn't need an excuse to celebrate or to create madcap concoctions for us. We learned quickly that Barbie was the best garnish a chef could have; she turned up in more desserts and on more cheese board displays than one would have imagined possible: wrestling in chocolate mud pudding, entrapped in a chocolate logjam, swimming in a sea of salami and cheese. Barton loved any kind of themed dinner, and we often arrived at the club to find it was Marco Polo Night (pasta three ways), or Thai Night, or, his favorite, White Trash Night. On that night we loaded our plates with chicken fried steaks, white gravy, collard greens, and black-eyed peas and sat down to tables furnished with six packs of Coca-Cola and fresh bottles of Jack Daniels.

But it was the daily cooking that was the true foundation for Barton's genius. I read in a profile of Barton in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* that he never prepared the same main course twice in a semester, and perhaps this is why, when I think of his food, I remember most its variety and its inventiveness. There was just too much of life to taste, I think, for Barton to repeat himself. Each night he would greet us from the kitchen doorway, eager, talkative, happy to see us. "Hi, Princess," he would call to me as he glanced up from his elaborate and colorful chalkboard menu. Each of those menus, each trip down the food line was an education. Barton cooked promiscuously and with abandon. He danced in the kitchen, as comfortable with comfort food as with haute cuisine, as knowledgeable about the uses of cake mix to sculpt the Grand Canyon as he was with the glories of caviar. He believed the perfect flavor was a sweet onion expertly sautéed in olive oil, but he also knew the virtues of chrysanthemum soup and of chocolate fettuccine with vanilla cream sauce. An advertisement run in the campus paper to recruit new members printed merely our weekly menu:

- Monday: Turkey Cutlets stuffed with spicy sausage OR Italian Stuffed Crepes
Pasta with peas, prosciutto, mushrooms and cream
Italian Green Beans with hazelnuts
Mocha Bombe tarts
- Tuesday: Broiled Tuna with morel cream sauce
Five Grain Pilaf
Stir Fried Vegetables
Brandied Fresh Fruit Salad
- Wednesday: Smoked Brisket OR Corn Timbales
Fried Squashes
Oven Roasted Potatoes
Jello Salads
Buttermilk Sky Pie
Vin: Lone Star Beer
- Thursday: Thai Food
Thai Marinated Chicken OR
Deep Fried Sea Bass in spicy sweet sauce
Broccoli Rabe with Ginger Butter
Rice
xxx Adult Chocolate Fortune Cookies and Iced Coconut Cream
- Friday: Pork Loin Martini (marinated in gin and vermouth) OR
Private spinach soufflés
Peas with sweet and sour onions
Penne Rigate a la Puttenesca
Garlic Bread
Communist Tea Cakes and Amaretto Coffee

The advertisement finished simply: "We eat this way all the time. Is there any point in eating anywhere else?"

So it was not just at the special-occasion dinners that I learned to eat. At Terrace I ate my first oyster. Barton served us blue Jell-O suspended with daisies, and he poached quail eggs in coffee grounds so they emerged marbled and Byzantine looking. He invented Pasta Michelin—a quintessential Terran dish of pitch-black squid ink pasta bathed in a garlicky shrimp and squid and tomato sauce. And every spring he roasted a whole suckling pig over an open fire in the backyard. He stood in the smoke and turned the spit, and we loved him more than ever for his skill and his extravagance.

In his own slim, privately published cookbook, sardonically entitled *Eating Ivy*, Barton writes:

My mom is from a big rural Oklahoma family of nine children; my dad is from West Florida and his family roots reach from one end of rural

Mississippi to the other end of Alabama. Every three years we'd make a family pilgrimage "back home"—both homes—"so we'd know where we came from and who we were." I remember huge gatherings at my granddaddy's house in Maysville, Oklahoma, or at a big party in "Paul's Valley" where picnic tables groaned with Aunt Nila's thises and Cora Thelma's famous thas—fried chicken, banana pudding, watermelon, corn, beans 'n' hocks for daddy, and casseroles (endless casseroles), smoked briskets, chicken 'n' dumplings, and a virtual contest of pies. It would go on all day with the old folks playing dominoes in the shade, jes' vistin', while hoards and hoards of children—30 or 40 anyway—romped and played and our parents were like us, all kids again harassing and reminiscing and being quite ungrownup.

Reading these lines, I understand that it is no mistake that Barton and the club he helped to build formed the center of so many lives at Princeton. For if his food was love, it was also play, and in those heady years at Terrace, we played extraordinarily hard at being the artists, writers, scientists, musicians, scholars, and people we were striving to become. Although we seemed so grown up to ourselves, so cosmopolitan, and we knew even then how wildly privileged we were to sit in those classrooms, to have the resources of a venerable institution and the traditions of centuries available to us, we were, of course, still very young. And so we romped in our own exciting and risk-filled ways. We loved to eat and drink and talk and write and sing and sculpt and talk some more. At Terrace we meditated and then watched *Blade Runner* three times straight. We held poetry readings. We did any kind of drug we could get our hands on. We watched the Mets win the pennant and donated our art to hang on the club walls. We drank far too much wine, far too much whiskey, far too much beer. We debated the critical schools of Marx and Derrida, the humor of visiting writer Tama Janowitz, the cultural relevance of *Miami Vice*, and the relative greatness of Thomas Mann, H.D., Flannery O'Connor, and Alan Ginsberg. We hired Lydia Lunch and International Crisis and GEAR for our weekend parties. We found our Slavic and Slavophilic friends in the Tap Room debating the merits of Gogol, in Russian. And Steve, who by consensus was the smartest man any of us knew, at least for a year, would recite the longest and most baroque speeches from Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* one day, arrive at the medieval feast dressed as the Beast the next, and play us a Chopin sonata after dinner. We wrote about sex and love and faith and sin and goodness. We made art about being young in the world and in love or out of love and the impossible burdens of our male or female bodies. We had sex with each other, fell in love, and broke each other's hearts. We sang about our rage and our heartaches and the revenge we would have. We

mended. And we expounded against Princeton and all it offered us even as we knew that we stood at the very center of that world. For it was really only there, at that place, at that moment, that such a collection of brilliant and erratic and searching and porous and deeply flawed young people could have found and befriended each other. Terrace was our own private salon, and little did we realize at the time how far we had gone in re-creating, with Barton's help, the latter day Left Bank we longed for.

WHEN BARTON DIED IN APRIL 1995 from complications related to AIDS, I found myself three thousand miles away, in graduate school, too poor to make the flight back for his memorial service. I found myself, unconsciously, planning a dinner party for fifteen that weekend, without giving much thought to why I had undertaken such a task or how I was to accomplish it with my limited tools and my even more limited kitchen. And yet, there I was, that Saturday, preparing a menu straight out of a cooking magazine of oven-roasted vegetable ravioli with yellow pepper mole and red pepper confit, fava bean succotash and phyllo rounds, and orange angel food cake with fresh berry compote. I was not an especially skilled cook, nor had I ever thrown a dinner party quite so ambitious, but I was unafraid of risk. It simply didn't occur to me that the dinner would fail. It took all day to prepare and assemble the courses, and some time in the kitchen to cook and plate, but then I sat with my guests and ate and drank. I was pleased that it was good. My friends were happy, sated, amusing. But as I sat there on the floor of my living room, surrounded by what were, at the time, those whom I imagined to be my closest friends, I knew it was all wrong. It hit me in an instant, one of the more unpleasant and jarring epiphanies I have ever had. I had planned the dinner because to cook was all I knew to do to evoke Barton's memory, to recall what he had given me. But the wrong people surrounded me, and no matter how long or how well I cooked, Chris and Samantha and Matt and John would never be Molly and Ted and Sina and John. The food that night, no matter how good, failed to satisfy me, and I knew those who could were thousands of miles, indeed, a lifetime away. I stole away from my guests, who were too drunk to realize that I was not simply fetching another bottle of wine, and sat on my back steps. Overlooking the dark and fragrant garden that gave me so much respite from my studies, I smoked a cigarette, and I cried.

Barton's food was, of course, an obvious metaphor. He flirted with the limits of taste, but he accepted everything. It was not so much that at Terrace we played by the rule "anything goes." Rather, it was much simpler: At Terrace,

everything was. Barton's food was no different. It broke down the boundaries between adult and child, high culture and low, good taste and bad, East and West, rural and urban. At his table it didn't matter if we were gay or straight, male or female, rich or poor. This was important because we were, for the most part, outsiders at Princeton, discontent and different from what Princeton wanted us to be. We were black, gay, white, lesbian, Asian, bisexual. We were artists and mathematicians, actors and filmmakers, strippers, junkies, violinists, and future rock stars. Princes and millionaires ate next to scholarship kids, artists next to athletes, Muslims, Jews, and Christians next to agnostics and atheists. We even had a mad scientist who conjured new compounds in his senior thesis chemistry lab. In the midst of one of the most homogenous places on earth, Barton created what was, perhaps, one of the most diverse and certainly one of the most tolerant communities we would ever know.

In a moment of gastronomic insight, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin claimed, "the discovery of a new dish does more for human happiness than the discovery of a star." Barton's dishes not only offered happiness in their consumption, but with each menu he illuminated how a more lasting happiness might be achieved. Much has been written about the ability of food to comfort and to console, and indeed it can serve this function. But it can do much more interesting and, perhaps, more important work. Barton's food created community by challenging complacency, by refusing the obvious, by constantly surprising us—and he asked no less of us as his daily guests. Even now, separated by more than a decade and much geography, having actually become the grown-up artists, writers, engineers, architects, musicians, editors, magazine founders—even the more conservative investment

bankers, lawyers, and parents—that we dreamed of, when my old friends and I meet each other again at weddings, over winter holidays or summer vacations, time collapses. Our differences, once a source of such pride and galvanizing energy, now intensified by the demands of career and family, multiplied by the years and, sadly, by infrequent correspondence, remain a source of deep respect. We can whip up a batch of Mediterranean flatbread pizzas, harass each other a little, reminisce a little more, and then settle in to become ungrownup and joyful all over again.

Barton's bounty certainly gave us an education in decadence and pleasure, but he also offered us inadvertent lessons in aesthetics, in tolerance, and in the humor he thought we needed to make our way in a world that was often unjust, frequently absurd, but always full of delight. They were lessons that we took to heart, and that probably served us as well as any of the academic courses that we took so seriously. They were lessons that helped us to love Princeton and to make our home there, and we carried them, consciously or unconsciously, into the larger world where we faced challenges far beyond those we encountered at Princeton, indeed challenges from which Princeton had sheltered us. They were lessons that suggest that Brillat-Savarin was only half right when he proclaimed, "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are." What we eat can tell us not only who we are but how we are in the world—to our families, to our friends, and to the wider communities to which we must, inevitably, for better and for worse, belong. ☺