

A Glutton For Punishment

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It is not fun to go out to eat with Wendell. Wendell always has and always will order fish “well-done.” He might be the only native of Beverly Hills who has never let the *word* “sashimi,” much less the real thing, pass his lips. He also orders veal “well-done.” Actually, he only eats food that most people would describe as “burned beyond recognition.” The only foods he eats *at all* are certain cuts of beef, certain fishes, and certain potatoes. Well-done. Wendell is about as likely to taste something new as Wolfgang Puck is to add Spam to his pizzas.

Wendell is a successful, almost-sixty-year-old professional. He is smart. Well-travelled. Well-rounded. Except when it comes to food. And not only is he completely devoid of so much as a hint of culinary curiosity, he is as rigid in his ways as a forged steel chef’s knife. It wouldn’t be so bad if he kept his bullheaded habits to himself. But, alas, no man is a Floating Island.

Which is why, if you really love food, it is simply not fun to go out to eat with Wendell. Normally, he is a fun guy. Except in restaurants. I have been out to eat with him many times. Obviously, I’m a glutton for punishment. But he is a dear friend, and I keep thinking that someday Wendell will order prosciutto and fresh figs, or duckling in cassis sauce with wild mushroom ragout, or *anything* besides well-done filet of sole, or a veal chop. Well-done.

Taking him to ethnic restaurants where I *know* he will not recognize anything on the menu and I think *maybe* he will let me order for him and show him the edible errors of his ways doesn’t work either. He will make a scene with a service person. Or spit food onto his plate complete with disgusting sound effects. Or storm into the kitchen, demand to speak to “the idiot in charge,” and force the Chef to explain why, since the menu plainly lists Thai beef salad with red chili jam, he can’t get “anyone in the joint to bring him a simple well-done steak and some A-I.” This is probably why, with Wendell, I have often had the sensation of being Karen Black to his Jack Nicholson in the classic coffee shop scene from “Five Easy Pieces.” Since Wendell’s floor show usually takes the place of the appetizer course, this is also probably why, with Wendell, I have left many a restaurant, beet red with embarrassment, before ever lifting a fork. And why I have been blacklisted from others.

The safest-actually the *only*-way to go out to eat with Wendell is to let him choose the restaurant. He does keep a relatively up-to-date list of three or four establishments nationwide that are acceptable. But even this is not a completely fail-safe method. Dollars to well-done donuts he

will still find a reason to send his food back and you will be longing for dessert before he has even sawed into his well-done veal. But at least you've got a fighting chance.

It is not fun to eat *in* with Wendell, either. Because no matter what everyone else is having, we will have to cook something different for Wendell. Unless everyone else is having either fish or veal. Well-done. And even if everyone else *is* having well-done fish or veal, odds are that the accompaniments will not be to Wendell's liking. "I refuse to eat anything with a name as ridiculous as radicchio," he'll say. "If God wanted humans to eat vegetables, He wouldn't have invented barbecues," he'll say. And if there's a little Bernaise or perhaps a light citrus reduction involved in the menu, forget it. It might touch his well-done whatever. Of course, we do always feed him on those silly plates with the separate sections to avoid such monumental mishaps. But you never know. It could happen. And anyway, all of ours' will be well done long before Wendell's is well-done.

Believe me. I am more forgiving than most. I think you can teach an old pooch some new culinary tricks. And I haven't abandoned the ketch. I keep eating with him. I'll even admit that *I love* well-done burgers. And really crispy bacon. And well-cooked scrambled eggs. But dry-as-a-bone veal parmigiana, "hold the parmigiana"?

Maybe there was something in Wendell's childhood that would help explain his attitude towards food. Maybe there are a whole lot more people around like Wendell and I've just been lucky enough not to have to eat with them. Or maybe Wendell just plain likes the smell of burning Bourguignon in the evening. One thing is certain. It's easy to stay thin. Eating with Wendell.