

# THIS TASTES TERRIBLE!

(Can I have some more?)

BY JJ GOODE

**T**en years ago, I was a young fool in Paris in search of cliché. Between walks along the Seine with my lady-friend, I sought out what I considered the inevitable Parisian revelation: the moment when you try something for the first time—pot-au-feu, a croissant, a cake named after a train station—and experience immediate, life-defining enlightenment.

Specifically I sought revelation at a much-admired cheese shop where I purchased some Alsatian Munster. This cheese promised epiphany, as I'd read somewhere that it was the World's Greatest Cheese. As if setting the scene for fond recollection later in life, I brought my precious Munster to a park with a view of the Eiffel Tower. I slowly unwrapped the cheese, like Charlie Bucket with his Wonka Bar. My knife broke through the pale orange rind. I took a bite and braced for bliss.

What I got was socks. Socks that had been wet for a very long time. I also detected notes of New York City dumpster, a hint of barnyard flatulence. With each bite, I emitted a small, involuntary exclamation of disgust. Then I would take another bite, in order to be completely sure that I had actually tasted what I thought I'd just tasted. Soon the cheese was gone.

I got back from Paris and returned to my normal life of friendly cheddars and mild Goudas. Oddly, I found I missed that fetid Munster, the strength of feeling it inspired, the thrill of repulsion. When this Munster and I finally reunited—through a friend undaunted by customs agents—something strange happened. Instead of curiosity-tinged horror, now I felt warmth and wonder. I marveled that something so meek as milk could morph into this brash, oozing cake of stink—and that I could learn to love such a thing. This Munster made me think. And more than any love-at-first-bite foods, it left me feeling something like lust.

My Paris revelation taught me that first impressions don't necessarily last—a good thing, too, as it means your culinary universe is always wider than you think it is.

In fact, many of my most enduring food romances began not with rapture but with ambivalence, if not outright revulsion. Today, I remember that Alsatian Munster, but not much else I ate in Paris. I'm sure I've eaten great bucatini all'amatriciana in Rome and the perfect lobster roll in Maine, but to be honest, the details have faded. What I vividly remember is my first encounter with peak-season durian (May 2011, at David Thompson's Nahm in Bangkok), the stench of which immediately reminded this New Jersey native of Exit 13 on the Turnpike. I remember, too,

the site of my first bile-spiked soup, somehow simultaneously saccharine and bitter (a restaurant-like dirt patch with more stray cats than customers, just outside of Chiang Mai). And I can easily summon the waiter's terse reaction when I ordered stinky tofu in a Sichuan restaurant in Flushing, Queens. ("No," the man said, simply shaking his head, and he was probably right.)

I'm no masochist. I don't enjoy eating objectively horrible stuff, like airport sandwiches or truffled mac and cheese. And yes, some-

times disgust never blossoms into tolerance, let alone affection (natto, for instance). The other big lesson Munster taught me is that whether or not you like a food is the wrong question. The point is to embrace and revisit all sorts of challenging foods. And I've found that even what I never learn to like has value. Challenging food does what great food is supposed to do. It forces you outside of your own experience. To eat bile soup is to be initiated, albeit briefly, into someone else's culinary culture. To struggle with bile soup while the people around lap it up is to understand how far away from home you really are.

So whenever I confront anything off-putting—some ambitious young chef's ice cream made with algae, the coming insect-based cuisine—I stick to my mantra: "That sounds disgusting. I can't wait to try it."

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