



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Eating High on the Hog**

## **Eating High on the Hog**

*Sir or madame, tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.*<sup>1</sup> This 18<sup>th</sup> century saying is expressed in today's less elegant terms, *Mate, you are what you eat*. Taken in either context, this thought may be interpreted in more than one way. It can refer to our physical composition: fat, lean, or in-between. It can refer to our life style: rich, poor, or somewhere in the middle. It could refer to our discernment about what we eat, identifying us as a gourmet, a gourmand, or an ordinary eater.

But is the idea of being a gourmet a natural part of who we are? We did not take to bottles or our mothers' breasts that were filled with L'Oeuf di Poule. We started off with the basics and somehow graduated to eating crispy soft boiled egg with smoked salmon and oscerta caviar...which is called L'Oeuf di Poule.

During my working life I had the good fortune to travel to many parts of the world. I had the opportunity to sample a wide variety of food and stay in many different lodgings. Some of the meals and hotels were extraordinary, especially to a person who was reared in a blue-collar family and a rural part of America. Others were ordinary. Some, but not many, were unpleasant experiences.

Through these culinary encounters, this provincial bumpkin came to understand this fact: There is little relationship between the amount of money one spends on a meal to the enjoyment one gains from the food.

I was careful with the construction of that last sentence. I did not say anything about the *quality* of the food; the noun was *enjoyment*. Assessing the quality of food and drink is subjective. I have a couple of buddies up here in Idaho whom I classify as gourmets. They avoid a restaurant that I consider a great dining place.

Of course, we all know that some renditions of these supposed pleasures in life are not pleasant at all. We draw the line. I am not speaking about rot-gut food or shabby eateries. I am speaking about the idea of getting the "best pleasurable bang for our buck" in places that do not attach warning labels on their menus and bathroom towels.

To make my point that *money usually buys quality, but does not necessarily buy the satisfaction in proportion to the money spent*, I have chosen for our case study two restaurants where I ate recently: the Joël Robuchon restaurant in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the Leku Ona restaurant in Boise, Idaho.

### **Warning Label**

The restaurants were selected carefully in order to test my theory. Joël Robuchon is ranked as one of the best and most expensive restaurants in the country. Leku Ona is not ranked as anything. Joël Robuchon uses crystal glasses. Leku Ona uses ordinary glasses. Both sell wine. The difference in price between the two restaurants for a dry white is about \$25 a glass, roughly \$4 per sip.

I had a Grey Goose martini at both places. The vodka at Joël Robuchon's was twice the price of Leku Ona's. Fine, someone has to pay for that Waterford crystal. Not to mention the special olives.

I ate at Joël Robuchon first, and later at Leku Ona, I attempted ordering roughly the same meal at Leku's that I had at Joël's (a salad, a soup, a meat). One could question my methods,

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<sup>1</sup> Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826) in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary*, (New York, Random House, 2001), 285.

maybe my good sense, as Joël's is ranked as one of the Top 5 best restaurants in the United States by *Gourmet* magazine and is given three stars by Michelin.<sup>2</sup> Keep in mind the test for this experiment was to judge the satisfaction with the meals and not necessarily their quality. Don't they go hand in hand? Of course they do, but not necessarily in lockstep order.

### Inner and Outer Décor

**Outer decor:** People want to frequent a restaurant whose façade's decor does not shame them to hurriedly leave their car and slink into the building. Outer coats matter. But once inside, the outside is largely forgotten. I apologize for my lapse, but I forgot to take a picture of the outside of Leku's. So, in the interests of Columbia School journalism integrity, I show you below: (a) picture of the entrance into Joël's and (b) a picture of the entrance into a restaurant close to Leku's. After all, red brick is red brick.

I am not being flippant. I regret my journalistic lapse, but it is my reporter duty to point out the significant differences of the exteriors of our two case studies. A restaurant's bill for our food and drink partially reflects the restaurant's brick and mortar.



**Inner decor:** But it is the inner part of a restaurant that counts the most; just as it is in our homes. It is amazing how much money we spend on the outsides of our homes, places we do not see very often. Maybe we should pitch a tent in the summer in our front yard, checking out our views, comparing our roofs to the Joneses. It will be hot as blazes and mosquitoes will burrow into our skins, but we will enjoy the view and bask in our garage door's superiority to the neighbor's paltry Costco imitation.

### Cut to the Chase

"Howdy neighbor! How's it going?"

"Real good. Been eating high on the hog lately."

Many years ago (I was five years of age), I recall my dad and older brothers slaughtering a pig at our ranch. They had the dead animal strung up on a pulley. It was in various stages of dissection. Dad was in good spirits and although I do not recall much of the conversation, just visual image, I remember dad laughing while proclaiming we were going to eat high on the hog tonight! And we did. High on the hog were ham and pork chops. Low on the hog was belly and hoofs.

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<sup>2</sup> Considered by many to be the premier restaurant rating.



For this meal at Joël Robuchon's, I was going to be eating high on the hog. I entered and was treated grandly. I had arrived early. No matter, I was seated at the bar, as seen to the left, where I ordered club soda... more accurately, *sparkling water* or even more accurately, *gas*. ... and a Grey Goose martini.

Shortly, I was shown to my table, one of twelve in the main dining area. Having the Grey Goose and *gas* in hand, the waiter placed into my other hand, the menu shown below. Upon my first scan of the entries, I took a slug of Grey Goose.

<b>L'AUTOMNE</b>	
<b>LES ENTREES FROIDES ET CHAUDES</b>	
<b>L'Œuf de Poule</b> <i>mollet et friand au caviar et au saumon fumé</i> Crispy soft boiled egg with smoked salmon and oscetra caviar	<b>\$235</b>
<b>La Langoustine</b> <i>truffée et cuite en ravioli à l'étuvée de chou vert</i> Truffled langoustine ravioli with chopped cabbage	<b>\$125</b>
<b>Le Caviar</b> , <i>tartare de saumon aux jeunes pousses de shiso, fin velouté de chou fleur, le navet rouge et le radis avec un carpaccio de hamachi</i> Caviar on salmon tartar with shiso sprouts, chilled cauliflower veloute, red turnip with yellowtail carpaccio	<b>\$165</b>
<b>Le Champignon</b> <i>en macaron mitonné dans un bouillon au jarret de veau et truffe blanche</i> Paris mushrooms, veal raviolis cooked in broth with white truffle	<b>\$135</b>
<b>LES PLATS PRINCIPAUX CHAUDS</b>	
<b>Le Homard</b> <i>en cocotte lutée aux asperges et girolles</i> Lobster in a sealed cocotte with asparagus and chanterelles mushrooms	<b>\$150</b>
<b>Le Bar</b> <i>cuit en peau aux cinq épices avec une sauce au verjus</i> Pan-fried sea bass with five spices served with verjus sauce	<b>\$135</b>
<b>Le Saumon</b> , <i>le dos rôti mi-cuit aux graines de moutarde, tagliatelle de mangue à l'huile pimentée</i> Slightly cooked salmon filet with grain mustard seeds, mango tagliatelle	<b>\$135</b>
<b>Le Veau</b> <i>en côte au plat avec un jus gras et escorté de taglierinis de légumes au pistou</i> Sautéed veal chop with natural jus and vegetable taglierinis flavored with pesto	<b>\$175</b>
<b>Le Bœuf</b> <i>cuit sur du gros sel aromatisé avec une fricassée de légumes</i>	
<b>\$185</b> Beef rib eye cooked on a bed of rock salt with a vegetable fricassée	
<b>La Pintade Fermière</b> <i>au foie gras rôti, pommes de terre confites au jus (pour 2 pers, 60 minutes d'attente)</i>	<b>\$325</b>
French hen with roasted foie gras, confit potatoes au jus (for 2 people, 60 minutes)	

An appetizer for over \$100 was lurking in the kitchen's alcoves, containing various mixes of---with the exception of caviar, pretty much what mom had mixed in her salads. She substituted catfish for salmon, macaroni for carbonara, and such.

Of course, being a student of gourmet behavior (but not a consumer), I was certain the proof of this pudding was not in the dishes themselves, but in the "dressings" to be

placed onto those condiments. Lettuce is lettuce, so is a cucumber. Sauces, one of the elixirs of life, transform ordinary eating experiences to extraordinary encounters.

Nonetheless, \$235 for a soft boiled egg, some salmon and caviar? Pan fried Sea Bass for \$135? With the *gas* and drink, my bill was already nearing \$200, and I had not yet had a taste of bread (I wondered if they charged for their margarine, eh, butter). I had gas alright, but not in my glass.

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The waiters were polite and efficient. I had three people waiting on me, an example of the disproportionate ratio effect. With three well-meaning but hovering humans nearby, I had to suppress: “Get back into the kitchen. Let me drown in my vodka.”

What is the use of having private dining if you cannot dine privately? Here is a modest suggestion for the “Waiters’ Guide to a Three Star Restaurant Rating:” Do not do incessant hovering. Look at your diner furtively from behind curtains. Above all, be discerning in when and how you pounce upon him to ply another drink from him...and especially to sell a dessert he neither wants or needs, or possibly can afford.”

Enough about the logistics of diners and dinees. For this narrative, I explained to the waiter that his restaurant was being compared to a competitor located in Boise, Idaho.<sup>3</sup>

- He responded, “Really? I don’t know of any ...eh restaurants in that part of the country that would rate, well, a comparison with Joël Robuchon’s! May I know the name? I’ll look it up in the *Gault Millau* restaurant guide...the magazine that named Joël Robuchon the chef of the century. ”
- “You mean in Las Vegas?”
- “No, I mean in France.”
- I countered with...because I had forgotten: “Eh, the name escapes me at the moment.”

I settled on a salad, soup, and French Hen, shown below. The bread was free, so was olive oil and butter (I *could* believe it was butter). The food was delicious, but I must say that the salad dressing was similar in taste and composition to others I have had fine dining places. So was the soup. The French Hen was the absolute best French Hen I have ever had, what with this French Hen being the only French Hen I have ever had.



Before the tip, the meal cost about \$400. Was the food and drink worth it? No. Was the experience worth it? Yes. The experience of dining out is as valuable to me as the food and drink itself.

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And now to the Leku Ona restaurant in Boise. Holly and I arrived early and walked through the bar (as seen below) to get to the dining area. Holly ordered a wine. In accordance with my plan, I ordered a Grey Goose. The place was pleasant. One waitress was handling all tables, but without delay or fuss. She brought the menu over. It was on printed 8x12 paper.

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased. I did not have my recorder with me.



“Our special tonight is lamb stew. It’s one of my favorites. As you may know, this is a Basque kitchen, reflective of Northern Spain cuisine (which we knew, and one reason we had returned). Our cooks use a recipe from the Basque region. We also have Marmitako, a Basque tuna dish.”

In an attempt to keep my research project on an even keel, I was tempted to ask the waitress, “And how’s the French Hen this evening?” But I

decided the remark would not be in good taste, so to speak, and held my tongue.

We ordered the lamb stew. While waiting for the meal, she brought out salad, fresh bread, and a red bean soup, as seen below. We had a choice of real butter, I Can’t Believe It’s Butter, and olive oil.



In addition, the waitress served us a potato bathed in a cream sauce. The sauce was delicious. I asked her about it and she said it had thyme and bay leaves in it, as did the lamb stew. The stew itself was outstanding. At my request, my lamb was cooked perfectly: medium rare-to-rare, and was tender as Kobe beef. The sauce was special. I also asked the waitress about it. She smiled and said, “The cook just adds a bit of Worcestershire.” I wondered if the chefs at Joël Robuchon’s use Worcestershire. Not likely, it’s not sufficiently French.

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The bill for this meal was under \$100 for two. How did it compare to the meal at the Michelin three-star in Las Vegas? I was equally satisfied with both meals. I had no complaints with either. Was the food at Joel’s better than at the Basque restaurant? I thought the salad and soups were better. But the main dish---French Hen vs. Basque Lamb Stew---was a toss-up.

The ambience at Rabuchon’s was that of another world; in a sense, a world of fantasy. The ambience at Leku Ona was pedestrian. The diner at Joël Robuchon’s was treated with utmost civility. The diner at Leku Ona was treated with courtesy, but that was that.

Was an evening at Joël Robuchon’s worth \$300 more than a dinner at Leku Ona? Yes. Every night? No. And that’s the point of this essay, “Excess on occasion is exhilarating. It prevents moderation from acquiring the deadening effect of habit.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*, 15, 1938. Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary*, (New York, Random House, 2001), 257.

I suspect Joël Robuchon himself enjoys a bowl of lamb stew and likely a Big Mac as well. That's the beauty and pleasure of food: It offers diversity in taste to those who have diversity of tastes.

So, here's to Joël Robuchon's and Leku Ona. Keep on trucking and keep on cooking.