

Bon Appétit



For most adults, food is an anticipated event which, inevitably, is hijacked by an inability to be present. The olfactory and gustatory pleasures of mealtime are sacrificed to the desire to read, the need to watch TV, or the cut and thrust of conversation.

Recently, mealtime has been further invaded by iPods and cell phones. I remember once being in a little restaurant called, "Pasta?" in Palo Alto located in a long, narrow building with a small aisle separating the tables.

I was really enjoying my Fettuccini Alfredo, when the table next to me was occupied by a man in his forties - a lawyer, to judge by his conversations. He ordered a spaghetti dish which he stuffed into his mouth in great, trailing fork loads while he blasted a series of co-workers at his office with a spate of cell phone harangues.

He was not paying the slightest attention to his meal. Instead, he was spitting vitriol and spaghetti sauce into the phone. As I was leaving, I touched him lightly on the shoulder and said, "Bon Appétit." He looked after my retreating figure and muttered, "Weirdo!"

And last month in a Mountain View restaurant, I watched a four-year-old really enjoy his meal. He was totally focused on his food, but not on its smell or taste. Rather, it was the look and feel that fascinated him. By coincidence, he too, like my lawyer friend, was enjoying a spaghetti dish.

But his was being served by his mother in a plastic bowl to minimize the inevitable collateral damage.

I stared intently at his eyes. And suddenly, I was looking through his eyes and imagination. Here is the drama that he was beholding. A short piece of red-sauced spaghetti had fallen onto the rim of the bowl. It was draped, in a squiggly fashion, down the bowl's inside and outside. But, in our shared eyes and imagination, the piece of spaghetti was a cowboy astride a bucking bronco.

Another bronco, blood brother to the one being tamed, had kicked off the cowboy's head and bitten off his hands and torso. Only his bloodied legs were left, yet they held on tenaciously.

The little boy grasped the bowl in both hands and rocked it violently. But the cowboy continued to cling onto the heaving, sweaty flanks of the steed while the rodeo crowd gave them a standing ovation. Then a loud voice came over the speaker system, "Jimmy, stop playing with your food!"

The little boy looked disbelievingly at the irate matron who had dared insult him in the presence of his fans. He dismissed her with a withering look and immediately went on to a new venture that did not need spaghetti as a prop.

Since the escapade had ended, I went back to my Clam Chowder, wondering which monsters lurked in its murky depths.

Namasté,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Seán".

Tír na nÓg
June, 2015