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SEPT. 3, 2001

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## NEW GRUB STREETS

How far do you have to go to find hidden food treasure in New York?

BY CALVIN TRILLIN

In Chinatown not long ago, on the corner of East Broadway and Forsyth Street, a sandwich that I bought from a street vender started me wondering whether I could consider myself a chowhound. Did I, that is, conform to the standards of the breed set forth by a Web site called chowhound.com, which describes its devotees as people who “blaze trails, combing gleefully through neighborhoods for hidden culinary treasure,” people who “spurn trends and established opinion and sniff out secret deliciousness on their own”? The sandwich did possess deliciousness, and you could say that it kept at least one secret even from me: since the vender didn’t speak English, I wasn’t able to figure out precisely what was in it. Chowhoundishly (on the Web site, the word can be morphed into just about any part of speech), I do regularly comb through at least one neighborhood, Chinatown—two, if you count the neighborhood I live in, Greenwich Village, which is only a short bike ride away. I’ve always spent a certain amount of time in such wanderings, most of it with my mouth full. It should be said that when I began my visits to Chinatown, forty years ago, there wasn’t much to buy from a street vender, unless your craving was for firecrackers. At that time, Chinatown was a small island below Little Italy—a small island that seemed to be getting smaller, as if it were being eroded by the constant lapping of olive oil and Chianti at its borders.

Chinatown then had only a single, small dim-sum parlor and not many other restaurants whose menus varied significantly from the sort of Americanized fare being served by descendants of Chinese railroad workers in Denver or Chinese fruit pickers in Sacramento; what was available was mostly the Chinese equivalent of the red sauce and pasta that defined Italian restaurants in the years before most

New Yorkers had heard the word “trattoria.” At one of the more culinarily advanced places we frequented in Chinatown, what we considered a particularly exotic dish was, upon reflection, exotic mainly for the way it was listed on the menu: Shredded Three Kinds Meat.

This was prior to the Immigration Act of 1965, in the years when this country’s immigration policy, based on a system of national quotas, reflected not simply bigotry but the sort of bigotry that seemed to equate desirable stock with blandness in cooking. The quota for the United Kingdom was so high that it was never filled. Asians were, in effect, excluded. Thirty-second Street, a couple of blocks from Herald Square, hadn’t begun to resemble a bustling commercial street in Seoul. Carroll Gardens did not yet offer its residents a choice of Yemeni cafés. Travelers to Coney Island expected to find Nathan’s hot dogs but not Azerbaijani *kufya-bozbash*. Although I am perfectly aware that only a person lacking in sensitivity would compare the problem of living in a place that offered a narrow range of truly interesting restaurants with the problem of involuntary servitude, I have to say that some serious eaters think of the Immigration Act of 1965 as their very own Emancipation Proclamation.

Once the effects of the 1965 changes began to kick in, a burgeoning Chinatown swallowed great chunks of what had been Little Italy. We eventually had a profusion of not just Peking duck but duck tongues and deboned duck feet with jellyfish. These days, I find that I can eat splendidly in Chinatown without leaving my bike. On Mott Street—before crossing Canal, which was once Chinatown’s uptown border—I often stop at a take-out window on what has become a terrifically busy market block. There I buy a huge vegetable steamed

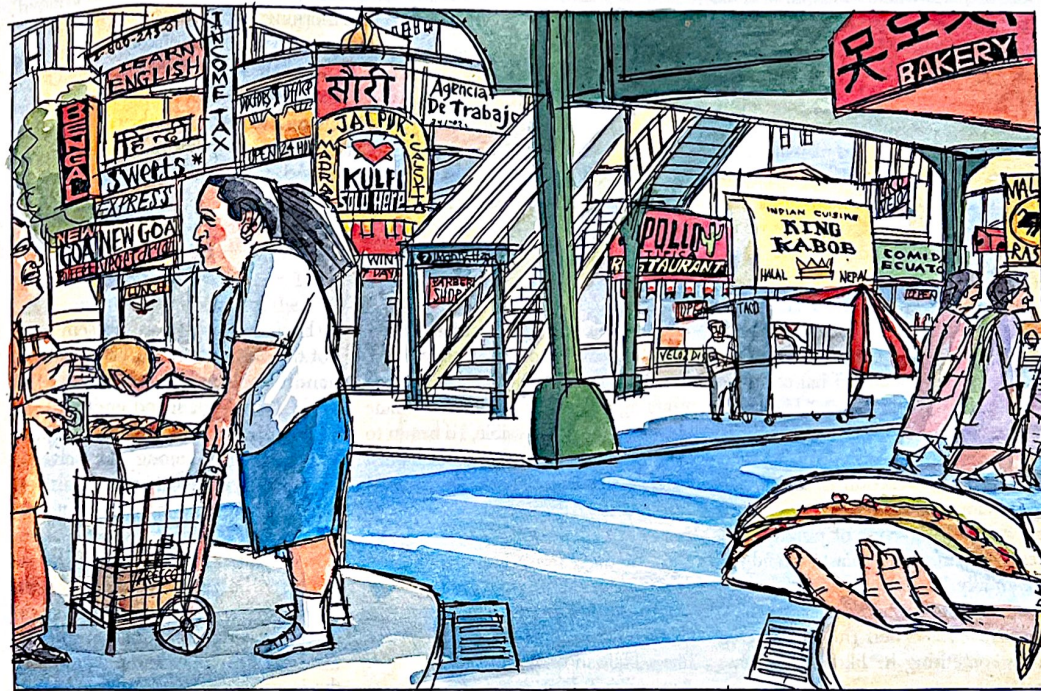
bun, which I tend to polish off on the spot. A few yards closer to Canal, I sometimes pick up some fish balls from a woman who sells them from a large plastic bag right at the curb. Most of her customers presumably take them home and put them in soup. As I shoulder my way through the crowds, I pop them in my mouth, like jujubes.

the past as “what madeines would taste like if the French really understood such things.”

It was on the way home from one of these rambles that I stopped my bike at East Broadway and Forsyth, where vendors were selling several unfamiliar items. What caught my eye was a

took a couple of bites, thanked me with elaborate courtesy, and carefully folded the plastic around the remains, I made an instantaneous diagnosis: Wooden Palate Syndrome. It turns out that you don’t have to know what’s in a sandwich to feel proprietary about it.

Then a thought occurred to me: this is chowhound stuff. I couldn’t help



The chowhounds follow the route of the No. 7 train, looking for a Mexican torta, an Indian dosa, or a Tibetan momo.

Still on Mott Street but a few blocks farther downtown, I visit another window to get an order of grilled cakes similar to what some of the vast new dim-sum restaurants serve as taro cakes. Then, on Division Street, I check the window of New South Wind coffee shop to make sure they haven’t sold out of the specialty that’s otherwise on display there, lean my bike against the window, dart in for a moment, and emerge with a rolled-up rice noodle studded with bits of some substances whose origin I do not intend to investigate. By the time I’ve taken care of the rice noodle, I’m often too full to sit down in an actual restaurant or even to stop for dessert at the shed of the Hong Kong Egg Cake Lady, who makes some musket-ball-shaped items that I’ve referred to in

sandwich, tightly wrapped in clear plastic. It consisted of an ordinary Western-style bun—what I assume the Chinese would refer to with some word that translates literally as “the sort of bread foreign devils eat”—and something green peeking out of the middle. I risked a dollar for a taste. Inside the bun was a chopped vegetable that might have been bok choy or mustard greens, flavored with something that tasted like horseradish. I loved it. Whenever I was in Chinatown during the next few weeks, I’d pick up a few greens sandwiches and hand them out when I got back to the Village, like trophies from an adventure abroad. When a recipient of my largesse gobbled up the sandwich with great enthusiasm, I beamed with pride. When someone

thinking of the Arepa Lady. Jim Leff, who presides over chowhound.com and sometimes refers to himself as the Alpha Dog, has called the Arepa Lady “pretty much my signature ‘find.’” Although Leff’s site is basically a collection of message boards for the food-obsessed, it also includes such features as “What Jim Had for Dinner” and “When Bad Food Happens to Good People,” plus an occasional special report. The Arepa Lady of Jackson Heights, Queens, rated a special report. Late on weekend evenings, Leff wrote, she grills the Colombian corn cakes called *arepas* at Seventy-ninth and Roosevelt Avenue. This is underneath the elevated tracks used by the No. 7 subway train as it passes over the cooking odors of several dozen countries on



its route from Times Square to a booming second Chinatown that has developed since 1965 in Flushing. Because of the rumble of the No. 7, you often have to shout to be heard on Roosevelt Avenue, and what you're likely to be shouting is "What a *samosa*!" or "That's the best *taco al carbon* I've had outside of Mexico!" Roosevelt Avenue is the sort of place where someone who has just downed some Filipino barbecue may emerge from the restaurant and, in the next block or two, be tempted to follow that up with an Afghan shish kebabs, a Mexican *torta*, an Indian *dosa*, and a Tibetan *momo* before making the decision about whether to go with Korean or Uruguayan baked goods. For devout chowhounds, the route of the No. 7 is El Camino de Santiago.

On this almost sacred ground, Leff cautions, you have to search among the vendors for "the tiny, ageless woman with the beatific smile"—the Arepa Lady, serving what Leff has called his favorite food in New York. "The arepas themselves are snacks from heaven," his special report says. "You try one, and your first reaction is 'mmm, this is delicious.' But before that thought can fully form, waves of progressively deeper feelings begin crashing, and you are finally left silently nodding your head. You understand things. You have been loved." When the Alpha Dog finds something he likes, he eschews restraint.

Compared to the Arepa Lady, the vendor I'd just patronized did lack a certain remoteness. There wasn't any question in my mind that her very convenience made the experience less chowhoundish than it might have been. New Yorkers who revel in chowhoundry tend to do most of their eating in the outer boroughs—particularly Queens and Brooklyn, where a lot of the people admitted in the place of all those Englishmen have congregated. Judged by the standards of people who post messages on chowhound.com, I am a stranger to the boroughs. Given the variety and quality of food available within walking distance of my house, I'm reluctant to leave lower Manhattan at mealtime. A vender of exotic food-stuffs is not likely to be discovered in an obscure neighborhood by someone who doesn't even like to go uptown.

## HYMN TO THE NECK

Tamed by starched collars or looped by the noose, all hail the stem that holds up the frail cranial buttercup. The neck throbs with dread of the guillotine's kiss, while the silly, bracelet-craving wrists chafe in their handcuffs. Your one and only neck, home to glottis, tonsils, and many other highly specialized pieces of meat, is covered with stubble. Three mornings ago, undeserving sinner though she is, yours truly got to watch you shave in the bath. Soap matted your chest hair. A clouded hand mirror reflected a piece of your cheek. Vapor rose all around like spirit-infested mist in some fabled rain forest. The throat is a road. Speech is its pilgrim. Something pulses visibly in your neck as the words *Hand me a towel* flower from your mouth.

—Amy Gerstler

My vicarious experience in outer-borough eating, on the other hand, has been quite extensive. About ten years ago, before the Internet made chowhound.com possible, I'd begun to follow the travels of a food critic named Robert Sietsema, whose dispatches I read first in an occasional newsletter he puts out called *Down the Hatch* and then in the *Village Voice*. Although *Down the Hatch* began with a concentration on Manhattan, Sietsema was soon spending a lot of his time in places like a Haitian night club on Flatbush Avenue or a Portuguese *churrasqueira* off the Jericho Turnpike or an Arab diner in Astoria or a Ghanaian seafood restaurant in the Bronx. At the time, I hadn't met Sietsema, but I took to calling him "my man Sietsema." As my wife and I perused different publications over breakfast, she would occasionally comment on the news—"Looks like they've got another truce in Northern Ireland," say, or "The Fed is apparently going to cut the interest rate"—and I would say, "My man Sietsema's been eating at an Egyptian fish joint in Brooklyn," or "My man Sietsema has visited the best Oaxacan restaurant in New Brunswick." You might say that I followed Sietsema's adventures to the outer boroughs and beyond the way some sedentary Victorian burgher in Manchester or Leeds must have followed the travels of Henry Stanley in Africa.

Eventually, my man Sietsema was not the only adventurer I followed. A handful of professional food writers in New York spend enough time in out-of-the-way restaurants to be able to disagree among themselves—sometimes via the message boards of chowhound.com—about where to find the best Salvadoran *pupusa* or a superior Albanian *burek*. (Both of these turn out to be versions of meat or cheese inside dough; anyone who spends a lot of time trying unfamiliar cuisines in the boroughs may come away with the impression that most things turn out to be versions of meat or cheese inside dough.) Writers who concentrate on what is sometimes called ethnic eating or alternative eating or off-beat eating form a small, occasionally bickering community, like a community of drama critics who concentrate on Off Broadway. Or maybe Off Off Broadway.

Some of them—Myra Alperon, for instance, who publishes a newsletter called *NoshNews* ("Nosh your way from Odessa to Bombay. . . . And never leave New York")—are virtually full time in the neighborhoods. Others, like Eric Asimov, who writes the "\$25 and Under" column for the *Times*, make occasional forays as part of their assignment to review inexpensive restaurants. They have produced a number of guidebooks, including Sietsema's "The Food Lover's Guide to the Best Ethnic

Eating in New York City" and Leff's "The Eclectic Gourmet Guide to Greater New York City." The Los Angeles equivalent would be Jonathan Gold's "Counter Intelligence." Members of the community do not limit themselves to the cooking of new immigrants. On chowhound.com, Leff insists that a true chowhound's lust for "hyperdeliciousness in all forms" includes foie gras and Château Margaux. Still, an adventurous eater in New York is not likely to spend his time in the latest chic Manhattan bistro while there are Nigerian yam-porridge outposts in Brooklyn left to explore.

Over the years, I've come to know several members of this community, and when I've talked to, say, Sietsema, or to Sylvia Carter, who began writing the "Eats" column for *Newsday* in 1980 and is sometimes referred to as the den mother of the alternative eaters, or to Ed Levine, who became familiar with the boroughs when he began his food-writing career searching out places to shop, I feel positively sedentary by comparison. It has occurred to me that, despite the hymns I have sung for years to the 1965 Immigration Act, I may not be completely emancipated. Eventually, I decided to get in touch with Jim Leff, and when I phoned him he asked if we should get together for a meal.

"Sure," I said.

"Great," Leff said. "You want to go to Danbury for goulash?"

That, I thought, was the Alpha Dog talking.

On chowhound.com, a battalion of food crazies stands ready to respond promptly and forthrightly if a complete stranger wants to know where to obtain the best version of a certain Vietnamese sandwich, or asks if there are any modestly priced restaurants his parents might like when they come from Moline for a visit, or seeks opinions on whether her friend's birthday splurge this year should be at Eleven Madison Park rather than at the Gramercy Tavern, or demonstrates an obvious need to be corrected by a more knowledgeable person on what to order in some new Chinese restaurant in Sunnyside. In fact, Leff assured me that if I posted news of my Chinatown sandwich, I would know within a





few hours not only its precise ingredients but maybe even where to get a better one. Eric Asimov has said that chowhound.com, with its generous exchange of information by people who are similarly obsessed, is just what a Web site was meant to be, which may be another way of saying that it doesn't make money.

Although food has been a passion for Jim Leff at least since high school, when he started sending restaurant tips to Sylvia Carter at *Newsday*, he makes his living in large part as a musician—a trombonist with a leaning toward jazz and a willingness to play Hasidic dance music if that's what the gig calls for. According to Sietsema, who played in a rock band himself for a number of years while making his living at the typing and book designing and photo editing he refers to as "urban roustabout work," Leff is a "bizarrely talented" trombonist. Asimov is a guitarist, and Jonathan Gold spent years playing the amplified cello in a punk-rock band. Ed Levine used to manage a jazz club in the Village. Someone might be able to put together a theory about a part of the brain that controls both offbeat food yearnings and an ear for rock or jazz music, but the way Sietsema explains it is that once you make the sound check late in the afternoon you've got nothing to do for four or five hours but search around in a strange neighborhood for someplace to get dinner.

Leff might be picked out of a

crowded restaurant by someone told to look for the musician. A bearded, informally dressed man in his late thirties, he has dark hair pulled back into a knot. I've heard Leff and Sietsema and Gold and some members of what Leff calls his Fress Team—the *fressers* (Yiddish for eaters, or maybe trenchermen) who sometimes accompany him to a new restaurant he's trying—described as looking like "guys who stayed in graduate school too long." (Leff, in fact, did some graduate work, and Sietsema actually spent five years in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, apparently without displaying any unseemly interest in a degree. Gold's "Counter Intelligence" begins, "For a while in my early twenties, my only clearly articulated ambition was to eat at least once at every restaurant on Pico Boulevard, starting with the fried yuca dish served at a *pupuseria* near where the street began in downtown Los Angeles, and working methodically westward toward the chili fries at Tom's #5 near the beach. It seemed a reasonable enough alternative to graduate school at the time.") If they showed up anonymously to review a fancy French restaurant on the Upper East Side, the question might be not whether the headwaiter would recognize them but whether he would be willing to seat them. The answer is presumably yes: Gold, who might be considered the alternative eater's first crossover act, now reviews mainstream New York restaurants for *Gourmet*.

My first glimpse of Leff did not turn out to be in a goulash restaurant in Danbury. Danbury seemed a long way to go for goulash, although Leff assured me that it was only an hour away, that the journey would include a stop at a homemade-yogurt place in East Elmhurst which also does great spinach pie, and that eating the Danbury goulash would almost certainly be an experience that transformed my life. He was also quick to say that the goulash place had not been discovered by him but by Jane and Michael Stern, who have been sniffing out unpretentious restaurants around the country for a number of years—although he was willing to take credit for discovering, in a manner of speaking, that the Sterns had underrated it.

Leff's eagerness to take me to what was, in effect, someone else's restaurant seemed to refute what other alternative eaters had told me about his singular attachment to restaurants that he has himself discovered. Most food writers who report on the offbeat pay at least lip service to the notion that it's of no real importance who happened to write about a restaurant first. Leff seems unembarrassed about using "Major Discovery" as a headline or referring to a restaurant as "my greatest discovery ever." He is exquisitely conscious of which restaurants were mentioned first on chowhound.com, reflecting the territorial instincts you might expect to encounter in an alpha dog. Jonathan Gold—who, like Robert Sietsema, has at times felt unwelcome on chowhound.com—has called Leff "the premier proponent of the paranoid school of restaurant criticism."

On the other hand, I can understand taking some pride in a signature pick. Witness how I feel about my greens sandwich. Discovery is part of the game. Also, discovery is hard work. Sietsema wears out a copy of "Hagstrom's New York City 5 Borough Atlas" every year as he prowls the streets, becoming particularly alert when he goes through a neighborhood in which, as he has put it, "the hipster coefficient is zero." When Sietsema reads in a neighborhood newspaper about a homicide in some bar described as a place frequented by West Africans, he finds himself wondering not about the vic-

tim or the crime but about whether the bar happens to be the sort of bar that serves food.

Sietsema says that, once a writer discovers a place, he may feel the necessity to "defend it against all comers." If others are unimpressed with it, after all, it wasn't much of a discovery. When I accompanied Ed Levine one day for a lunchtime outing in Queens—we'd started on Roosevelt Avenue with a Cuban sandwich at El Sitio and some *picaditas con carne* at a *taqueria* called El Grano de Oro 2000, then finished up in Corona with an empanada at El Palacio de Empanada and a sublime eggplant-parmigiana sandwich at the Corona Heights Pork Store, those two treats separated by what you might call a palate cleanser of old-fashioned Italian lemon ice in a paper cup at Benfaremo, the Lemon Ice King of Corona—he did his impression of Jim Leff's response to hearing another eater's disappointment in, say, a Salvadoran *pupuseria* Leff had discovered: "But the cook went back to El Salvador. You didn't know? The mama's only in the kitchen on Thursday. You went on a Tuesday? You didn't know?"

The moment a restaurant is discovered, of course, it stands exposed to the danger of going downhill. It might indeed lose its cook to the constant back-and-forth of modern immigration. It might become self-conscious from having attracted what Leff refers to with great contempt as "Zagat-clutching foodies"—a foodie being in his lexicon precisely what a chowhound is not. Chowhound.com actually has a department called "Downhill Alert!" I once heard Leff say that the entire route of the No. 7 was going downhill. This was not long after the route, which has often been mentioned in the mainstream press, became the subject of a piece by Jonathan Gold in *Gourmet*, foodie central. (In the piece, Gold, perhaps innocently, mentioned that he'd never been able to find the Arepa Lady.) "The Indians are going, and it's mostly Pakistanis," Leff said of the No. 7. "And I love Pakistani food but these particular Pakistanis have sort of agreed not to cook it well, so there's not really good Indian food anymore. The Colombians . . . that are left are sort

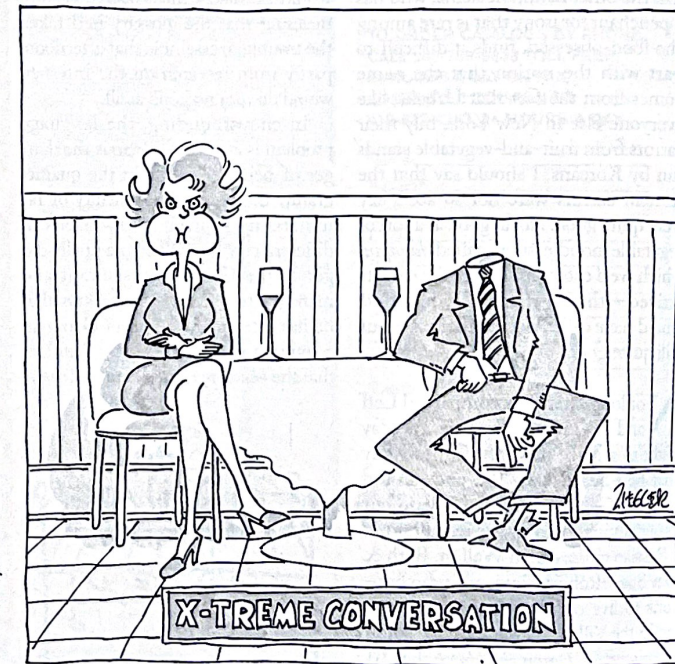
of hapless, and are not cooking that great. The Mexicans are coming in, we had great hopes, but there's a lot of bad Mexican food now in Jackson Heights."

The thrill of discovery is obviously enhanced by discovering something rare, or even unique. One of my forays with Leff included a lunch (if that's what the second or third meal you eat in the middle of the day is called) at a kosher Middle Eastern restaurant in Brooklyn called Olympic Pita, a place that I at first thought I'd been brought to because of a design element new to my experience: a large picture window in the dining room faced straight into the back of a one-car garage, a few feet away. The back of the garage had been totally covered in a forest (or maybe jungle) mural that blended with some bushes in the narrow grassy strip in front of it and with the green of the asphalt shingles on the roof. Leff then reminded me that what I would find truly rare about Olympic Pita was an Iraqi Jewish mango hot sauce called *amba*, which any student of that cuisine would be astounded to encounter in North America. "If you ever meet an Iraqi Jew and tell them you know where to get

this, they will doubt your word," he informed me. "It's not considered available. It's extremely rare. This might be the rarest single food in town." I liked *amba*, which we spread generously on our *shawarma*. I thought of having something to put over on an Iraqi Jew as a little bonus.

All the offbeat eaters are, of course, aware that what seems breathtakingly exotic and authentic and even quaint could be a trap—that they could be so smitten by the palpably unspoiled granny bustling around the tiny kitchen in her babushka that they overlook the rocklike quality of her dumplings. If pressed, they will sadly report one another's propensity for falling into the trap. Leff has said that if a place selling astonishing blueberry muffins were next door to a so-so Mozambican place, Robert Sietsema would write about the Mozambican place and followers of "What Jim Had for Dinner" would hear about the blueberry muffins, the chowhoundian way being never to "ingest anything undelicious," whether it's exotic or not.

Sietsema, who believes he adheres to the nothing-undelicious principle of chowhoundishness himself, acknowl-





edges that he takes an almost anthropological approach, even though anthropology was not one of the subjects he got around to studying during his academic career. He once told me, for instance, that he has spent some time trying to find out why all the Uzbekistani restaurants he's tried seem to have a dish called Korean carrots. The subject came up while we were having the second leg of lunch one day at an Uzbekistani restaurant in Forest Hills called Salut. We had started in Ridge-wood with a Frisbee-size hamburger sandwich (a *pljeskavica*, actually) at a stand called Bosna Express Corp.—we ate on an automobile seat that had been propped against the wall across from two folding chairs to create the sort of sidewalk café one might expect to find in an area of the Balkans that had seen its share of trouble—and we would finish off with a *masala dosa* in a tiny café called Dosa Hutt, next to an ornate Hindu temple in Flushing. One theory he has come across about Korean carrots, Sietsema said, is that one of the conditions the Japanese imposed upon Russia after winning the Russo-Japanese War was that Russia accept some of Japan's unassimilated Koreans, who were then sent to Uzbekistan. On the other hand, Sietsema, who has a penchant for irony that is rare among the food-obsessed, finds it difficult to part with the notion that the name comes from the fact that Uzbeks, like everyone else in New York, buy their carrots from fruit-and-vegetable stands run by Koreans. I should say that the Korean carrots were not so-so. They were quite good. Not as good as a sort of vegetable-noodle soup called *lagman*, which we'd eaten just before the carrots arrived—the *lagman* was what Leff would have called hyperdelicious—but still quite good.

Not long after I'd accompanied Leff and his Fress Team one Tuesday night to a place near Sheepshead Bay that he'd heard was "the end-all and be-all of Georgian food"—it won out as our destination over the restaurant in a Russian *shvitz* called Wall St. Bath & Day Spa—Robert Sietsema, who happens to live only a few blocks from me in the Village, came by with some early issues of *Down the Hatch* that I'd

asked to see. The Fress Team outing had started me thinking about how strenuous chowhounding is—strenuous, I mean, beyond just the strain of eating two or three lunches. On the way to Sheepshead Bay, Leff had outlined some of the problems we might face. For one thing, given the language difficulties he'd encountered when he phoned the restaurant, it could turn out to be closed on Tuesdays. In case we found ourselves in need of a fallback, he'd brought along a thick printout that listed, in tiny type, all of the restaurants in his repertoire, arranged by neighborhood. Some of the restaurants were listed by name only, and some not even by name ("Irish place in back of Ping's"). Some of them included comments or favorite dishes. On the upper left-hand corner of the first page was typed 3281, the number of restaurants on the list. Leafing through the printout, I told Leff that it looked like the life list of a particularly maniacal birder.

He ticked off some other potential problems: maybe Tuesday was such a slow night they'd have nothing available beyond chicken and *pelmeni*, which he has referred to as "the ubiquitous Russian tortellini." Or maybe the menus would be in Cyrillic characters only, meaning that the glossary he'd taken the trouble to assemble that afternoon, partly from research on the Internet, would do him no good at all.

In chowhounding, the language problem is ever present. So is the danger of being ensnared in the quaint-granny trap. So is the difficulty of familiarizing yourself with dozens of different cuisines. When we finally did get to the Georgian restaurant and managed to order, Leff, who says that he has eaten in every decent Georgian restaurant in New York, was confident that the *khachapuri* (as it happens, a ver-

sion of cheese inside dough) was insufficiently flaky, given its startling resemblance to quesadillas; as someone who has travelled extensively as a musician, he is in a position to compare, say, *salgadinhos* he tries in Astoria to the *salgadinhos* he has had in Brazil. But, given the rate and variety of immigration, there is a limit to everyone's experience. At the Olympic Pita, had we been eating a superior *amba* or only a run-of-the-mill *amba*? If I did ever meet an Iraqi Jew and proudly escorted him to Olympic Pita for a little surprise, would he say derisively, after a quick taste, "They told you that was *amba*?"

At my house, Sietsema and I talked a bit about the restaurants we liked in the Village. I reminded him how fortunate we were to live in an area that offered such remarkable food only a stroll away. I'd told him about a restaurant in Hoboken, and I realized that I liked the thought of my man Sietsema, armed with a street atlas of Hudson County, checking it out, maybe on one of those mild fall evenings when my wife and I enjoy walking to a pizza parlor on Spring Street which we treasure for its clam pie. Maybe he'd happen across a fabulous purveyor of Guyanese *rotis* or Dominican fritters on the way. Thinking about a walk downtown reminded me of my greens sandwich. I had posted it on chowhound.com, but nobody seemed interested in enlightening me about its origin or telling me where I could get a better one—although only a few days later there was, coincidentally, a spirited discussion about the steamed buns in the place I patronize on Mott Street. I happened to have a greens sandwich in the fridge, and I offered it to Sietsema. I like to think that I hadn't prepared myself to respond to an unenthusiastic reception by saying that refrigeration is known to deaden the taste of Chinese greens or that I'd heard rumors that the regular sandwich maker had recently been picked up by Immigration.

Sietsema loved it. "It's a real find," he said. "A totally unique entity."

"Did you say 'totally unique entity'?" I said.

He had.

"Well, thank you," I said. "Thank you very much." ♦

