

22 June 1980

Dear Harold and Lil:

The enclosed is the peg for writing. Recently Roger Kent, the backbone of California Democratic politics for the past 35 years, died of emphysema and complications, and it was only natural that the editor of ~~the~~ the Pacific Sun, a liberal Marin weekly, should ask Roger's old friend, co-worker and neighbor, Libby Gatov, to do a ~~an~~ profile on him. Her account, even though badly cut, will tell you more about both of them than I ever could. I met Roger long ago, when he came into the AP office one night, waking on air, and waving the consent decree against Nixon and Haldeman who pleaded nolo contendere to Roger's charges of fraud in the campaign Pat Brown won to be reelected governor over Nixon. Libby neglects to mention that she was co-plaintiff in that successful suit.

Our venture into "foreign" food proved to be very transitory and uninteresting enough that we've gone back to Chinese food. Including chiao-tze. Let Mike to explain the difference between chiao-tze and the way they usually are turned out in this country, as kuo-t'ieh or potstickers.

Locally the chiao-tze and potsticker situation has taken a great leap forward with a Japanese noodle firm which is marketing ready-made skins in which to wrap the mixture of ground pork, chopped Chinese cabbage, celery, young onion and cilantro which make up this Chinese ancestor of ravioli. (Cilantro is the green ~~part~~ ^{part} of the coriander plant and also is known as Chinese parsley, but the latins all know it as cilantro). Well, these skins are a great boon because, as Mike and his good wife will tell you, making them ~~yourself~~ yourself is a tedious pain in the ass. Blessed with the ready-made kind, one can mix up a batch of filling and then work up an appetite while wrapping little spoonsfull in each round skin. You boil these briefly for chiao-tze, and braise them in a skillet for potstickers. Both are dipped in a sauce of soy and vinegar; Both are what anyone who ever has lived in North China longs for most when he gets nostalgic about the way he used to eat.

All northern Chinese families make a big thing on the eve of the Chinese New Year out of preparing and eating chiao-tze. The whole family joins in rolling the dough ~~and~~ out to just the right thickness (about 1/16 of an inch) then wrapping the filling in and pinching the skin shut and sealing it. There used to be a fine story about how New Year's Eve was always the most dangerous time for a walled city under siege. This was because the besieging army, shivering around its campfire in the bitter cold, inevitably would get to thinking about how everyone in the city was making chiao-tze, then visualize everyone eating them, which was of course entirely too much and whereupon the army would storm the ramparts in order to get at the chiao-tze.

Actually, a thousand-year-old chiao-tze recently resolved a question which had been in my mind for nearly 50 years. This was the old argument about whether Marco Polo took the idea of pasta to ~~China~~ China with him, or took it back to Italy. While it is objectively probable that some form of pasta was endemic in both countries from the time they began grinding wheat into flour, still there were striking parallels in both cuisines which suggested strongly that either Polo or the Jesuits who followed him to China had ~~enriched~~ enriched one cuisine from the other.

Chiaotze and ravioli, for one thing. Spaghetti with meat sauce and chia chiang mien for another. And there is a striking, though less positive similarity between pizza and certain Chinese unleavened cakes with meat and vegetables (the Chinese don't use cheese).

Now, about the 1,000 year-old chiaotze. When the People's Republic ~~xxxx~~ sent its excellent historical exhibition here several years ago, one of the exhibits was of the contents of a T'ang Dynasty (600-900 A.D.) tomb from Turfan in western China. Among the contents was a very dried up chiaotze, but still recognizably a chiaotze, put in the tomb along with other goodies to comfort the departed in the next world. The point of this is that Marco Polo didn't get to China until around 1200 A.D. Therefore this Turfan chiaotze predates him by at least 200 years. Quod erat demonstrandum.

Libby is no more immune to the lure of the chiaotze than any other red-blooded American, and shows every sign of regarding them as an epochal development rivaling the ~~ix~~ invention of the wheel. She recently asked me if I'd help her entertain a couple of friends from Hayward with Chinese food, and when I asked her what she'd like to fix she replied promptly and beseechingly: COULD we have chiaotze? We could and did. The couple are a retired engineer (Singer and Frieden) who has lived many years in Europe, and his wife, a charming woman who did an eight-hour "living history" interview with Libby for the UC Library in Berkeley. They're delightful people, and consumed chiaotze and potstickers with a tireless and most gratifying gusto. The next day everyone was recovered enough that we took a picnic lunch to Audubon Canyon near Bolinas (Bolinas means whales, as in baleen) where we climbed a ridge until we ^{were} above the tops of a grove of redwood trees in which 50 or 60 pairs of giant white cranes and blue herons were mating, laying eggs, sitting on them, or coning and going in the business of feeding their young. Telescopes are on the house, but you bring your own binoculars.

In a sort of reverse lend-lease, Libby has been here twice recently, helping me entertain up to eight people at a time with Mongolian barbecue. If you find your asada recipe we'd be interested, but if it involves turning something on a spit I don't have that equipment. Anyway, there is a long list of potential victims for both the chiaotze and Mongolian barbecue routines. Both are very different from anything else around and both are guaranteed successes. Thus far, anyway.

At Hospice I have helped Joanne catch up with her office work and am working into another generation of patients. There have been two or three such generations (I usually work with two or three people at the same time) and while they're all interesting and a pleasure to work with, this new lot is exceptional in their courage and responsiveness to help. One is a man in his 50s who had a very good building-maintenance business but who came down more than a year ago with cancer of the spine. It paralyzed him from the waist down, and he's been a hospital bed in his living room ever since. Still very cheerful and upbeat, partly because of his own strength and partly because of a gutsy, intelligent wife. Recently his appetite was flagging, but it revived when I took the makings over and we had a chiaotze dinner.

Another is a retired meat-cutter who has bone cancer and who has lost a leg (including the hip) because of it. He's also a very positive character and again, his wife is superior. He has a son who started as a meat-cutter but who went into television with a program on selecting and buying meat for the home and who writes a column for the Chronicle on the same subject. Suchx people are a real pleasure to work with.

The latest is an old lady in her 70s who has mouth cancer and whom I take to her doctor once a week for chemotherapy. Her husband, a retired FGEE worker, isn't in such good shape himself and can't drive.

Today I spent pulling ivy off tree trunks and cutting sprouts and weeds. There is NO level ground on this place for any sort of garden and the deer rule out a garden anyway. The only thing that survives is something deer don't like to eat. So all your good suggestions about cultivators are wasted. I'm still tempted by a weed-eater, though, and expect to rent one some day and see how well it works. Deer are protected here, and make themselves very much at home. Yesterday when I went down below the house for something I disturbed a doe and two spotted fawns who ~~xxx~~ were resting comfortably next to the table saw -- the same saw which a pair of little birds tied up for three months by building a nest and raising a family in the cast-iron mandrill.

My health continues excellent. I don't gain weight despite all the good eating, and have no trouble doing anything I need to do. I had a checkup recently and the doctor gave me a clean bill of health to go to China in October. He knows the tour leader, has been to China himself, and was so enthusiastic that I could have had one foot in the grave and he'd still have passed me.

So I have no complaints. There still is a gaping hole in my life but many things combine to make it capable of being lived with.

All the best to you both,

jdw