



Paris on Twenty Thousand Dollars a Day

Sitting next to me in the evening flight to Paris from JFK, was a successful young executive. The successful part of his equation was easy to perceive; he was wearing a 500 dollar shirt, a conservative but eye catching Hermes necktie, an impeccable Tahaney suit and, by his feet there rested a leather attaché case made of fine unborn calf finely designed and exquisitely finished metal locks almost screamed "I am a mark of distinction!"

Responding to some unconscious quest for keeping things in their places, I mentally catalogued my seat mate, even before I had a chance to exchange a word with him.

In this age of high executive salaries, quick killings in the money markets and sudden wealth appearing from sources of varied pedigree, I could not readily place him. I had to settle for one of those young lawyers who join Dad's old firm and, true to modern American tradition, start at the top. I also figured he was single, as I did not see a wedding ring nor the tell tale sign of one. This, however, is not a finding of any certainty as present mores allow unions, arrangements, situations and joint ventures between heterosexual couples that no longer make use of socially imposed symbols.

"Will you have champagne or something else?" -- asked the stew on duty. The question was directed at my seat mate first, as he was seated next to the window.

"Just Champagne, please" -- His voice was well structured and his accent faintly smacked of Eastern Shore. And, of course, champagne was the right thing to drink at that moment.

I also decided to have some champagne. Fortunately, since childhood I have been exposed to its delights as my parents seemed to be forever toasting one thing and another with the finest brands. Early on I knew more about French geography and wine making than the average French Member of Parliament.

We were served a decent Clicquot, at the right temperature and the usual small packets of peanuts and other cocktail snacks.

"I am not going to ask if you are going to Paris. This is a non-stop flight, you know, and my powers of deduction are not being strained."

My seat mate had turned towards me, champagne flute in his hand and had delivered his opening line in a soft and light tone, without exaggerating on the



delivery or including any nuances. Just a plain observation, short, friendly and polite. Class.

"You are right, it would be difficult to go to Abilene on this flight" I answered, without thinking.

He smiled and extended his hand.

"My name is Mike McClellan. And I must add that it is a pleasure sharing this flying sofa with you."

He was pleasant, well educated and best of all, impeccably mannered. We chatted about this and the other and in the process, as is usual, disclosed details of our lives.

He was not a lawyer. He was a Value Analyst for a major publisher. And he was single, living in New York. There was more brief biographical data about New Jersey's hill country, Princeton, Rhodes scholarship in London and some Navy service.

You know, the 6 hour period of captivity on the New York - Paris flight allows for ample time to talk. You are almost obligated to do so. The cocktails and the meal take about 2 to 2 and half hours. The movie takes another hour and a half. If you can sleep with your vertebra under protest, you can do no more than a half hour at a stretch. So that leaves time to stare ahead, read or talk to your seat mate. Especially if he is attractive, witty and wants to talk.

So we talked away. As always, I tried to reduce my output of personal data to the necessary minimum. Accomplished women are not exactly what men want to share a ride with. So I just mentioned that I also worked for a publisher in Boston doing this and that; book reviews, studying new collections, etc. I dared not mention the 9 books and countless columns I have sweated over, nor the film scripts and the couple of Emmys I have somewhere in my garage.

I asked him what a Value Analyst does. I said: "I have never heard of such occupation, or is it a title devised to confuse aspiring writers?"

"No" he said. "It is a serious and responsible position. It has to do with establishing real and accepted parameters of excellence in varying situations, places, products and even personalities. The Company must know, for instance, if skiing in some new resort in Canada can justify printing one of those hundred dollar books with great photographs that give a note of distinction to your coffee table, or whether to accept a book proposal about some celebrity's bio."



"So" I asked. "What are you evaluating on this trip?"

"You may not believe this, but I have to do Paris on twenty thousand dollars a day. That is, I have to spend that amount in a day. You have certainly read accounts about visiting Paris on small, medium and not so medium budgets. You have probably read numberless written accounts on the subject and zillion articles about the visit to Paris. For instance, last year there were more than 4200 published pieces in magazines, Sunday Supplements, Travel books, regional and local dailies, etc. Even Church newsletters include accounts on my Visit to Paris." He paused to raise his glass and with a charming smile took another sip of the lovely fluid. I did likewise. He continued:

"Of all these written accounts, a full 60 percent were devoted almost entirely to rating hotels, boarding houses, hostels, restaurants, shops, transportation, air quality, people's smiles, river water appearance, etc. etc. It appears as if people go to Paris to check and compare hotel prices evaluate the plumbing and to determine whether the croissants in the morning are over baked, hot, cold, sticky..."

"Well, a city like Paris, like any other great city, invariably stimulates the visitor. The writing is a natural by-product, don't you think?"

"Of course. Except that in many ways visitors wonder what it would be like to spend a few days in Paris without a financial restraint. In other words, spending at will. Most people seem to think that everything is tremendously expensive in Paris and that a very large budget is essential in order to be able to savor the many pleasures of the city. Our idea is to satisfy their curiosity and ours. We wish to determine if we can spend twenty thousand dollars a day in a more or less normal manner; that is avoiding any type of purchase and spend the money only on ordinary things and services. Remove the blindfolds and show how you can spend a small fortune and have a great time. Especially if someone is footing the bill"

To me, the project was peculiar if not outright fatuous. To go to Paris and try to spend twenty thousand dollars a day seemed to me stretching the limits of responsible publishing. At the same time I was curious to know how anyone could manage to spend that much as a matter of course and not incurring exceptional expenses.

"Listen" I said "I was in Paris for a solid week last month and even including the air fare I did not spend one fourth of the amount you plan to spend in a single day. I stayed at a good hotel, ate in restaurants, invited people to dinners, tipped appropriately, made daily long distance calls continuously and bought me a silk scarf, a pair of shoes and two books at WH Smith!"



His question was a clever one. It was a probing question:

“Yes, but were you by yourself?”

I caught on right away. “Yes” I replied. “I did have lunch with colleagues and hosted a dinner for one of the executives who was getting married next month. No nightclubs, no trips on the bateaux and no quick visits to the countryside”

“He laughed and said:

“Were you bored?”

“Not really. I carry with me enough reading material to stay interested for days. Why do you ask?”

I felt it was time I take the offensive. Before he had a chance to answer I followed up with another question:

“And you, Mike, don’t you get bored on these journeys?”

He said what I expected to hear:

“Yes I do. Mine is a lonely job. I have to verify every aspect of a project and that involves both time and concentration”

“Yes but in this case, spending twenty thousand dollars in a single day should be fun, not only for you but also for those involved. Paris has many things to offer and it is easy to build up outrageous expenses in no time at all”

Then it came. I was glad that the strategy had paid off.:

“Let me ask you something” he said and looked at me in a way that included a clear message “why don’t you join me in this project once you have finished your assignment. Or even before you start the assignment, or just forget about the assignment. I feel that spending these days with you and being able to spend at will can be the experience of a lifetime for me!”

I laughed and drank more champagne. Whoever invented that Cliquot, knew what he or she was doing. Someone with a velvet palate, I thought, remembering one of Miranda;s descriptions of either great champagne or a great kiss! I said:

“Tell me one thing. Are you supposed to be by yourself while you add to Frances Balance of Payments with those twenty thousand bucks or can you invite other people to join you?”



“It has to be strictly an individual effort. If I as much as invite you for a glass of Perrier, I have to pay for it from my own pocket. By the way, do you drink Perrier?”

The man had class and wit. Qualities I value in men. I recovered quickly and answered:

“Even without a glass, mon ami”

I agreed to accompany him next day when he would begin recording the expenses. At the end of the next day and, to my amazement, we spent only five thousand eight hundred dollars. His hotel suite by itself took 2,500 dollars. The car rental with chauffeur cost another 1,000 a day. Lunch for one at Lipp’s took 450 dollars for half the bill, same as the 1,000 dollars for dinner at the Crillon and another 500 in generous tips to head waiters, doormen, elevator operators and hotel clerk. We returned to the hotel around midnight and sat down at the bar for the usual nightcap, which turned out to be another bottle of champagne. I helped him estimate the day’s expenses, for which my portion had to be deducted and charged to his personal account, even if I insisted that I pay my share.

At one point he said:

“I am afraid I can not spend twenty thousand dollars in a single day, unless I buy you some furs, a bracelet and a gallon of choice scents along with enough orchids to choke your suite!”

“So, what are you going to do now?”

He smiled with that charge of manly attraction and said:

“I am going to cancel the rental car and rent a lively Mercedes. I am going to e-mail my office and tell them that I am taking a few days off, and that the Paris on Twenty Thousand does not work. Then I am going to drive straight south and stay overnight in Lyon where I plan to have dinner at one of Armand’s restaurants. Then, some lazy days in les Alps Mediterranee and then Provence. Some days at St Remy de Provence and then off to Barcelona and back to the yellow cake mines in New York!”

“Gee, that sounds great, Mike. Won’t you be bored?”

He laughed and asked the question I expected him to ask.



True Delights of French Cuisine

To coincide with the appearance of the latest edition of the Michelin Guide, I was asked, or ordered, to write about the true values of French Cuisine, its historical essence and the numerous influences it was exposed to throughout the centuries. I protested claiming that I am not a historian and while I love French food, I am more interested in the people who prepare it, the places where they do it and the people who consume it. Especially if it is a lovely lady sitting alone next to my table at Lanversin's.

Some of the tables at Lanversin are placed very near each other with the seats on a comfortable bench along one of the walls, so I was quite close to her. She noticed my discreet appraisal, and also the thin folder and the copy of Patrick Deschamp's recent book lying on the table. She turned to me and asked: "How come you have a copy of Deschamp's book when it has not been released yet?"

I like that. Straightforward. I answered: "Family ties. His mother is my mother's sister, or my aunt Emy. The book will be out in about two weeks; I always get an advanced copy. Are you familiar with his work?"

"Yes. Can I see it?"

I passed it on to her. She opened and read the words Patrick had written as a dedication:

"Hey, you! I wish I had some of those fancy writing assignments you get and could spend weeks on end sailing the Greek Islands or playing golf with Clint in the Monterrey peninsula. Here is one about ancient civilizations. It will not interest you simply because their golf courses were too tough!

She laughed and asked: "Is that true?"

"Wish it was. I am just a word mechanic, a writing robot and barely educated."

We introduced each other and that was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Well, she turned out to be a descendant of Curnonsky, a revered gastronome of the beginning of the last century. She happened to be a Clinical Psychologist attached to one of the Ministry of Health Units in Paris and had studied at the same lycee with Kathryn, Patrick's wife. She was excited to learn that I was working on an article on French cuisine and, what was more admirable to her, was that I was familiar with her great grand father and his unique legacy to those who love French cuisine. She herself was an expert chef, as I gleaned from the bit and pieces of information she revealed about herself. We consumed several plates of coquillage at Lanversin and in the process I was able to learn about one of the more interesting stories of a famous restaurateur and her famous recipes. I figured that I had fulfilled my editor's request if and when I turned in a story about people, places and food, and not a learned treatise on the spirituality of chopped garlic fried in vegetable oil.



In a trip to the Riec-sur-Belon in Brittany, I had heard about Chantal Chagny and the single mindedness that propelled her and her restaurant in Fleurie-en-Beaujolais to the upper spheres of the Michelin Guide universe. I mentioned this to Helene – that was the lady in the next table – and she quickly explained to me that Chantal’s story somehow had the touch of magic and tradition that is often discovered in the background of many French provincial restaurants. It was another good reason to visit Riec-su-Belon, which, besides its famed oysters, bisques and its delicate clarets, boasted of a magnificent auberge and the equally famous Auberge du Sep.

“What made Chantal so special?” I asked Helene, beginning to smell the development of a good story and perhaps an exciting friendship.

“Her obsession. We French have many obsessions but they are never put ahead of our own comfort, you know. My grandfather used to say that at the age of four, mind you, four years of age, she already knew what she wanted in life.”

“It seems like a little too early in life to exhibit such personal preferences.”

“It would seem so, Monsieur, but when you have a child that age asking to be allowed in the kitchen all the time instead of playing with other children, you know there is something special about that child. Such was her interest in food, wines and the refinements that go with them, that my own grandfather publicly bequeathed his own crown to Chantal when she was 10 years old.”

The story was beginning to acquire the rhythm of an interesting narrative. I was all ears.

“Please go on” I urged Helene as we continued to honor Lanversin’s delicate offerings.

She looked out the window and with a distant look in her lovely brown eyes, said:

“I recalled that her restaurant in Beaujolais, the Auberge du Sep had over the years earned Michelin’s stars and national recognition, if not international fame, and had been the subject of several feature articles. I also remembered the Bresse pigeon, the various versions of duck, partridge and pheasant and the artful manner in which complements like cabbage, mashed potatoes or small onions in wine sauce, could transform a meal into an experience not easily forgotten. And I do not forget that she went through WW2 in an area where survival was not easy”

“How did she manage during WW2?”

“The Occupation only affected her to the extent that her menus had to be limited to whatever was available in the region. She did not compromise on taste, however, and she was soon recognized as a versatile and imaginative restaurateur”

She paused to join me in another toast with that marvelous [Côte de Brouilly](#), and then continued:



“My grandfather told us about some of the incredible improvisations that she was famous for. She took advantage of the wide variety of edible vegetables in the area; even those not raised as crops, like wild asparagus and, of course, mushroom, wild berries and beets. Her inventiveness knew no ends. She was able to convince some of the locals to plant gardens with vegetables she favored; thus, the tomatoes were always fresh same as the zucchini, the corn, peas, radishes, and spinach. She applied the old adage that creativity is often the result of desperate need.”

“Tell me about those days. I understand that her fame originated during those harsh times. . . “

“Yes. The German forces in the area were not fighting troops but support units engaged in administrative matters, so that the usual rabble associated with fighting units did not have a presence in the village. Most of the troops were professional people and as such, their behavior was quite acceptable. The locals, after a while realized that the troops were there by imposition and not by choice and were both friendly and fair. They ended up being treated like tourists.”

“What happened next?”

“A very strange thing happened. One of the officers of the German detachment was a free-lance writer who secretly filed regular reports with a Swiss publication, from which it was syndicated to newspapers and magazines in Canada, Spain, the US and some publications in Latin America. While he could not mention Chantal’s restaurant by name, he made sure that some of her specialties were described and lauded so that they could not be easily forgotten. The strange thing is that a modest Swiss restaurateur followed the articles assiduously and after the war, traced the author, who had used a false name, through the publisher and from there he located the restaurant and Chantal.

“It is an extraordinary story,” I said while doing away with the last oysters on the plate.

“Well, it had a happy ending. The Swiss man married Chantal in 1950 and helped her open up a new restaurant in Beaujolais, which she called Auberge du Cep. The building had no great facilities nor conveniences but it compensated with a great scenic view of one of the most charming corners of France, Beaujolais”

As we ordered another bottle of wine she continued with Chantal’s story.

“Soon after she had opened the restaurant, she was lucky to find Maurice, a versatile and ingenious chef and in a short time her Auberge du Cep was bursting at the seams, as her coq au vin, andouillette au Beaujolais blanc and cote de boeuf bathed in red wine sauce attracted local notables, passing businessmen, wine merchants during the week and masses of wine tourists visiting the chateaux of the region during weekends.”



By some strange coincidence, we both looked at our watches at the same instant. We looked at each other and laughed. "We have lost the notion of time, as people say when they have lost the notion of time" she laughed. "It is almost evening and it's Friday!"

"Why? You have an important appointment?"

"Not at all. It is only that I had to check my mail box at the Poste and it is closed by now. Nothing important"

I had to ask her. The perspective of having dinner by myself, again, did not appeal to me and I wondered if the same occurred to her. I asked her with the best smile I could muster, but without exaggerating:

"Why don't we continue this fascinating conversation at dinner tonight?"

She smiled again with that lovely expression in her eyes and replied:

"I barely know you and I do not make a habit of picking up strange men in restaurants, except that any friend or relative of Patrick and Kathryn Deschamps is a friend of mine

At diner that evening, we continued our conversation or, rather, her careful and detailed narrative about Chandal.

"In 1973 Chandal did not seem too surprised when a client showed her the newest edition of the red Michelin Guide and announced that the **Auberge du Cep** had received a Michelin star. She hadn't even had time to open the official letter of recognition and had not even looked at the diploma that came with it. Again, in 1979, a second Michelin star was awarded to her Auberge du Cep. This time she knew it was coming and all she could do was to cry with joy. 'I didn't sleep for two months,' she said. 'I was delighted with the honor and recognition but was also filled with doubts. The restaurant was a modest installation but didn't have the staff, the atmosphere, and the decor, of a two-star restaurant. How are we going to maintain the level demanded by a two star restaurant?'"

"Chantal continued to improve what was already a superb menu and her restaurant thrived in the 80's. The death of her chef in the early nineties was a deeply felt loss not only by Chantal but also by a clientele accustomed to Maurice's unique touch."

Helene smiled at me and said:

"I hope my descriptions are helpful to you. To me, it has always been a fascinating story and I hope it is the same with you. Also, people around us must think that I have eaten a CD that can not be turned off, or that you are a handsome writer whose cat stole his tongue!"

"Helene, I am having a wonderful evening thanks to your incredible memory and your overall beauty and charm! On top of that you have related to me a story that is worth writing about. I will have to give you the appropriate credit when it is published!"

"Thank you, but I do not know if you noticed that Chandal is a favorite subject with me and has been for years. You see, people not only remember her for her outstanding cuisine but for her sense of humor and the



innumerable quotes she left for posterity. For instance, she always claimed that bread was some sort of visiting card: 'Bread tells you how important the menu is going to be and the butter served with it confirms or denies it!' Then I remember the phrase about the menu being as 'old and as new as ever'. Years ago I memorized some of the menus and used to amuse friends and acquaintances with my knowledge of ingredients and final product"

I interrupted her to ask, or rather beg:

"Please let me hear some"

She looked at me putting both her hands on the table and in a typical professorial gesture intoned:

"Let us mention the fabulous taste of the plumpest of Bresse pigeons - with that rich red meat flavor of duck and the tender moistness of farm chicken - served with confit of soft shallots on a bed of green cabbage. But that is not all, as I recall, her coq au vin may be lighter today but no less satisfying. And for selective nostalgia, there are sweetbreads in hazelnut butter and veal kidneys cooked in a sealed casserole, pan-seared chicken livers, rich country terrines and eggs poached in the fruity red wine of the Beaujolais."

I continued to be amazed by her vivid memories and the zest she attached to each description.

She also showed me that some of the specialties deserved as much praise as the main dishes. She described the delicate sauté of fresh frog's legs (from Eastern Europe, not the Dombes nearby) served with a feathery mixed salad, or a delicate ragout of shelled fresh crayfish showered with herbs.

We did not avoid talking about wines. She mentioned that Chandal had always taken special care in the selection of the wines in her cellar. Her wine cellar, while not extensive of labels, it wisely contains wines grouped by their complement to the types of food served. For instance some of the lighter Beaujolais and whites are destined for the lighter meal offerings while the stout reds of some vintage go with the more compromising stews, casseroles and roasts.

Helene reminded me that a good part of the success of the Auberge du Sep was due to Chandal's relations with her suppliers. She was fond of saying that ' a good butcher is almost as good as a good husband, as long as you make sure that clients accept tender nuggets of lamb chop cooked on the bone, perfumed with garlic' . She also obtained some of the prize cheeses from Louis Chevenet and the Broussard shops. Her country fare is so attractive that on a given day you find the mayor, the local winemaker, the school principal and other diners in search of a French auberge from days gone by. She again gave me that smile, while her eyes acquired a most appealing look and said:

"All you need is pictures for your article and you will then have a complete record of French provincial cuisine!"

I laughed and asked her:



“Do you happen to have one of those digital cameras?”

“Yes. Why?” she answered with smiling eyes, knowing what was coming.

“I have decided to drive to Beaujolais tomorrow and perhaps eat at the Auberge du Sep. You see, I feel that anyone who wishes to savor the France of long ago must visit the Auberge du Cep. Your description of the place creates the desire to enjoy its atmosphere which you so aptly describe as full of placidite. And, dear Helen, placidite is the key to enjoyment and good digestion.” I paused and then said to her:

“I am driving to Beaujolais tomorrow and I need to get some outstanding digital pictures. Would you?”

Bed and Breakfast, Lace Curtains and Charm

“Did you know that there are more than 20,000 bed and breakfast establishments in the US and Canada?”

My wife looked out the window at the magnificent view of the Chesapeake Bay and replied:

“Of course I knew that! And I also know that it is the fastest growing segment of the travel industry in this country. More than 8 billion dollars are spent a year in Bed & Breakfast lodgings.”

“How did you know all that?”

“I’m reading the same article you have been reading, my sweet!”

The B&B on the Bay, where we had decided to spend a long week-end, more than justified the exhaustive search we had undertaken. We would not settle for less than a B&B that would meet our requirements at least halfway. It also justified the long trip from Richmond and a discreet absence from professional obligations.

We found what we looked for. A charming colonial mansion, complete with portico, columns and an ancient coach house that had been converted into several ample studios. Impeccable grounds and a marvelous view of the Bay. Besides, the postcard quality did not end there. There was a sense of peace and tranquility that matched perfectly the surroundings and also the cheerful interior. Added to that, additional charm appeared in the person of the owners of the place. Col (ret) and Mrs. Armbruster, were the perfect hosts. We felt that we had found a home away from home.

So far, B&B’s have never disappointed us. And it has spurred us to try remote areas of the country where other traditions and other customs have given us a better insight into the essence of the republic itself. We have stayed in converted schoolhouses, old farmhouses, modernized warehouses, Queen Anne Victorian homes and mansions, barns and an occasional adobe house. We have



not missed the log cabin and the floating barge. We have stayed in the so called country inns, where the emphasis is on the evening meals. Also in countless Bed and Breakfast establishment, where breakfast is more than just a meal but a convivial social occasion with all the cozy elements of a family reunion.

Naturally, we have even tried a few home stay places where a single room and a bathroom down the hall are the usual fare. Common to all is the informal cordiality of the owners or managers, and the willingness to provide the necessary comforts. And this includes enlightened conversation and first hand information about the area, its traditions, points of interests and best places to eat.

“Listen” said my wife as she sipped the pre-breakfast champagne and orange juice the Col. had gracefully sent up with a basket of fruit. “I’ve been thinking.” She raised the flute and continued:

“Why don’t you ask the good Colonel to let us keep the room for another couple of days?”

“I already have!”
