

Ripeness Is All

I went to my barber last week. This is always an occasion. The last time I visited him was just before I set out with Frank in October for the Grand Tour of France. I can get away with this, more or less, because I have my hair cut short. Then I can ignore it until I trip over it getting out of bed.

My barber always comments on how long it's been, in both senses. This time he said, "You don't really like to get a haircut until your old one is past its sell-by date. I'll bet you like your cheese the same way." Enthusiastic affirmative from me. "I've got a Stilton I was given for Christmas. That's since you had a haircut, and it's already high."

I was shocked. "You've let it sit around cut (unlike my hair) for over two months? Don't you like Stilton?"

"No, I don't" he said. "Do you want it? I've got a fridge here. I can keep it in 'til you come for it. But don't wait for your next haircut! I'd have the health inspectors down on me!"

Today I dropped by to pick it up - gingerly. It looked mean. When I got it home and opened it I had to chase it around the kitchen, tackle it, and stuff it back in the box. Just the way I like it.

I acquired this degraded taste at my father's knee. In Fall River he used to drop in regularly at the local German butcher, who would give him the left-over Limburger that had got so ornery that even the first-generation immigrants wouldn't touch it. "It's better than that sissy stuff," he would assure me. "You just have to get it past your nose." He felt the same about salads. A wooden salad bowl, he declared, should have the aroma of a well-stocked hotel garbage can.

Next door to my barber is our butcher. In an effort to stay solvent in the BSE Age, he's not only selling organic free-range meat and poultry, but he's also opened a cheese counter. It's basically good stuff, but he can't legally sell cheese that's actually ready to eat. Most of it has a sell-by date which is well before it has reached maturity. And so his discriminating customers must order what they want in advance, take it home, and keep it until, officially, it's well past the time to throw it away.

ARTISTS today know that feeling. Everything comes straight from the factory, wrapped in plastic and guaranteed sterile. You can rest assured that when you open it up and examine it, you won't get any nasty surprises. In the bad old days, works of art were liable to be infected. They might cause emotional, even social upheavals. People would riot in the streets, sometimes even slaughter each other. Revolutionaries would storm the barricades, love-sick youths throw themselves from bridges, nuns writhe before the altar in ecstasy.

People made or collected art because it related to the most important things in their lives. Many preferred it to the "real thing". And not just the perverted, the destitute and the desperate: Max Beerbohm writes of meeting Henry James in the street one day and refusing an invitation to tea because he'd just acquired James' latest novel and couldn't wait to read it.

A song needs time to ripen, to mature, to grow the mold cultures of association. It's a hedgerow, supporting many invisible forms of life. For me, a single phrase from Canteloube's arrangements of Songs of the Auvergne calls up memories of the great formal room at College of the Pacific where a dignified old lady played us, on request, our choices from the Carnegie Collection of 78s, which included the original Madeleine Grey recording. Then, layer on layer, there come further associations: next the gutsy Netania Davrath recording for Vanguard, sung in the original dialect, complete for the first time, on two LPs; then my discovery of cantal cheese; then the austere purity of Arlene Auger's recording for Virgin CD; then at last visiting the Auvergne and searching for hidden corners not taken over by the tourist industry; and finally, within the past few days, discovering for the first time that the songs are also seminal for a dear friend of thirty years.

These are profound human needs. All the forces of a vast multi-national entertainment industry cannot dispel them. Though the official arbiters of taste no longer require the rising generations to study anything prior to the 20th century, a remnant of the old scholars commit the classics to memory, like the fugitives in Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 431". And there are kids today who turn off the radio in disgust and get out one of their laboriously assembled collection of LPs dating back to the pop scene in San Francisco in the 60s, when they were playing because they had to, not for money: Jefferson Airplane, Janice Joplin, Big Brother and the Holding Company, The Grateful Dead. These records were made by real people who persuaded producers to release them, not synthesized out of gleams in an ad-man's eye. Will today's pop industry yield anything other than aesthetic pollution? Would they be able to support a mold culture? I'm glad I won't be around to find out.

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