

Newsweek

May 16, 2005

Periscope

FOOD

Appetite For the U.S.A.

THE OYSTERS HAVE arrived, sparkling; drawn, the chef explains, from the Chesapeake, where the Chincoteague, the Rappahannock and the York rivers meet. "So they're from the northern neck of Virginia!" Johnny Apple happily exclaims, relieved at having placed the source of his lunch. Provenance matters to this political journalist turned food writer whose just-published book, "Apple's America," is a cultivated, quirky guide for the curious traveler. Its T-shirt motto could be: PEOPLE CAN AND SHOULD BE A LITTLE INTERESTED IN EVERYTHING.

Apple's everything includes knowing the names of the country's hottest conductors and an appreciation of the edgiest new museum architects. Opera matters, as does



WHAT'S COOKING? Apple reviews his lunch plans with Equinox chef Todd Gray

such social reality as the recent parking-lot clubbing of an African-American in Cincinnati, or that "the rivers of asphalt that Detroit laid down to handle the cars it built ... turned out to be the exit ramps for most of the city's white population." Not the stuff of ordinary travel guides, but deft cultural portraits that bring 40

cities to life under his fond scrutiny. Essays tie together deep history, ethnic distinctiveness and cultural differences with the genius of synthesis that made R. W. Apple for decades The New York Times's go-to guy for news analysis. Now enjoying favored-nation status at the Times as a roving food journalist, Apple opened

his little black books to write this one. Out spilled notes made over 40 years of shoulder-rubbing and elbow-bending with local politicians from coast to coast. When a man's got to cover the country, a man's gotta eat. And eat well. So the recommendations and observations that tumble from his pages are to be heeded (box). And while he eagerly seeks out the funky in food, he obviously believes life's too short for a bad bed: hotel listings have a high ratio of Four Seasons.

Apple's assessments are, in a snarky world, surprisingly generous.

"That goes back to my antipathy towards 'gotcha' journalism," he says. "I made my reputation at the Times during the Vietnam War by opposing the conventional wisdom. I wasn't writing opinion pieces. I love food, and I thought food writing was very long on opinion and very short on reporting." Something else entered the equation: disillusionment. "Politicians are now free to posture more and think

less. One of the great props of journalism, that makes it fun and make people read it, is the people. There are wonderful people in food. Intellectually and emotionally, it's a window into ways of life, national traditions. Got to be careful, though," he edits himself. "It can sound incredibly heavy, like a sociology professor ruining a good poem." And then he's back on the road for his book tour, clearly relishing the ceremony, loving the opportunity to stir the pot as well as lick the spoon.

—DOROTHY KALINS

DELICIOUS DOZEN A Critic's Road Trip

Never uncomfortable at a 4-star table, Apple has an uncanny instinct for the authentic. Highlights of his 40-city tour:

ATLANTA: WHERESHO? "Scott Peacock, protégé and companion of Edna Lewis, the high priestess of Southern cooking, holds her banner high in his delightful little restaurant, once a gas station."

BOSTON: SEAMUS SHACK "There's not much that Jasper White, a jovial giant of a chef from New Jersey, doesn't know about New England seafood."

CHARLESTON: HENRY SHILL "... as unpretentious as they come—a former barbershop ... but everyone in town knows how good and fairly priced it is."

CHICAGO: FRIENTEN ESKLAND TOPFISBERG "You could spend a lifetime in Oaxaca and know less about Mexican food than you can learn at these restaurants."

DALLAS: JENK'S STEAKS "At this concrete-block shack ... You could slice the atmosphere with a knife; for the beef, you don't need one."

HONOLULU: SAM CHOY'S SHAMING-HEAD "Sam Choy, a big man with a bigger heart, is the sole Hawaiian superchef born in the islands ... Portions are daunting."

KANSAS CITY: APRIL'S BREAK! BARRACUDA "I always prepare myself for the letdown that never comes. For me this remains the best of Kansas City's eighty barbecue joints."

LOS ANGELES: VALENTINO "... I know no better Italian restaurant in the United States ... put yourself in the hands of Piero Selvaggio, the warmhearted owner."

LOUISVILLE: BARTO'S "... salty, chewy country ham ... absolutely greaseless chicken ... mashed potatoes better than your grandmother's ... Oh my."

NEW ORLEANS: SALTONE'S "... ceiling fans, no reservations, waiters with attitude: the older order changeth not at Galatoire's, thank the Lord."

SAN FRANCISCO: DINI CAFE "A friend of mine calls Judy Rodgers's Spartan cafe, with copper bar and roaring wood oven, 'the soul of San Francisco.' It is."

WASHINGTON, D.C.: EDWARDS "Todd Gray ... quickly emerged as the city's most assiduous forager for ingredients ... the fattest chickens, the ripest tomatoes, the most delicate spring lamb ..."

