

## The Whole World on a Plate

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*Susan Willis*

**T**he Las Vegas buffet! Even if you're losing, it's there for the taking—a limitless bounty. The atmosphere textured with mouth-watering carbs and succulent oils, the aromas laced with sugar and spice, the sounds of quiet conversation, cutlery, and chewing—yes! This is capitalism's dream of unimpeded consumption. And I'm ready to dig in—foot long papaya strips, crab legs that all but walk onto my plate; every pan brimming, begging me to scoop. Too bad my stomach doesn't have a storage annex, something like a basement or attic, or one of those PODs that people park in their driveways to handle the overflow from their houses. As the epitome of a society built on disposable commodity consumption, the all-you-can-eat Las Vegas buffet bundles the abundance of magically produced goods with the dilemma of over-supply.

Imagine an IHOP on a Sunday morning—the parking lot jammed, people crowded around the cash register, packed into the miniscule waiting area, spilling out the front door; all this just to get a table! Now consider the buffet at the Excalibur in Las Vegas, where three to four thousand eager diners are seated for breakfast everyday. The logistics of mass consumption are astounding. Thankfully, I was not waiting in line at the Excalibur. Instead, I had chosen the more modest Harrah's buffet.

Typical of Las Vegas' 60 buffets, the waiting area outside Harrah's "Flavora" is a dead zone. Unlike the sensory overload of the casino floor, the waiting area is home to a patient herd of docile guests. Even though all anticipate a sumptuous feed, no one pushes or jostles. Many murmur in mooring conversation, barely heard over the casino's busy ring tones. Swaying from side to side, the troop of expectant eaters attempts to ease their weary feet. The wait-time will be a half hour to 45 minutes and there are no in-line distractions, like those at Disney World where video monitors and costumed characters turn a zig-zagging queue into an extension of the amusement. Did the designers of the buffet intend the regimented tedium of the line as a way of accentuating the pleasure of the buffet itself? Or, did they assume that, having learned how to abide airport security, visitors to Las Vegas are immune to boredom? I noticed that no one broke ranks to bail out of the wait and return to the casino floor.

I've learned to distract tedium with observation; so, I turned my attention to those around me. A few were trundling rollerboard suitcases—a last meal before takeoff? I guess no one fears a bomb in the buffet, as there are no

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metal detectors or security checkpoints. A great many diners were trundling disproportionately large bodies. Admittedly, I'm a small person, but I couldn't help but notice the exceptional height and girth of the majority of my fellow line-mates. Just ahead, a ginger-haired family of four overwhelmed me with the combined weight of their broad shoulders, thick torsos, and heavy legs. Jovial and chatty, they were soon joined by two more family members—equally big and ginger-haired. Just behind, a black man and his wife towered over me—both of them double my weight. The man, genial and loquacious, struck up a conversation. He explained that he and his wife were from Cleveland, that Vegas is their favorite vacation destination, and Harrah's their favorite buffet. Then he popped the question: did I know how to eat—lay off the fat and go for the meat? I told him my downfall was the pasta, that I always put way too much of it on my plate and hardly have room for anything else. He smiled in commiseration. Clearly pasta was not going to slow him down.

As I turned to face the head of the line in the vain hope of detecting some movement, I recalled the oft-repeated refrain from my childhood, that Americans are growing taller and bigger as each generation outstrips its parents and Old World forbearers. The Harrah's buffet line upheld the conventional wisdom. But, did my parent's generation realize that rather than a superhuman race of giants, we'd just become overweight? Yes, there were those two svelte twentysomethings to give the lie to societal obesity. Cocooned in shimmering evening dresses, they seemed out of place amongst the middle aged and heavy crowd. I later saw them in the serving area, gingerly tweezing single leaves of lettuce onto their plates. Giggling, they tried to spear one spaghetti noodle, one broccoli floret, one shrimp out of the gumbo. Unlike the ladlers and pilers, they had turned the all-you-can-eat buffet into an anorexic's game of pick-and-choose.

Musing over the people in line, I realized I had finally arrived at the cashier, only to discover that a second line formed to my left—this, the line to actually be seated. Apparently, the buffet maintains the formality of a hostess to direct diners to designated tables. I suppose if we all just trooped in, the crush would resemble a Wal-Mart on a busy Saturday afternoon. There is also a waitstaff, charged with pouring our requested beverage and with whisking away our soiled plate, even those still piled with food that we appear to no longer want. Thus, we can speed back to the serving line with a clean plate and an equally clean conscience—no starving Armenians to hold us guilty for uneaten morsels. If you choose unwisely or choose too much of one thing, don't worry about it. Just choose again. After all,

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capitalism is all about free choice. And unlike shopping at the supermarket, drug store, or Wal-Mart where an unwanted purchase can mean a bothersome trip to the customer service counter for a refund, the buffet instantly cancels our bad choices with new ones.

American culture is always new—new products, new applications, new styles, even a whole new you. Over and over again, we get to experience the new as a first time event. I remember the first time I walked into a Wal-Mart store and nearly keeled over. The elderly “greeter” all but pushed his face into mine. Behind him, aisles jam-packed with bright packaging extended to the store’s horizon, and all about shoppers maneuvered their brimming carts. My kids, on a quest for new school supplies, tugged at my arms. Apparently, their internal GPS units had already located the notebooks, pencils, and crayons; while I, befuddled and unable to read the store’s merchandizing topography, feebly sought directions from an employee. Granted, I’m not a born shopper, as are my children and their entire generation. So, I was not dismayed when my local Wal-Mart was chastised for handing out campaign literature for Elizabeth Dole, thus giving me a political reason to drop Wal-Mart from my shopping itinerary.

I thought I had put Wal-Mart well behind me; but now, faced with Harrah’s buffet, I found myself reliving my initial foray into the big box store. There was just too much of everything—hundreds of people seated in ever expanding and randomly situated eating areas, dozens more swarmed like ants on sorties to the serving line, while countless others disappeared from view, folded into the line’s sinuous curves. Unlike the aisle arrangement of a big box store, where commodities are offered up in regimented fashion, the serving line at Harrah’s consumes the consumer, inviting each to wallow in the sights, aromas, and anticipated tastes.

While I may have been ill prepared for Wal-Mart, I’m no stranger to self-service eating. In North Carolina, where I live, Golden Corral is the buffet of choice. At half the price of a Las Vegas buffet, Golden Corral herds diners into a bounteous world of tummy filling fare—mac and cheese, mashed potatoes, hush puppies, fried chicken and fish, steaks and roasts, salads smothered in creamy dressing, puffy dinner rolls, and vats of Cool Whip. What a challenge! Those who choose wisely and begin with soup, salad, and a dinner roll may be finished before the entrée. Really big eaters might begin with the meats and side dishes and never have room for the dessert. Since “all you can eat” is never all that you see, why not just begin with dessert and work backwards? Golden Corral makes every meal a

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Thanksgiving Day spread. Sadly, we can't store the leftovers in Tupperware for a week's worth of refrigerated meals. No wonder so many buffet diners can be seen squirreling tasty items into their coat pockets and handbags. The elderly on fixed incomes are especially adept. Like the two women I observed one Sunday afternoon at the Golden Corral near my house. Primly dressed, as if they had just come from church, both had a copious handbag stowed on her lap. One used paper napkins to wrap individual food items, before depositing them in her purse. The other took a more direct approach. She had lined her purse with a plastic shopping bag and proceeded to drop things in without recourse to daintiness. Both women were mindful of the waitstaff, who patrolled the dining area with pitchers of sweet tea. They cautiously slid items from plate to purse only when they saw the waitstaff occupied elsewhere.

The notion of an all-you-can-eat buffet teases consumers with the possibility of beating the system by getting more than we pay for. Because we pay up front and there are no barcodes or dollar signs to mar the foods on offer, everything presents itself as if free for the taking. Not so at a cafeteria, which is the historical antecedent of the buffet. Cafeterias offered their bounty on a strict unit pricing system. The more you took, the more you paid. And some items definitely cost more than others. I remember my family's excursions to the cafeteria in the 50s—a wonderland in chrome and glass, where food items beckoned from shelves behind hygienic plate-glass windows. Diners reached under the plate-glass to secure their choices. Many choices were pre-sliced or pre-spooned onto plates. Others were dished up by scrupulous servers, whose ladles measured out the same amount to every customer. Because each item had its price, the fun of sliding a tray along the line and letting oneself be tempted by every appealing item had to be reckoned against the reality of the cost that the vigilant cashier would ring up at the end of the line. "Your eyes are bigger than you stomach," admonished my parents, whose Depression era upbringing instructed them in the practice of consuming within their means. No wonder cafeterias have all but disappeared from the landscape. They represented a moment in the historical development of the consumer when desires still had to be factored against needs. They also pre-dated payment by credit card, a time when consumers had to make choices according to cash on hand. As a child, my eyes were truly bigger than my stomach and they went straight to the chiffon pies at the end of the serving line—lime green, lemony yellow, or deep chocolate, each with a swirl of cream on top. In putting it all on view, the cafeteria was already tempting consumers to want beyond their means. "Would you like a Jell-O?" Clearly, my mother thought she was being extravagant in offering

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me a dessert. She would never consider a chiffon pie, much less imagine that I might desperately want one. Her eyes could look and not really see.

I think my mother may have eaten at one of history's landmark cafeterias: Clifton's in downtown L.A. I know she had a special fondness for cafeteria style eating, and Clifton's opened its doors in 1935 just about the time my mother's family moved to Los Angeles from Brooklyn. The original restaurant featured a themed environment that not only lifted diners out of the Depression but out of L.A. itself and dropped them Oz-like into a redwood forest complete with a waterfall and wildlife. While the original restaurant no longer exists, photos of its Art Deco façade and fantasy interior rival Disneyland for saturation of design, and suggest that Disney's dreams had more to do with Hollywood kitsch than the Brothers Grimm.

As a product of the Depression, Clifton's boasted the motto, "Dine free unless Delighted." Indeed, accounts of cafeterias throughout the Depression, and particularly in hard hit areas in the south, are rife with stories of cheap food for the destitute masses and leftovers served after hours and out the back door to the penniless.

The origin of cafeterias can be traced to the boom and bust economy of the California Gold Rush. San Francisco in 1849 seethed with hungry prospectors—all of them burning calories and none of them producing food. The need to provide quick, but substantial food for the laboring masses found its solution in the Mexican "*cafeterías*" that dotted the city's barrios and side streets, offering simple fare and pots of coffee. Much like the barbeque—derived from "barbacoa"—cafeterias migrated out of Mexico with the southwest's Hispanic workforce—the one to provide for cowboys on long overland cattle drives, and the other to service the urban working classes.

What perpetuated the cafeteria as a cultural form from the Gold Rush to the Depression is as much aspirational as it is practical. Yes, the masses needed to be fed; and no one understood that better than Clifford Clinton, founder of Clifton's Cafeterias, who went on to develop soy as the basis of what he called "Meals for Millions." His chain of cafeterias provided as much food for thought as for hungry stomachs. The redwood forest conjured lush refuge, the glass and chrome spoke to faith in progress and American industrial might, and the treasure of food on display summoned prospects of bounty. The nation might have been in the depths of economic depression, but the cafeteria—like a space capsule projected into the future—preserved the dream of American plenty.

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Now, fast forward into the barren landscape of southern Nevada. This is where the cafeteria comes back to earth and transforms itself into the amazing all-you-can-eat Las Vegas buffet. As if history were repeating itself, the Strip swells with hungry masses prospecting for gold. Every visitor's vacation is a tale of boom or bust, played out against the backdrop of the larger US economy that threatens nationwide recession even while the stock market takes its wealthy investors on a rollercoaster ride. Here, the all-you-can-eat buffet offers respite from worries over financial insecurity and commodity scarcity. There may never be enough money in our paychecks or in the government's "economic stimulus package" to pay down the interest-accruing debt on the nation's credit cards, but there will always be unlimited bounty at the Las Vegas buffet.

Boom, bust, and a burgeoning labor force—these may not be the only factors that contributed to the development of cafeteria style eating, both in Los Angeles and in its later reincarnation in Las Vegas. L.A. in the 30s was one of the most corrupt cities in the nation. It certainly rivaled Las Vegas, during that city's Mob dominated period, for protection rackets, prostitution, and extortion—all of it run out of the Mayor's office and overseen by the city's police. It took a Grand Jury investigation, a special recall election, and the indictments of numbers of police officers to end Mayor Shaw's campaign to turn the city into a private money mill. Was it coincidental that the drive to rid the city of its corrupt bosses was spearheaded by cafeteria mogul, Clifford Clinton? Or, did the aspirations of all the common people who dined in his restaurants somehow manifest themselves in his efforts? Clinton's civic crusade was not without grave personal risk. His house was bombed by members of LAPD, as was the car driven by his private investigator. Narrowly escaping death, the latter testified from a wheelchair. No wonder Raymond Chandler, father of the hard boiled detective genre, had such a predilection for Clifton's Cafeteria.

Did the mobster moguls of the 50s, who turned Las Vegas into a gambling mecca, wholly underestimate the importance of the buffet? Or, did they grasp its aspirational value and opt to limit it by sidelining the buffets? For whatever reason, the entrepreneurial casino bosses of the 50s saw the buffets as a basic pit stop for players who needed a quick calorie fix without the hassle of casting about the Strip for food. Because the casinos made their real money at the tables and on the machines, the food was cheap. If it was also unremarkable—well, all the more reason not to linger over it.

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In sharp contrast, today's buffets are as much a reason for going to Las Vegas as the casinos and the dream of a big win. Diners sample the different buffets and can be overheard offering comparisons. Some write on-line food reviews and others advertise discount coupons to the buffets for sale on eBay. But no matter how many buffets a particular visitor might have tried, each and every diner I queried always responded, "This one's the best."

Such was the case one evening when I attempted a conversation with a party of four seated next to me in Paris' "Le Village" buffet. I was with my daughter who had spent her Study Abroad year in Dijon, so an excursion into things French seemed a logical choice. The décor summons up a French village of yesteryear, complete with provincial storefronts, flowery window boxes, and dirndled waitresses. National pride infuses the serving area, which offers a pedagogical tour of five of France's regional cuisines. Thus, Brittany serves up coq au vin and crepes; Normandy, quiche and steamed mussels; Burgundy, boeuf bourguignon; Provence, ravioli and ratatouille; and Alsace, fondue and braised duck. As for the salads, cheeses, and desserts, these are set apart, the latter in their own little Hansel and Gretel-style sugar house.

The foursome seated next to us was reluctant to enter into conversation. Perhaps, they were put off by my daughter's enthusiasm. She had just returned to our table after a preliminary excursion to the serving line to announce, "It's marvelous, and totally vegetarian friendly!" The foursome, either incurious or unimaginative, were working their way through platefuls of meat. No braised eggplant or zucchini for them; although one had a few snails rolling about with the beef. Undaunted and trying to figure out why they were so wedded to meat when "Le Village" tempts its diners with a host of unique possibilities, I chatted on, explaining that this was my daughter's first trip to Vegas. I asked if they came often. A few vague murmurs seemed to imply a "yes." I mentioned that my daughter and I are fans of the buffets and wondered if they had any special tips. Clearly annoyed by two chatty vegetarians, they dove deeper into their plates, stoically chewing to avoid having to give a response. Finally, one of the men and a woman I took for his wife began to open up. Between mouthfuls from her second and his third plate, the man let on that the four of them were from Rochester and they try to get to Las Vegas a couple of times a year. Through half sentences and a fair number of grunts and murmurs, I gathered that the four considered themselves buffet connoisseurs. In their judgement, "Paris was best on the Strip," although "some days are better than others." I found it odd that Paris ranked at the top of their list, when so many of "Le Village's" regional specialties went unsampled by the Rochesterites. Gazing

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at our own plates, I realized that my daughter and I had progressed to dessert and that we had each chosen four, which we divided in half and shared for a total of eight sweet delights apiece. Sugar is definitely the vegetarian's bane.

Why do we choose what we choose? It's true that I have a sweet tooth and can't help but indulge it, especially when tempted with petit fours and chocolate mousse. But, what about the meat eaters? Do they have an analogous taste-driven desire for roast beef au jus? Or, are we all just playing Supermarket Sweep? Like contestants on the TV game show that premiered in the mid 60s, we bolt into the serving area. Instead of racing about with a shopping cart, we ply the line, tray in hand. And just like the Supermarket Sweepers, we don't just grab everything. I remember the televised players racing to the frozen food section—there to toss four or five turkeys into their cart; then on to the meats where they stuffed T-bones and fillet mignons into the nooks and crannies between the turkeys. Some players headed straight to the toiletries, over-the-counter-drugs, and Pampers. On the game show, choice was a simple matter of price, with the victory going to the contestant whose shopping cart totaled the highest dollar amount at the end of the frantic spree. The show taught viewers and contestants alike that winning means equating taste with expense. In a commodified society such as ours, where wanting is channeled into buying and where value means price, how can we not want what costs the most?

Dinner at "Le Village" comes to \$24.99 per person. I wonder if the foursome from Rochester managed to consume \$100 dollars worth of meat between them. Or, for that matter, did my daughter and I come close to \$50 dollars in sweets and veggies? Is it possible that any of us let ourselves be guided by taste alone? Or, did we all heed a system of unseen price stickers—ingrained over numerous trips to the supermarket—that ranks the sweets as extravagant and therefore valuable, and the meats as just plain pricey?

If Paris offers its diners five regional cuisines, the other Las Vegas buffets aim to deliver the whole world on a plate. A trip down the serving line is a little like a themed ride at an amusement park. Diners journey past the well known food landmarks—the big hams, vats of potatoes, and side dishes—then wind their way through the ethnic offerings: dishes from Asia, Mexico, Italy, and the Cajun bayou. Often the ethnic foods are designated as such, framed with paper flowers or fiesta napkins. These alert diners to their encounter with diversity. As you may expect, the Mexican food zone includes do-it-yourself tacos with crisp taco shells and pre-cut fillings displayed in a

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cluster of serving trays. Then there's the tamale pie—a mound of savory ground beef, layered with corn meal, and smothered in melted and congealed cheese—all of it bathed under the heat lamp's red glow. Chips, refrieds and guacamole offer the possibility of nachos or a tostada. We all know how to assemble the ingredients and how they will taste, because we've all dined at a Mexican restaurant somewhere in the U.S.A.

The Asian food items are equally recognizable—egg rolls, sweet 'n' sour chicken, stir-fried vegetables with bits of beef, or chicken, or shrimp. Similarly, the Italian offerings strike a familiar chord—fettuccini alfredo, pizza, bowtie pasta salad, meatballs in a rich tomato sauce, and bowls full of grated parmesan to top it all off. So, too, with the Cajun, where a couple of versions of gooey gumbo compete with the steamed crab legs. And, last but not least, there's the obligatory sushi. In all my trips to Las Vegas, I have yet to encounter a buffet that doesn't include sushi. Even Paris, with its rigorous attention to traditional national cuisines, proudly offers sushi, prepared on the spot by a presumably world class sushi chef.

Notwithstanding their familiarity, these foods were once foreign to the mainstream American palate. Now, they're our favorite ethnic cuisines. Walk into any shopping mall and let your nose guide you to the food court. There, you will find the foods of our immigrant brothers and sisters sandwiched in between the Coney Island dogs and frozen yogurt treats. Thus, Panda Express shares counter space with Sbarro, Wendy's, N.C. Bar B Q, and Baja Bistro. All vie for the shopper's taste buds and wallet.

What's interesting about buffet style eating and what distinguishes it from the mall's food court is that the buffet invites us to sample everything and to put it all on the same plate. At the mall, we're faced with a choice: do I want a calzone or a burger and fries? At the buffet, our choice is cumulative: do I want a taco, and some of that cheesy pasta, and what about a bit of rice and stir-fry? The plate brings it all together. Spoonfuls from a dozen separate dishes collide, then merge. Overambitious diners begin to pile foods on top of foods until their crowded plates threaten to overflow. The plate is a culinary epicenter, where all the world's possibilities slide into a homogeneous mass that no one would mistake for fusion food. But, hey, as we probably once told our Mom, as we swallowed a gluey mound of mashed potatoes studded with peas, "It all goes to the same place."

Besides, at the buffet, it's all cooked in the same kitchen—and most of it probably by Latinos. The mega kitchens that serve the casino hotels differ

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only in scale from kitchens all across America whose employees are largely immigrant and predominantly Hispanic. Here, in my hometown, the Vietnamese lunch counter greets diners with rich aromas and a demure Asian serving staff. But every pot that emerges from the kitchen is carried by a latino, who doesn't appear to speak English—or for that matter, Vietnamese—but who has clearly mastered the art of cooking in woks. When I first saw such a man hoist a heavy pot of kung pao chicken and pour it into the serving tray, I was struck by what I took for an incongruity. But isn't it the height of ethnocentrism to imagine that the ethnicity of cooks and cuisines must match like the icons in a child's lotto game? Besides, no one seems to question the thousands of Anglo chefs and their dilettante wannabes, who have no qualms about learning and mastering the foods of other people in other places.

Try to imagine a Las Vegas buffet without its ethnic offerings. Erase those colorful corn kernels and red peppers, stifle the savory aromas, soften the piquant tastes, and do away with the fun of making your own taco. What's left is the rich and bland. How better to express America's dilemma—rich, but bland. We want the diversity of palate that comes with our immigrant populations, but we don't necessarily want the bearers of diversity to stick around. "Send them back!" "Keep them out!" Do the vigilante Minutemen, who shout these slogans and devote their weekends to building and patrolling sections of fence along the border with Mexico, scrupulously avoid pit stops at Taco Bell? Or, for that matter, when the residents of Hazelton, PA. and Escondido, CA., my childhood home, passed ordinances to penalize landlords who rent to so called "illegals," did they remember to decree that tacos henceforth be renamed "freedom sandwiches?"

The daunting task faced by all ant-immigrant ranters is to assiduously distinguish the foreign from the American. But what the Las Vegas buffet makes clear is that the best of America has been becoming foreign for a long time. If the ethnic foods in the buffet are familiar, it's because America has lived with them for more than a hundred years. They came with the Mexicans who herded cattle throughout the southwest, the Acadians who migrated out of Quebec to fuse with bayou culture, the Italians who cut the stone for our monumental skyscrapers, and the Asians who helped build the Transcontinental Railroad.

I've been on the planet long enough to remember a time in my hometown when the now familiar ethnic still had a tinge of the foreign. I imagine some places in the Midwest are only now beginning to experience what it

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means to be a cultural crossroads—something I took for granted as a native Californian. Growing up in Escondido in the 50s, I was pleased that my family frequented the town's two non-Anglo eateries. One boasted a neon sign that glowed the words: "Chinese American." It featured beef, chicken, and pork versions of chow mein and chop suey as well as egg rolls, fried wontons, and of course, the crackle of crispy fried noodles that you could sprinkle on top of everything. Best of all, were the delightful little white paper boxes with wire handles. The packaging made eating Chinese like opening a present.

Lupita's was Escondido's other ethnic restaurant. A Mexican "*lonchería*," Lupita's had migrated out of the barrio and across the highway that separated the Mexican and Anglo parts of town. Diners at Lupita's could gaze across four lanes of blacktop and see the pastel houses of the barrio, without ever leaving the familiarity of Mainstreet. The restaurant's "A" inspection rating stood as reassurance against mental images of the sorts of things sold in the barrio markets, particularly the organ rich meat market, where spleens, tripe, and enormous beef tongues were commonplace.

Lupita's is where I discovered "huevos rancheros"—a dish that, so far, hasn't made the transition to fast food. It's just too messy to be eaten in a car. Imagine two fried eggs soon to be pierced by your fork, then stirred into a savory blend of beans and salsa—all of it piled on griddle-warm corn tortillas. For the Anglo population of Escondido, Lupita's was familiar without being assimilated. Other than the A 'n' W Root Beer Stand and the Car Hop with its roller skating waitresses, there was no fast food—much less, a Taco Bell. Mexican food belonged to the Mexican people. It was ours only as consumers. Similarly, we took in the language. How could we not, when the speech and music filled the air? It wafted above the groves when the truckloads of workers arrived to harvest the citrus and avocados. Spanish was the language of schoolyard gossip, aimed at "güeras" like me; and it boomed out of every other AM station.

Sadly, I was an imperfect speaker, never able to decipher the entire storyline of "Superhombre," or the juiciest—if not, meanest—bits whispered about me. So, Lupita's smacked of the exotic. And not the least, because the window sills above all the booths were lined with giant taxidermy frogs—each holding a musical instrument in its delicately elongated frog fingers, each with its lips coarsely stitched in a grin. I see those frogs to this day—haunting reminders that another culture's kitsch was my ineffably foreign.

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Out on the Las Vegas Strip, the architecture pays homage to the foreign. If a plate of food at the buffet can deliver a microcosm of the world, then the Strip offers the world in macrocosm. But have no fear. This is not the world seething with ethnic violence, torn by economic disparity, decimated by famine and sickness, and wounded by war. No, it's the comfortably safe world of pastiche, where everything that's unique and different in the real world is reduced to a quote, much like the Americanized version of ethnic cuisine found in the buffets. At Paris, the Eiffel Tower abrupts out of the casino floor, through the roof, and into the Las Vegas skyline. The Luxor condemns its guests to life inside the steeply pitched walls of a pyramid. The Venetian captivates visitors with its version of the famous canals complete with gondolas and gondoliers. The Bellagio's aristocratic façade is offset by a crowd pleasing computerized water show, set to the strains of popular Italian ballads. Caesar's Palace offers the Roman Forum, colonized by upscale shops like Prada and Gucci. Mandalay Bay is vaguely and non-specifically tropical. And, Rio features the nightmarish wishfulfillment of Mardi-Gras everyday of the year.

Can any of this be called exotic, or is it all just plain over-the-top? Clearly, no one who visits Las Vegas is apt to imagine themselves in any of the real places that the architecture quotes. This is true even in the Venetian, where visitors stare spellbound at the ceiling whose play of light and drifting clouds give the appearance of an evening sky. Unlike tourists at Disney World's EPCOT, who remark that their sojourns in the park's replicas of France and Germany made them feel as if they were really there without the discomfiture of actual travel, visitors to Las Vegas know they're in Vegas and only want to be in Vegas. In fact, all the references to the world outside merely confirm that it's all just Vegas. Of course, sticklers are apt to remark that some places are absent from the Strip—most notably, China and Russia. Others may see the presence of the purely corporate (MGM Grand) and the egotistical (Steve Wynn and Donald Trump's casinos) as distractions from the otherwise World's Fair ambience. If the Strip subsumes the world, it does so unevenly and incompletely. It has no need to document the world in its entirety, because it is the world.

In imposing itself on the desert, marooned in a sea of sand, Las Vegas suggests a world unto itself. A night flight into the city confirms its apparent isolation—an island of light ringed by the void-like dark. It's a conceit born of hubris, which is wholly contradicted by the city's absolute dependence on the wider world whose riches flow into Las Vegas in a steady stream, like plankton sucked down the maw of a giant whale. Here, the wealth of the

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world's production—the meat, the fish, the fancy out-of-season fruits and vegetables, the butter, eggs, milk, and ice cream, the coffee, sugar, and don't forget the chocolate—all does “go to the same place;” drawn into the city on supply lines made of concrete that function like feeding tubes attached to a disproportionately huge stomach. The Bellagio alone runs up a food tab of a million dollars a month for its rich spread that includes 1,000 pounds of prime rib per day. Most visitors to Las Vegas never see the city's backstage feeding area, as was my lot during one of my research trips. I had been walking on the Strip and decided to take what appeared to be a shortcut to Caesar's Palace by way of an upscale mall named Fashion Show. I wouldn't call the mall labyrinthine, but its internal space seemed to expand with every step I took. With Caesar's Palace nowhere in sight, much less an egress back to the Strip, I opted for an emergency exit. Hoping for sunlight, I was dismayed to find myself in a narrow florescent green corridor where I'm sure no shopper has ever trod. With a few twists and turns, I finally arrived at a door. Dismayed once again, I emerged into sunlight, but not on the Strip. Instead, I stood perched above a massive loading dock with other docks to the right and left of me. A maze of arterial service roads snaked in multiple directions, none of which led to the Strip. Like a port where massive container ships disgorge their cargo, this no-man's-land of loading docks and truck routes embodies the topography of globalized production, wherein most of the food items we buy travel a minimum of 1500 miles from farms to our plates. Las Vegas, once a vernal meadow, now a concrete desert, is the epitome of capitalism's irrational supply chain, which wholly and precariously depends on the uninterrupted flow of cheap fossil fuel.

It would be tough—if not down right impossible—to be a locavore in Las Vegas. Unlike many towns and cities across America, where eating local is becoming a fad, Las Vegas prides itself on eating the far flung. Imagine dedicating yourself to the Hundred Mile Diet, popularized by Alisa Smith and J.B. Mackinnon, who developed a locavore regime in the food rich environs of Vancouver. Granted, March was difficult for the couple. With only beets and potatoes as fully local foodstuffs, Smith and Mackinnon survived on borscht and potato pancakes. But, spring brought plentiful greens; and summer, its bounty of fruits and vegetables. The couple's dietary experiment dramatized how regional economies that were once self-sustaining have been decimated by market driven systems of production and distribution. Thus, the environs of Vancouver that once produced wheat could not provide its dedicated locavores with a single loaf of bread. Even fish were scarce, as the markets boasted the catch from Latin America and Asia. Where the Vancouver locavores trolled independent markets and backyard

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gardens for the makings of a meal, a locavore in Las Vegas would truly be hard pressed and perhaps doomed to a repast of mirages, not unlike those drought crazed prospectors in the movies.

Luckily, there's R.C. Farms right in northern Las Vegas, ready to provide any dedicated locavore with a "porkatarian" option. A perverse 21st century realization of Clifford Clinton's dream of providing "meals for Millions," R.C. Farms feeds its hogs with recycled waste from the Las Vegas buffets—30 tons per day to be exact. Just imagine all that food brought out to the serving line, but left to languish under the heat lamps, not to mention all that food left on your plate. It's all dumped together then stirred and raked by patient R.C. Farms employees, ever on the lookout for stray utensils. The whole world, now no longer on a plate, gets churned into swill and trucked out to the farm, where it's steam sterilized and served up to the happy hogs. Fortunately, hogs have a digestive system very like our own. I wonder, though, if the 5,000 hogs at R.C. Farms are up to the task. If 4,000 humans stuff themselves at the Excalibur breakfast, can a mere 5,000 hogs finish off the leftovers? And, what about the garbage from all those other buffets? Shouldn't there be as many pigs as people?

Maybe the distinction between pigs and people is moot. After all, the pigs feed us and we feed the pigs. "It all goes to the same place"—from pig to pig, not unlike the Bible's from dust to dust. Maybe Charlton Heston had it wrong and "Soylent Green is pigs!"

What began as a meditation on how the buffet impacts the diner's waist, ends with a vision of recycled waste that again impacts the diner's waist.