

# From Religion to Restaurants

BY | JONATHAN KAUFFMAN '93

A FEW YEARS AFTER graduating from college, I discovered that I'd become embarrassed to tell people I'd majored in religious studies. (The question of my major still comes up frequently—people want to know how a restaurant critic landed his job.) I wasn't embarrassed about my education so much as concerned that I had spent all that time and other people's money pursuing personal, esoteric interests. So I'd follow up my confession with a comment like "Most impractical degree in the world, huh?" Only philosophy majors would feel the need to one-up me.

Don't get me wrong: I loved the religious studies courses I took at Macalester—Cal Roetzel's "Introduction to Hebrew Scriptures," Jim Laine's seminar on religion and caste in India, classes on American religions and the relationship between government and ritual. It was a classic case of taking one elective and ending up with a major. Seventeen years later, I'm still as fascinated by religion and spirituality as I was my senior year in college.

Not that the degree translated into a job.

Instead of heading for seminary or graduate school, I joined a pack of Mac grads then moving to San Francisco.

After a few years of puttering, I bought the best set of knives I could afford and went to work as a cook. And then I stumbled—thanks to one of those Mac friends—into writing restaurant reviews for an Oakland weekly newspaper.

After more than a decade writing for newspapers in the Bay Area and Seattle, I started telling people that my English minor was the practical part of my degree. And so I thought until two years ago, when I attended a pig slaughter and butchery class on a farm outside Seattle. Led by a local culinary teacher, the event was one of the first of its kind in the country; as both a food writer and an omnivore I felt I needed to attend.

It was a cold, clear day for a kill. Sixty of us gathered in the late morning, children darting around the lawn, adults breathing in steam from cups of spiced cider. Eventually the teacher gathered us around the pen. He nervously said a few words of respect and hoisted his rifle. Crack! The pig collapsed. We spent the afternoon

dissecting the animal's body and our feelings, which, for many of the conscientious omnivores attending the event, turned out to be less conflicted than we'd anticipated.

As I sat on the ferry back to Seattle writing up my notes, memories of my senior seminar on sacrifice began to bubble up. I thought about the books we'd read by 19th- and early 20th-century scholars such as Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss, and James Frazier. They'd theorized that the sacrificial animal served as a symbolic sponge for its killers' sins; the animal's death expunged these negative forces from the community, purifying the killers in the process.

On the other hand, the pig slaughter I'd just attended seemed to invert this dynamic—it was the *butcher* who was taking on the sins of the people witnessing the animal's death. By watching him kill a pig we then ate, we were absolving ourselves of being unconscious omnivores, people who only thought of pork as plastic-wrapped protein. In one of those rare moments writers treasure, an essay suddenly flowed from my fingers.

When the piece was published, I called my parents. "Hey, I finally used my college degree," I joked, to which they responded with wan laughter. My father has grown more supportive of my zigzagging career over the years, but he'd still love to see me go to grad school.

After I hung up the phone, though, I realized just how wrong my lame joke was, and how profoundly my four years of religious studies had shaped the way I write about food. Those classes predisposed me to look not just at ingredients but also at the symbolism imbued in them. To examine how

food trends—and our individual tastes—are shaped by larger social forces. (Hey, bacon mania doesn't just come out of nowhere.) To read the messages about politics, class, and culture that chefs convey to customers through their food. Increasingly, the mission that drives my work isn't just to find good restaurants but to discover what those restaurants say about who we are.

Telling a stranger I majored in religious studies still feels like a confession, an invitation to a more intimate conversation that neither of us wants to have. But I no longer shrug off the admission with "Impractical, eh?" Practicality isn't the most important measure of value—something any religious studies major should realize. ■

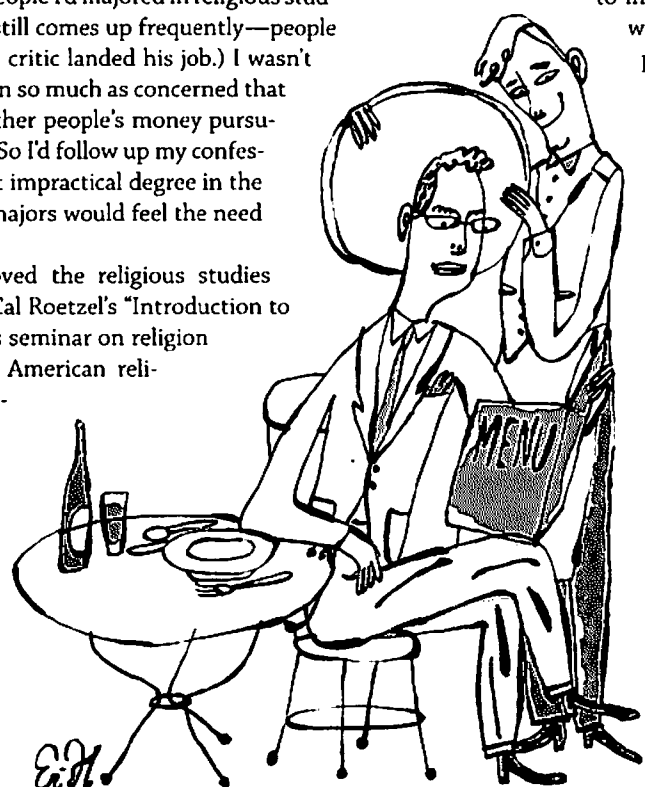


ILLUSTRATION: ERIC HANSON

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