



Delicious is the Tongue of the Taster—Part One

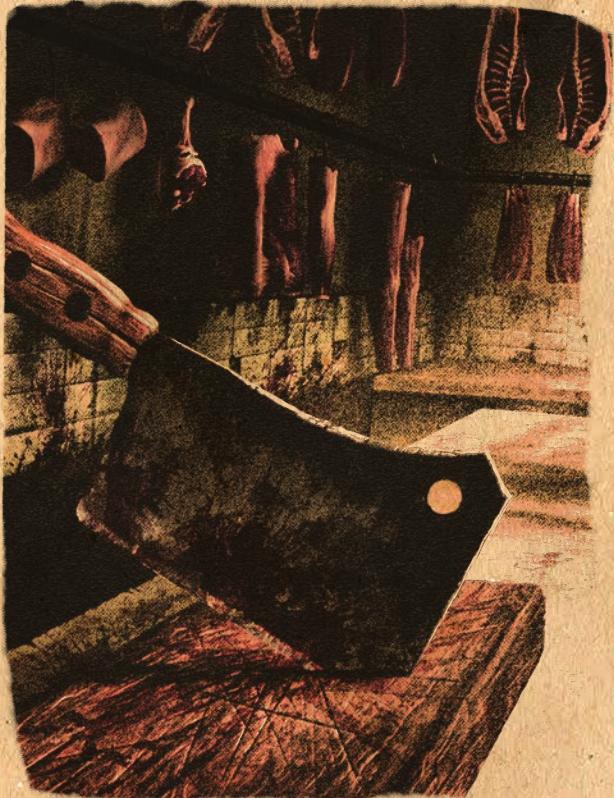
REGINALD P. GILMORE was, until recently, a well-respected New York City food critic, writing a regular column for that vaunted publication, *Empire State Leisure Ways*, a staple in the salons of the wealthy and of those who strive to appear so. But both he and his editor, Howard J. Morgan, Sr., mysteriously stopped contributing their literary talents to that fine periodical, and while there were rumors as to their

whereabouts and fates, if anyone knew the truth of either, they did not deign to share that information with the wider reading public. And so that public, as it inevitably does, eventually lost interest in the mystery. *Leisure Ways* found itself a new food critic and a new "Culture" editor. Life in the Big Apple whirled on, heedless.

That is, until the editors of *Tales from Nevermore* came into possession of a stack of letters from Gilmore to Morgan, sent

from various stops in the Miskatonic Valley. Sent, but never opened, and eventually returned unread to their author at his current place of residence, the catatonics wing of Arkham's very own Sanatorium for the mentally deranged, where an enterprising young orderly recognized their potential value and brought them to our attention.

And so it is, Dear Readers, that we bring you, at long last, the answer to the mystery these editors have taken to calling, tongue-in-cheek, "The Curious Case of the Missing Critic and His Editor." Part travelogue, part restaurant guide, and perhaps, part confession, this tale from *Nevermore* is best told in the words of the critic in question. So, without further ado...



*Mr. Howard J. Morgan, Sr.
Editor, Empire State Leisure Ways,
Culture Section*

Dear Howard,

I hope this letter finds you in improved health since last we met. I am posting this from Kingsport's Harborside, on the perennially mist-shrouded shores of the Miskatonic Valley, the first stop on my journey to recapture that elusive taste of which we have spoken so often of late, the one that haunts my dreams and, increasingly, my waking hours.

These salt-encrusted environs are at a regrettable remove from the bright lights and bustling crowds of our own beloved city, but alas my search takes me ever farther afield. And while these rundown brick warehouses, rough docks, and even rougher dockworkers in no way herald an enjoyable experience for the well-traveled, refined palate, I have heard tell of a seafood chowder worthy of a culinary connoisseur such as myself. Thus, my first stop on this tasting tour is the humble Harborside tavern known as The Rope and Anchor.

If the old chef's adage that one eats first with one's eyes is the rule by which a food critic must live and breathe, then it is only by Providence, Divine or otherwise, that I did not gasp my last upon entering this low establishment. Festooned with the rotting ropes and rusting anchors from which one assumes its name is derived, the tavern is dark even when the sun is at its zenith,

which it presumably was when I made my foray into its darkened depths—though the only proof I had of such was the evidence of my pocket watch, not any lessening of the ever-present gloom.

It is no exaggeration, Howard, to say I braved many an unfriendly gaze and muttered imprecation on my way to a scarred, wobbling table that had been varnished by years of spilt drinks and other less identifiable, but undoubtedly equally unsavory substances. The woman who took my order was every bit as surly as her patrons, though she did not bother to keep her own xenophobic maledictions under her breath, and her beetle-browed glower was enough to make even the toughest thug quail. Indeed, if I had been less resolute to find—rediscover?—the evanescent flavor from my dreams, I might well have tucked tail and run, as it were.

Instead, I squared my shoulders and ordered the seafood chowder in my firmest voice, willing it to project a bravado I did not feel to the dimmest corners of that seedy common room, in the vain hope that such would be enough to turn the attention of its denizens back to their own repasts. I do fear the slightest waver in my words may have had the opposite effect, however. Curs *can* suss out fear, can they not?

I did not order water to cleanse my palate between bites, as would normally have been

my wont, for I did not trust that what might be poured for me would be any purer than what made its way from the privy to the bay below.

I will admit, Howard, that I did think—uncharitably, it is now fair to say—the rumors of the chowder's preeminence were perhaps informed more by the tavern's unrepentant flaunting of the mores of Prohibition than by the dish's own merits, or those of its chef, a doughty woman by the name of Ellie (she did not deign to share a family name, if indeed she bears one). After all, it is no secret that alcohol dulls the palate as well as the intellect.

Imagine my surprise then, when the bowl arrived and my nostrils were tickled with the mingled aromas of onion, garlic, paprika, and thyme. Potatoes, carrots, and celery were coarsely chopped vegetable boats navigating through a dense field of cod, shrimp, scallop, and clam icebergs as they floated on a sea of creamy, buttery broth. My mouth was watering before I even brought the first spoonful to my mouth.

For a fleeting moment, I thought perhaps my quest had ended. As my teeth sank into the flesh of a large clam, I was momentarily returned to the landscape of my dream. It was the texture more than anything—the chew, the mouthfeel—they were *almost* right. Almost, Howard. But the taste... alas,

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the taste was not. As excellent as the chowder was, it was not the flavor I sought, that I so craved.

But it was enough to convince me I am on the right track here in the Miskatonic Valley. And so my journey will continue anon.

*With sincerest respect,
Your friend and colleague,
Reginald P. Gilmore*



*Mr. Howard J. Morgan
Editor, Empire State Leisure Ways*

Dear Howard,

I am writing this missive from my finely appointed room at the Excelsior Hotel in Arkham. The mahogany desk at which I sit is

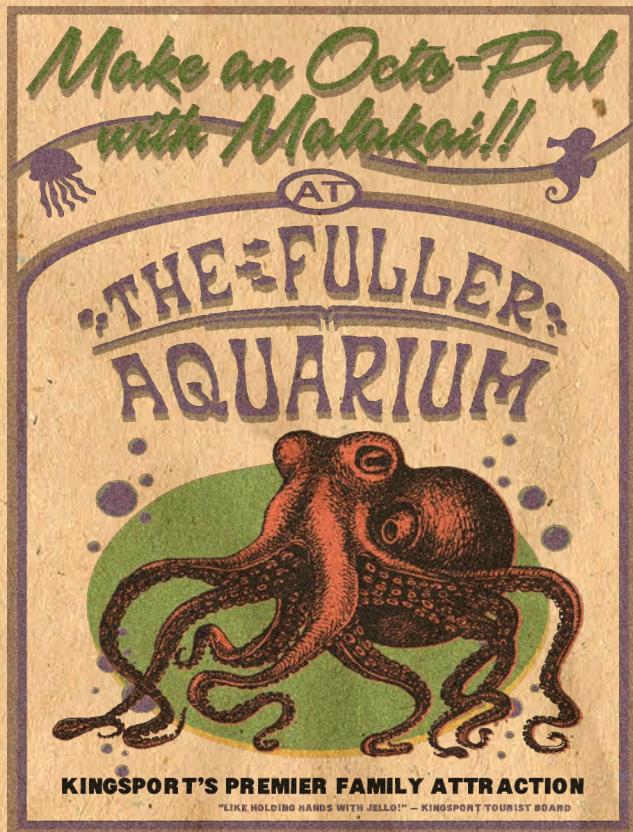


inlaid with ebony and ivory marquetry and boasts hardware with enough gilt to rival most cathedrals, if not Versailles itself. The leather-upholstered chair upon which I now sit dwarfs even that overstuffed, ostentatious monster that serves as the throne from which you oversee your editorial fiefdom at the *Leisure Ways* offices on Fifth Ave. It is not at all *comfortable*, mind you, but it certainly gives the illusion of making whoever sits here feel important, which is, I am sure, the point.

But as luxurious as my current setting is, it pales in comparison to the venue in which I dined last evening, the Excelsior's renowned supper club, The Black Goat.

You will have heard of its head chef, of course, the Frenchman, Guillame Durand. His reputed temper and eccentricity are nothing if not understated—I could hear him roaring at his sous-chef from my table near the kitchen, and I suspect he brought my waiter to tears shortly before the man came to deliver my first course, if his cowed demeanor and red eyes and nose were any indicator. Still, they say madness often accompanies genius, so I imagine that is why Durand's tantrums are tolerated, as the word “sublime” hardly does his dishes credit.

The meal course began with a simple hors d'oeuvre, Oysters Rockefeller, baked to perfection. The second course was *soupe à l'oignon*, served with the cheese still bubbling on its surface. I believe the chef used Comté cheese as opposed to Gruyère, a choice I applaud, as its caramel notes complement the onions and its nuttiness brings depth to the stock.



The appetizer course was skipped, for reasons I cannot guess at, and a lovely Salade Niçoise appeared next. The Cailletier olives were unusually firm and overly sweet, serving well to whet my appetite for the next course.

It arrived under a cloche polished to a mirror shine, and seeing my own oddly distorted reflection in the metal made me momentarily queasy, a sensation that passed as soon as the cloche was removed and the main dish was revealed—*confit de canard*.

You will recall, Howard, that I am not a great fan of duck, finding it often either too oily or somehow paradoxically too dry, but here Durand yet again proved himself a master, for the crispy skin yielded to reveal a juicy interior. I will admit, its color—that purplish-brown that many call puce—did give me brief pause, for it reminded me of nothing so much as organ meat, bringing immediately to mind many an unpleasant Sunday dinner at my grandmother's house, eating liver and onions, which she never failed to fry to the brink of inedibility, when she did not burn it outright.

But then the mixed scents of salt, garlic, and thyme rose up to my nostrils, and all musings upon my grandmother's crimes against cooking wafted away, replaced by eager anticipation. Beneath the aromatics, a different bouquet tickled both my palate and my brain, at once familiar and strange. As if I had smelled it before—that pungent, fatty, animal fragrance—but in a setting so dissimilar to this as to be nigh otherworldly.

As if I had smelled it in my dreams.

My mouth began to water, though whether at the dish's actual aroma or at the half-remembered redolence from the realms of my murky subconscious, I could not say. And indeed, it did not matter, for all thoughts of anything other than the duck and the aching hunger it engendered fled as I fell to, with a decided lack of decorum, I am somewhat chagrined to confess.

Tarte Tatin was next, made with Pippins and Calville apples imported from France, beautifully caramelized in an excellent crust. This was followed by the mignardise, bite-sized macarons served with café au lait.

In all, Howard, it was a meal fit for the occupant of the lavish, gold-encrusted room I now find myself in. I could find no fault with any of the dishes. And yet, I was ultimately left disappointed, feeling as though I had come within a hair's breadth of discovering what I truly sought, only to have it slip away again in what is becoming a maddening familiar fashion.

Some of my dismay must have shown on my face as I was finishing up my feast, for the waiter—he of the splotched face and suspected tears—leaned close as he delivered the check, and whispered to me, eyes darting anxiously about the room all the while, “If the dessert doesn’t please, Mon-

sieur, may I recommend the cherry pie at Velma’s Diner? It is... *magical*.” And with that cryptic statement, he hurriedly gathered up the last of my dishes and whisked away back to the kitchen. I didn’t see him again.

Well, now, Howard, I can hardly ignore a recommendation like that, can I? And so tomorrow night, I will forgo a repeat performance of Durand’s culinary wizardry in favor of whatever may await me at Velma’s Diner. I am hopeful that Velma’s “magic” might bring me closer to finding the answers I seek. I am eager to report back to you. Until then.

*With respect,
Your friend and colleague,
Reginald Gilmore*



Howard Morgan
Editor, E. S. Leisure Ways

Dear Howard,

I am back in my room at the Excelsior, writing from the same mahogany desk and plush leather chair as before, to inform you that the waiter from The Black Goat was correct—the cherry pie at Velma's All-Nite Diner was indeed bewitching, the work of a master baker who would do far better for herself if she plied her confections amongst clientele in New York City instead of in a roadside railcar on the rougher side of Arkham. Although, truth be told, Howard, *all* sides of Arkham appear rough once outside the confines of this hotel.

I did mention as much to the waitress who served me—one Agnes Baker, ironically enough (that the owner's wares would fare better amongst the City elites, not about the caliber of her current customers, obviously). Agnes dutifully replied that she would pass my observations along to her employer, but that I should not “hold my breath,” as it were. It seems the eponymous Velma has sunk both her life and her life's savings into her business and would be unlikely to budge for anything short of an invitation from the Grim Reaper himself. Alas, as I do not think either you or I, esteemed as we might each be in our separate fields, come near to matching that dread spirit's command, New York shall remain bereft of magical pie.



But the cherry pie was not the only toothsome delicacy on offer in this chrome and checkered linoleum temple to strong coffee and cheap food. Indeed, its brightly lit display case, the first thing one notices upon entrance, featured four shelves packed with rich chocolate pies and eclairs; squat carrot cakes, stately opera cakes, and glistening pineapple upside-down cakes; fresh fruit tarts inexplicably out of season; muffins the size of my fist; and huge cinnamon rolls fairly dripping glaze. It was truly a smorgasbord of sweetness, and had not the cherry pie come so highly recommended, I might well have been

tempted to try one of every pastry, for as unbecoming as such behavior might be for a famous food critic, it would yet have represented the height of manners amongst the ne'er-do-wells that populated the diner's vinyl booths. But such fancies faded the moment Agnes set an ample slice of the acclaimed pie on the pitted counter before me, still warm from the oven and topped with a generous dollop of fresh whipped cream.

Plump, crimson cherries oozed from its sides in heavy rivulets of filling even before my fork touched the pie's golden, buttery crust, which flaked off in thin, perfect layers. The intriguing perfume of cinnamon and allspice drifted up to my nose, underlain by a metallic, almost coppery scent that it took me a moment to identify as black cardamom. Such a sophisticated ingredient to find in such a backwater environment! That discovery,

perhaps more than anything else, piqued my excitement to taste this fabled pie for myself.

Well, now, Howard, this *is* odd. I find myself forced to pause as I write this, as the realization dawns that I am not being entirely truthful, with you or with myself.

For as fascinating as Velma's unusual choice of spices was, it was not truly the thing that had so aroused my interest most in that moment. Or, at least, it was not *entirely* that.

I was then, and remain now, impressed by the woman's deft use of seasoning, her selection of the finest cherries, her ability to divine the exact right amount of sugar and butter that would combine fruit and dough into a dessert fit for royalty. But it was not the *taste* of the pie that so entranced me then, or that haunts me so now. It was not even the smell, though that is certainly part of what lingers, that tang almost more reminiscent of butchered meat than of baked goods.

No, Howard. It was the sight of that thick, sanguine fluid seeping from the wounded, heat-burst stone fruit like cruor. It triggered a flash of memory so strong that I was left trembling with both fear and fervor. Just a flash, the briefest of flickers, but enough to make saliva leak unbidden from the corner of my mouth, For whatever taste my Dionysian muse has sent me to this strange place to recover, to rediscover, of one thing I am now certain.

It is covered in warm, rich, blood.

And, God help me, Howard, but I hunger for it.

I crave it.

God help me.

*Your fretful friend,
Reginald Gilmore*

