

THE VISITOR / SCULPTOR'S BREAKFAST

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THE VISITOR

It was already on Sunday that I saw him for the first time, a day after my arrival in Pasaia. The morning sky was dark, full of thick and heavy clouds. There was still no one on the square beneath my window, the chairs waiting, sitting one on top of the other at the ends of restaurants, metallic tables glistening in the light of the few sunrays that brushed them on their westward-bound way. I opened the wooden balcony door wide, smelled the fresh salty air, and went for a shower. As I stepped back into the living room wrapped in a long towel, he was there, staring at me. With confidence and curiosity, no shyness whatsoever. "Well, what, how did you get in here?" I exclaimed, slightly bewildered, caught in an unexpected situation. "Shoo, get out, shoo!" Darn, how do you say that in Spanish? The visitor barely moved. No, I'm not going to hit him, no, "shoo, get out, right this second!" I shouted. Only then, as the intensity of my voice grew, was he startled. He turned around and slowly lumbered off towards the balcony, as if he was trying to tell me, hey what do you want, I'm the one who's always here, you're the new kid. Completely black, so that I could not even make out his eyes in the semidarkness, he stepped over the balcony doorstep, turned his head in my direction, and meowed. "I just came to say hello. And you were so rude and cold to me. I really don't get you," he yelped, and jumped on the railing. He stood there for another second or two, and –as if I didn't exist, as if our encounter never happened– looked to the left and the right and then to the square beneath him before disappearing. Well, that's a good one, I thought to myself, I had no idea I had a roommate, and one with no manners at that.

With no haste I got dressed, left the room, and within minutes I had forgotten about him completely. The ocean pounded against the cliffs, its force causing the mighty rocks to crumble in the frothy waters. A misty fog sprayed over the two lighthouses marking the entrance into the bay, disappearing for a couple of minutes, only to return thicker than before. One, two, three, this is how we count the big waves, the locals from Pasaia told me. Then smaller ones follow. One, two, three ... I could count them all day long, it is so soothing. A shawl was keeping my neck warm and a light jacket was enough to keep the windy embrace from the sea pleasant and not too intrusive. One, two, three ... the waltz! In the distance I saw a woman with an umbrella striding at a fast pace along that forbidden path, where the rocks were crumbling off. Well then, I suppose it's not off limits after all, I thought to myself, and slowly headed in that direction. First, a narrow path through a wild bushy area, then up on a ridge and then ahead, in the warm wind, all the way to the narrow stairsteps carved into the stone, but unfortunately, some two meters away from the rocky slopes. How am I supposed to get down here, with no support?

I think I can make it; if the woman with the spring in her step could do it, so can I. But, where did she vanish? I stopped at the top of the staircase. I counted only four steps heading towards the bottom, that is, towards the next upward slope, when all of a sudden I could not move anymore. My thirst for the unknown, however inviting, was challenged by my fear of falling and the scenario of locals finding me, a foreigner, injured only a day after my arrival. To do it or not to do it? People must walk here all the time without falling off the rocks... I was trying to perk myself up. One deep breath, four steep stone-carved steps, and then descent. Down to the next five steps leading back uphill, which seemed safer.

And the ensuing reward: a view of the vast blue horizon, the crashing of the ocean waves against the weatherworn rocks, freedom.

The following morning I opened the balcony door again. I let the new day pour inside the tight apartment space, made some coffee, and went back to bed. The circulating air was dry, fresh, brand-new, awakening. Suddenly I was roused by the Meow. He was standing next to the bed, only inches away from my head, greeting me. Of course, I wasn't expecting him, the whole magic of the idea of caressing a fluffy curled up ball in my arms was replaced by the shock upon the intrusion into my privacy and the audacity and curiosity, which I suddenly could not empathize with. "Shoo, shoo, go on, get out," I yelled at him loudly and he slowly waddled off in the direction of the window. "Have it your way," he said, "if you have no appreciation for sincere curiosity or this kind of welcome, I won't be back." I closed the door behind him, got angry about having to close the shutters and windows in order to ensure privacy, and returned to bed.

He has not come back since. I can hear him, meowing on his morning walks across the neighboring balconies. I keep the doors wide open, but he doesn't come in. When I see him now and then at the neighbors', he turns his head the other way and continues to clean himself. I don't know why, but now I feel guilty and I wish the moment we first met would return. Perhaps this time it would be different.

SCULPTOR'S BREAKFAST

They say that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. I agree. Especially because breakfast serves as fuel to sculptors, which has to keep them on their feet for the better part of the day, because when you're standing with a five-kilogram angle grinder in your hands, carving into a half cubic meters' marble block, you can't make it till lunch time with just an apple and some yogurt in your stomach.

And when I'm not working in stone, I'm definitely using clay in the studio, filling and emptying the heavy plaster casts, or developing a new idea on paper, which also burns calories. I will have probably also already gone for my morning run and be starving.

So let's start making our sculptor's breakfast.

Eggs sunny-side up – a classic

I realize the importance of quality ingredients whenever I'm abroad and want to make just the kind of breakfast as I do at home. I don't think so. Faded eggs from caged hens, artificially smoked bacon, hmmm... I can trick the eyes, but not the other senses. This is why eggs are best made at home. I prefer medium-size fresh farmyard eggs, strips of gammon from a home-reared pig which my cousin brings every year, and possibly fresh porcini or chanterelles, and if that's not possible, frozen ones. Eggs are fried in an enamel pan, and eaten out of it, too.

The procedure is as follows.

Cut the bacon into (if I may use some male accuracy) 2 mm thick slices, fry it to the point of being almost totally crunchy, carefully crack the eggs (we don't want the yolk to break and ruin our morning, or day), and season with salt and pepper. Sprinkle with chives.

Eggs go well with buckwheat bread with added walnuts, or corn bread.

Ingredients:

2 eggs
2 oz home-cured bacon
1 spring onion
salt and pepper to taste

And here is an enhanced version

Cut a yellow pointed pepper into half-centimetre strips and fry it a pan until the skin starts turning dark. Add some pancetta or cracklings and continue to fry for another two minutes or so, before adding thickly cut porcini or shitake, two slices of coarsely chopped shallots, a few slices of dried chilli peppers, and, two minutes later, the eggs. A minute before the end, when the whites start to thicken, sprinkle some shredded parmesan on top. Remove the pan.

Season with salt, pepper, and fresh coriander. If we did it right, we have crunchy fried pancetta, fragrant gently roasted peppers, perfectly roasted golden-brown porcini, just a hint of onion, juicy and still-runny yolks, and the freshness of coriander. Something like this happens perhaps once a week, and when it does, it is surely a sign of a spectacular start of a day when nothing can go wrong (and even if it does, at least the breakfast was worthy of a king).

Ingredients:

2 eggs
1 small pointed yellow or red pepper
50 g pancetta or 1 tbsp fat with cracklings
4 medium-size shitake mushrooms or
1 medium-size porcini cut into thick slices
2 slices of red onion (possibly the local variety from Ptuj, Slovenia)
parmesan aged 24 months
salt and pepper to taste
coriander

Homemade porridge / gruel

Ribana kaša is the name of the dish my mom used to eat as a little girl, before going to school. It took her about 7 kilometres to get to the school, across hills, forests and valleys, in the heat and the cold. In spring and in autumn, when it rains a lot, she came to school soaking wet, dried off completely before the lessons ended, and then went back into the rain towards home. She was a diligent and hardworking student, and even if she hadn't been, there would still be a field and hoe waiting for her at home. When she passed the first year of gymnasium with flying colours, and the neighbour's boy, two years older than her, failed the grade, he complained it was because his mother never made him porridge for breakfast.

A simple, nutritious meal, although kneading the dough is a bit of a nuisance, so even when I was already grown up, and while she still could, this part was done for me by my mother.

Mix the flour, salt and water and knead into a stiff dough. Bring raw, whole-fat milk to a boil, add salt, grate the porridge into the milk and cook 10–15 minutes over a low flame, stirring constantly. Dress with butter-roasted shallots.

Ingredients

½ l milk
150 g flour
water
salt
1 shallot
1 tbsp butter

Noodle soup

As strange as it may sound, Chinese (or Japanese) noodle soup is my favourite wintertime breakfast, or, say, early lunch. I'm a morning-type artist, which means that I sleep until half past six and then get out of bed by around seven, or seven thirty, get dressed and head for the studio, where I work for around an hour, or an hour and a half, or I go for my morning run and exercise, take a shower, and then, awfully hungry, try to make breakfast as soon as possible.

I first came across this kind of noodle soup, that is, its Chinese version, during my visit to China. Even though after a month of having rice porridge, vegetables and soups for breakfast, one yearns for some nice fried eggs and coffee, this kind of soup does give you everything you need to get through the day. My version is described below.

Cut the pepper into strips and roast in a pan on a spoonful of sesame oil until it darkens. Reduce the heat, add chopped ginger, two coarsely minced garlic cloves, chopped celery and sliced shitake or porcini mushrooms, or torn chanterelles. In a minute or two, add a ladle of soup stock to prevent the garlic from overheating and turning bitter. If we were good all year long, then we must have some whole tomatoes stored in the freezer. In winter, nothing beats as a home-grown tomato that you toss into boiling water for a few seconds (in 5 minutes' time, the water will be used to cook pasta), peel it, chop it, and add it to the other vegetables. Sauté for another five minutes or so, adding more broth if necessary. Finally, add the leafy green vegetables. Again, if we were good, there might be a stem of collard greens waiting for us in the garden, if not, use a handful of spinach leaves or coarsely chopped Swiss chard. Add pasta to the boiling water, it needs a minute or two, then drain it, add it to the vegetables and pour in another ladle of the stock. Let it cook for another minute over medium heat. Remove the pan. In the meantime the noodles, which only take about two minutes, will be ready; add them to the wok and remove from fire. Add one yolk mixed with a tablespoon of cream, stir and let the sauce thicken a little, another two or three minutes.

Transfer to a large bowl, and optionally add a tablespoon of Chinese aged vinegar and sprinkle with coriander. If you happen to have some leftover roast meat from the day before, cut a few thin slices and place them on top. Because I'm fast at chopping and mixing, and because I'm famished by then, it only takes me twenty minutes to finish the dish. The soup can be improved by adding a tablespoon of tahini, and a bit of the Chinese mixture of chillies and soy in oil.

Of course, after such a hearty breakfast (but also after any breakfast) I need about a half hour in order for the food to set down a bit, if I'm going to do any bending while I work; however, because it is very low-fat, it doesn't make me want to take a nap, but rather keeps me up on my feet for at least another four hours.

Ingredients

1 pepper
a slice of ginger (1 cm wide)
2 cloves garlic
½ pepper

½ celery stalk rib
100 g leafy vegetables – Swiss chard, spinach, collard greens
2 medium-size tomatoes
soup stock
sesame oil
3 medium-size shitake mushrooms
1 egg yolk
½ dcl cream
salt or soy sauce
fresh coriander
1 tbsp Chinese aged vinegar
chilli peppers to taste
Japanese buckwheat noodles or Chinese wheat flat noodles

Crunchy bread with pâté, camembert, and jam

Do not let the name mislead you, you can make everything but the cheese right at home, perhaps not in one day, and the jam, naturally, when fruits are in season.

Chicken liver pâté is, again, one of those things which I don't make very often. Perfect on crunchy buttered bread and with a cup of coffee, whenever I have it in the fridge and eat it for breakfast, it causes such a rush of happiness and satisfaction, like very few other types of breakfast.

I prepare the pâté a day earlier. It is one of the rare dishes, to which I devote a lot of time, and for which I require absolute peace (with appropriate music in the background). I clean the liver slowly and with great care, and cut it into large chunks – each piece of liver into two or three chunks. I mince two shallots, sautéing them slowly on a mixture of olive oil and butter until they are soft. I increase the flame, add the liver, which is not supposed to be crowded in the pan, but needs enough space to just cover the bottom. Next, add the turmeric and oriental cumin and sear for 2–3 minutes over medium heat. The liver has to stay pink on the inside. In the end, add a half decilitre of cognac. I like to take time to make my homemade ghee. I buy fresh, unpasteurized butter, heating it slowly for 10 to 15 minutes over low heat, until the proteins boil out and a brown residue remains on the bottom. Drain. When the liver is minced and little round dishes filled with the pâté, cover the tops with ghee and place in the refrigerator.

The following morning, slice the bread and place it into a toaster, or, better yet, into an oven, grill function on. Toast the bread on both sides until it darkens slightly. When pressing the slices (music should be turned off and all disturbing noises eliminated), you have to hear that sexy crispy crunch...

Ingredients

500 g chicken liver
2 shallots
butter, olive oil
salt, pepper
turmeric, oriental cumin

cognac
unpasteurized milk
bread

***Zagorski štrukli* / strudel**

The next breakfast which has to be made a day earlier, preferably on a Saturday or Sunday, is this salty cottage cheese strudel. Why not the same day? Because then you can forget about working, you will eat half a tray and go straight back to bed. Which might not be a bad idea, if it's not a working day.

I know the dish from the Croatian region of Zagorje. It was there that I tasted (when visiting relatives) the most delicious and greasy *štrukli*, which almost always required a glass of wine to go with them, as the fat was threatening to give me a heart attack. And it would, of course, because my aunt would always "improve" the strudel by adding a heaping spoonful of lard on the top before placing it in the oven. In those parts, the biggest compliment I received was when I gained two or three kilos during winter, and when I came to visit, they would happily find that I had "bettered". Well, it's been some time now since I've stopped bettering myself in winter, as I run throughout the year.

Zagorski štrukli were also a favourite dish of the Yugoslavian president Tito, who was born in Zagorje, and it was allegedly known about him that – because of the countless bountiful banquets he organized or attended – while on a diet, the only breakfast he had was eggs with cracklings and cafe latte, which is basically my typical breakfast. It is this kind of diet that I have to thank for my figure.

The recipe is simple, and the fresher the ingredients, the better the strudel. We need sifted flour, two pinches of salt, an egg (taken out of the fridge earlier), a spoonful of oil and some warm water. Knead the dough, cover it, and in a half hour, roll it out and stretch it. Fill it with half a kilogram of cottage cheese, mixed with 200 grams of cream (if the cottage cheese was dry), an egg and some salt. Transfer the strudel onto a buttered tray and coat thickly with sour cream before baking for 35–40 minutes at 180 °C. When it's done, cover with a cloth, wait for five minutes, and even if it's still hot, have the first piece by blowing into it to cool, not letting your lips, tongue and throat get burned. Then wait for another five minutes or so and enjoy the strudel while still warm.

Ingredients

400 g fine wheat flour
1 dcl water (approximately)
½ tsp salt
1 tbsp oil

600 g cottage cheese
150 g sour cream and 50 g sour cream for topping
½ tsp salt

With the *štrukli*, have a cup of strong Bosnian-style coffee, to which you added a few grains of freshly ground cardamom.

I have been making and drinking coffee for almost two decades. Italian-style *cafetiere*, Vietnamese-style, Turkish-style, Bosnian-style, with foamed milk, cream, whipped cream. For years, my favourite was freshly ground Mexican coffee with cream. Proper coffee-lovers, of course, would call it a sin, as coffee is to be drunk without adding anything. Well, in those days, nothing could top the taste of the milky sweet coffee in combination with the delicious pâté on toasted bread...till the afternoon came, together with a stomach ache. In time I realized dairy products in my coffee were bad for me, and it was a good thing that I rediscovered the good old Turkish-style (now Bosnian) coffee, to which I still add unimaginable amounts of sugar, but which is most often the only sugar I will have during the whole day.

The procedure is as follows. After multiple experiments I realized the best way was to take a whole cardamom seed, peel it, crush it in a mortar, not entirely (don't make it into fine dust), but just to the point before that. At first, I would add the cardamom to the coffee, then I started putting it into the *džezva* (copper-plated coffee pot with a long neck) before making the coffee, before I finally saw that the best way was to rinse the pot before preparation, so that the bottom is wettish, then add ground cardamom seeds, place the pot over heat for 5 seconds, add coffee, stir over low heat for around thirty seconds, and then pour over boiling water. Mix and wait until the foam makes a bubble. Remove pot. Pour over the remaining boiling water, to make the coffee grounds settle. Sweeten with cane sugar, and enjoy the fragrance and taste.

Fried sardines, white bread, champagne

As it happened, I was driving with a friend and his mother, a doctor, and we were talking about healthy breakfasts. It was a grey winter's day and nostalgically, I thought about the sea and my favourite breakfast there, fresh fried sardines, white bread, and a glass of wine. The reaction of the doctor was, well, normal, come to think of it. Wine for breakfast probably elicits an entirely different perception of one's lifestyle, hence the explanation.

I love running, but in mid-July at the coast, it is only possible to run in the mornings, around half past six. After eight it gets too hot, and in the evening, my thoughts revolve only around food. Thus, the perfect summer breakfast starts as early as a little past six, when I wake up and start getting hydrated. Some water, lying in bed and thinking about what is the absolute latest time, when I have to get up, a few more sips, various motivational techniques, how great I will feel after running, and when it finally is half past six, a jump out of bed, warm-up, put my clothes on, and out through the door. I don't overdo it, I run around 6-7 kilometres, do some exercises, and already I'm at the pier, where fishermen are selling their night catch. A banknote for 100 kuna is in my pocket, and I hope to spot sardines. I buy a kilo, go to the beach, clean enough so that everyone can have five for breakfast; by that time I am already hot in the leggings and T-shirt, so after I've finished cleaning the fish, wrapping them into a bag, and covering the bag with a stone to hide it from the seagulls, it is time for a quick jump into the water, where I enjoy the moment when there's still nobody at the beach, the surface of the sea is oily smooth, and seagulls cawing above me.

On the way home I buy a loaf of white bread, head quietly into the kitchen, dust the fish with flour and fry them. We have them while they're still warm, with a glass of Malvasia, or, better yet, champagne. After breakfast I hit for the shade, napping, reading, napping again, and the day is perfect.

Ingredients

5–6 sardines per person
oil for frying
salt
fresh bread
cooled champagne

Rice porridge with pork ribs and pan-seared vegetables

This breakfast is easiest to make on a Monday, when we can add slices of pork ribs or pork belly that were left over from Sunday's lunch.

Cook the rice the day before. Quickly sauté one clove of finely chopped garlic and some ginger in olive oil, add rice, pour over boiling water, season, and remove when cooked.

For the best rice porridge you need soup stock to add if necessary, while slowly cooking the rice for about 15–20 minutes. The rice will soften and disperse in water. Quickly pan-sear the vegetables in olive oil – first, a half of green and a half of red pepper, fresh tomatoes (when in season, preferably some meaty sort), and chilli peppers to taste.

And here are the instructions for making pork belly or ribs. Actually, you need to start on Saturday already, when in the evening you season the meat with salt, pepper, the Chinese five spice mix, and a pinch of hot paprika.

The meat needs to be cooked as slowly as possible, 5 hours minimum, out of which 4 hours at 110 °C, and the last sixty minutes at 180 °C, so that the fat melts nicely. Once out of the oven, coat the ribs with honey, and try not to finish them on Sunday already. On Monday, slice the leftovers thinly, and throw them onto the porridge.

Serve the hot porridge in a deep bowl, topping it with the vegetables and the meat, and adding a few leaves of fresh coriander and a spoonful of Chinese aged vinegar, or balsamic vinegar, if you don't have the first.

Ingredients

1 cup rice
1 clove garlic
1 slice ginger (1 cm wide)
oil
soup stock
1 pepper

1–2 meaty tomatoes
1 kg leftover pork ribs or pork belly

Marinade:

1 tbsp Chinese five spice mixture
pinch of hot paprika
1 tsp salt
1 tbsp oil
pepper

***Bruschette* – toasted bread with a million toppings**

avocado topping
pate
roasted peppers with balsamic vinegar
sliced leek or spring onions
matured cheese
fresh goat cheese
homemade salami
homemade *ajvar** or *lutenica**

(*popular spreads from the Balkan region, made from roasted peppers, tomatoes, carrots and hot chillies)

This kind of breakfast is recommended if you have the company of at least one person, and best if you have a group of friends, as assembling the toasted slices of bread is not nearly as much fun when you're doing it alone. You need good bread from the day before, which you toast in an oven or toaster. Rub the bread with garlic, drizzle with olive oil, and assemble to taste.

For the avocado spread, or guacamole, mash the avocado with a fork (do not put it into a blender), add finely chopped spring onions and the juice from half a lime, season with salt and pepper, and bring everything together (i.e., mash a little more).

Cut the pepper into strips and pan-sear them while occasionally stirring, until the skin turns dark, add salt, and, after removing the pan from the heat, drizzle with balsamic vinegar.

Another great topping is a thick, homemade *ajvar*, onto which you place leeks and slices of homemade salami. And a little more, and some more after that.

Fruit smoothie

This breakfast is only good before a half-day's work in front of the computer, otherwise it'll make us hungry and very cranky in as little as an hour, and since we're already dressed, dusty and deeply buried in work, we cannot have a second breakfast.

I eat fruit very rarely, preferably straight from a tree, or if someone washes and peels it for me and offers me half. I love to have fruit before driving somewhere, because I seldom think about food when I drive, and this kind of light snack is ideal for a long drive. Besides, it gives me that great feeling of having eaten something healthy, and of vitamins downright drizzling over my cells, destroying viruses, bacteria, and bad mood.

My favourite two are *mango lassi*, which simply means using a good, ripe mango, chopped in a blender with a touch of yogurt and a pinch of cardamom; and khaki with kefir.

Cut the khaki, add half a banana, two prunes, some cocoa, crushed cocoa seeds, and kefir. Mix and drink while typing. The mixture shouldn't be too thick or too sweet, so add at least half a litre of kefir.

When peaches are ripe, cook them for about five minutes in a pan with a spoonful of sugar, two tablespoons of cognac, a spoonful of sour cream, and some yogurt or kefir, before mixing it all in a blender.

Blueberries are best in the summer, when we take them out of the freezer (if we were good and picked them ourselves, all the better), add kefir and a spoonful of honey, put everything in the blender, and cool off in the summer heat after sleeping in late, enjoying the refreshing beverage with a view of the sea.