



VINCENT SARDON: THE STAMPOGRAPHER

Gorgeously uncouth, Sardon's work revels in a Dada-like spirit. —Publishers Weekly

Parisian artist Sardon commandeers the rubber stamp with razor-sharp wit, unabashed profanity and sublime beauty.

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Playing Chicken

A memoir explores the inner conflict of the new food order.

MELANIE REHAK



"This is the topsy-turvy world of luxurious toil," Max Watman writes in *Harvest: Field Notes from a Far-Flung Pursuit of Real Food* (Norton, \$25), his new book about his adventures with—oh, how I've come to dread this phrase—real food. He's describing his preparation of a foraged meal during a recent summer vacation, which began with him making salt from seawater, because "what could be more guttural, more intrinsically oceanic than the ocean's salt?" He then infused the salt with anise liqueur and used it to season codfish, but not before Googling "fun to eat" seaweed species, which led him to the

unappetizing-sounding bladder wrack (that scraggle with pods we've all tangled with while trying to walk out to sea for a relaxing back float). Back to the shoreline he went to gather some, which he soaked for an hour, then roasted for later, when he served it on top of seawater risotto.

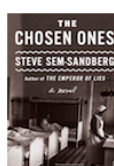
There was also a batch of periwinkle fritters, achieved, in Watman's telling, through "tedious work. You have to get past the little door they close on the world, a tiny disk of shell. Then you pluck them out with a toothpick, skewer, or small knife. It goes on forever, and your pile of meat never seems to get any bigger." And that was *after* he'd spent the time collecting the snails and keeping them alive for a day in strained seawater in order to let them cleanse themselves of grit. (At least one odious task was performed by someone else, right?) If the words *over the top* haven't popped into your mind yet, you are perhaps a more ambitious chef than I am, or at least a less irritable person.

And yet, even after reading about this meal, and about the pheasant *boudin blanc* Watman made after bird hunting, and the bresaola, and the home-pickled cornichons, and the "simple gumbo into which I was going to shred duck from a confit I'd made" (do the words "simple" and "confit" ever really belong in the same description?), I kept coming back to that painfully self-aware oxymoron: "luxurious toil." Perhaps more than anything else in Watman's book, that phrase sums up our schizophrenic culinary moment; the contradiction it embodies is scattered throughout *Harvest*, as it has been in so much food writing of recent years. We—by which, of course, I mean those of us with the privilege of choice—are ever more desperate to understand our food, to eat better, and to free ourselves from the multidimensional damage of corporate food-processing plants, and yet we're still staggeringly unsure about *how*, exactly, to accomplish any of this.

Often, it seems, we start by writing books, which keep coming and coming. Having written one of my own some years back and, like Watman, having been supported by a publisher while I traveled around milking goats and picking spinach and learning how to butcher animals, I count myself squarely in that lucky "we." And if we are honest with ourselves, we know that only a very few of us can afford, in every sense of that word, to spend time cheese making and noodling around with chickens and hogs in order to see what it's like before going back to our desks, where the weather doesn't affect our profit margin and there is probably someone in the next room with a salary who will keep us in coffee and summer vacation. However serious we are about such sojourns (and I believe that Watman is absolutely in earnest), they remain something of a lark—a luxury. That Watman is aware of this inherent tension in his project, and says it straight, is surely as much a sign of progress as his efforts at fishing and growing tomatoes are. "I just wanted the food to be better," he says at one point, before going on to admit, somewhat hopelessly, that his perspective is a fortunate one: "How could it be better? It's always been excellent—whether it was a sloppy barbecue sandwich in Georgia or a rack of ribs out of my smoker on July Fourth."



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He has trouble holding on to this understanding, though, as most of us do. To wit, there is the small matter of the steer he buys. Or rather, the 675-pound matter. The story of Bubbles is *Harvest's* opening salvo in Watman's personal war against the food industry. (I'll spare you the details of a somewhat agonizing analogy he makes with joining the French Resistance and the final scene of *Casablanca*, if only because I'm pretty sure Rick Blaine would be mortified by it.) Watman writes, "I wanted a freezer full of beef because I love it, and I don't want it to come from a system that doesn't care about me or the animal that is going to feed me." Fair enough. But right away, the dueling between his open-eyed grasp of the larger issues and his occasional blindness about what he's actually doing in the name of the revolution begins. He wisely debunks one of the great tropes of the food movement, reminding us that "despite the well-advertised and rightly argued truth that the cheap meat arrayed in the supermarket is a false economy, the fact remains that within my own household this false economy is the actual one." And yet his solution to this is—let me say it again—to *buy an animal of his own*, which ultimately allows him to pay "big box-store, ground-beef cheap" prices for every single cut of meat he gets from it. If only we all had a place to house a big, happy animal on a nearby farm when our backyards (if we even have them) prove too small, and people to take care of it for us. Bubbles makes a very good story, and even one that extends beyond Watman's little family: "The Wolf Creek [Farm] herd is an organic machine that maintains a huge swath of beautiful Virginia farmland. Because of the pressure on land like that, even now, if it weren't farmed it would be something else. Without a man who wants meat, there would be no herd. Without a herd, there would be no pasture." But in no way is Bubbles a large-scale solution.

Nor, really, are the chickens Watman raises and loses one by one to a marauding raccoon, though they, too, prompt a hilarious moment of clarity about the world in which he's trying to effect change. "I watch with alarm as American families put cute coops in their backyards," he writes ruefully. "Chickens are the new knitting." The more he searches for ways to make his food meaningful, the more he reveals the inner conflict that besets so many people trying to do the "right" thing when it comes to buying and eating. He detects "the occasional whiff of smug satisfaction" at the weekly farmers' market in his Hudson Valley town, but also extols its virtues as a place "totally without anxiety. You're just buying wonderful bread, and some mushrooms." But then at his local pizza place, he's the picture of discontent, incapable of ordering anything because he's so repulsed by the possible ingredients. To his credit, he sees exactly what's wrong with the way he feels: "A man who has boxed himself out of a slice of pizza is a sad man," he intones. "I had wanted to create a utopia, a way of eating that erased anxiety, and I'd done exactly the opposite. . . . My critical self seemed to have overtaken the creative part of me that wanted to have fun making food."

Fun comes up periodically in *Harvest*. Some of the things Watman does are fun, and some aren't, and some leave him feeling as if he should give the whole thing up and go back to law school. All this expectation of amusement is somewhat curious since, as we were all taught as children, doing the right thing isn't always fun. But in this, as in so much else, Watman speaks for a whole coterie of people who can't quite get the pieces to add up when it comes to money, eating, and pleasure, and maybe he's not wrong in his concerns, even if he occasionally sounds a little more petulant than he should. Late in the book, when things are not going quite as planned in his utopia, he moans, "What had I done? I'd gone out looking for purity and quality, simplicity and grace, and I hadn't found it. I felt defeated. I'd gone all askew. I wasn't having any fun."

Perhaps decades from now, when the food revolution is that many turns farther on its axis, we'll look back at books like Watman's (and mine, for that matter) and see them as primers for the better world that has arrived. Or maybe they'll just seem quaint, like those readers we had in school that spelled out the names of the trees and the animals, making it seem like they were the most important things in the world. And we knew them all by heart.

Melanie Rehak is the author of Eating for Beginners (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

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