

PREFACE

I realized how little I knew about flavor when I ate my first cube of rotted shark. *Hákarl*, the shark, is a traditional Icelandic delicacy—it comes in chunks about half the size of standard dice, taken from the corpse of a basking shark that has rotted in a shallow grave for several months. They're served on toothpicks. You wouldn't want to touch them. I might never have sampled it if a friend hadn't decided to hold her wedding in Iceland. I'd promised myself that I would attend the first destination wedding a friend invited me to, no matter where it took place. I expected Cancun or Tuscany. Iceland's Snaefellsnes Peninsula worked, too. My boyfriend Lawrence and I packed our bags and prepared to eat weird food then celebrate matrimony.

Run an Internet search for unusual Icelandic foods, as I did from my hotel room the day I arrived in Reykjavik, and you'll quickly turn up dozens of accounts from people who have tried—and failed—to eat *hákarl*. Chef Anthony Bourdain, who makes his living from eating strange stuff, describes *hákarl* as “the single worst, most disgusting and terrible tasting thing” he has ever eaten. Travel writer Jason Wilson flew to Iceland for the purpose of trying their traditional dishes at the *Thorablót* festival, and he couldn't go through with it. Anonymous online trip advisors posted “for the love of God, don't try the shark,” and one article about Café Loki, where I chose to order my *hákarl*, described the delicacy as reminiscent of a tramp's sock soaked in urine.

Rotted shark, while new to me, is not a new discovery for Icelanders; it's been eaten for centuries. Café Loki's ambience gave me the impression of a Reykjavik Cracker Barrel, the sort of diner one finds off any U.S. interstate, with Formica-topped tables, plastic-sheathed menus, early dinner hours and blue plate specials. If we'd been in the upper Midwest, I might have looked for some pickled pigs' feet and maybe stewed tongue; here the offerings included sheep's head jelly and

dried fish with butter. Lawrence enjoyed the sheep's head jelly a great deal, scooping up the fat globules that delivered a concentrated lamb-y taste, while rejecting the mashed turnips served alongside it.

When it came time for the *hákarl*, Lawrence's pleased expression turned to one of concern for his wellbeing. It was a new look for him. Lawrence is a businessman turned respected state bureaucrat who can summon the most intensely disapproving glare in Vermont. He's shaped roughly like a barrel (possibly like a keg—his first business was brewing craft beers), his shirt pockets always hold multiple pens and scraps of paper covered in illegible notes. He's been aptly described as "the dorkiest Soprano." He smiles, too, and you can hear him laugh from three buildings away (I've heard it), but mostly he looks in control of The Situation, whatever that situation might be. The *hákarl*, though, had him looking scared. Still, we'd eaten our way through the other offerings and couldn't delay the grand finale, which smelled, as promised, like a tramp's sock soaked in urine. I went first.

The little white cubes contained a taste sensation unlike anything I'd experienced before. It's a novelty straight from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Pop one in your mouth, and you'll experience a full three-course meal à la Violet Beauregarde, but without turning into a blueberry at the end.

First is the fish course, which combines the texture of a calamari ring with the taste of dried fish. If you haven't tasted dried fish before, then I suggest finding a jar of goldfish food flakes and taking a deep whiff. Dried fish tastes the way fish food flakes smell.

Next is a burn like tossing back a shot of whiskey. Icelanders will tell you to chase *hákarl* immediately with some local whiskey, Brennivin, but that ruins the three-course sensation, so don't do it. The fish includes a simulated whiskey shot on its own.

Last comes the blue cheese, and not an immoderately strong blue cheese, either. I preferred not to dwell on what produced this flavor; I preferred instead to think of sophisticated European diners who select stilton, with perhaps some apricots or wine grapes or a drizzle of honey, as their dessert course.

Ancient Icelandic food explorers had gone far, far beyond what I would ever attempt. Then, they'd sent forward into the modern day a

tiny cube that delivered three courses of flavor. I wouldn't have guessed at the possibility of such an item. I had trouble imagining how anyone might have stumbled upon it. I pictured bored medieval teenagers finding a shark corpse then daring each other to lick it. Lawrence corrected me—he'd taken the trouble to read the brochures on our visit to the Natural History Museum that afternoon, and he knew *hákarl* existed because six months of rotting was the only way to make Icelandic basking sharks non-toxic. I agreed that one thing worse than eating putrid shark flesh would be eating poisonous shark flesh. Imminent starvation does help spur new taste adventures.

Before leaving Café Loki, I stopped to check in with our waitress regarding the authenticity of our *hákarl*. I'm always suspicious about whether I'm getting food that locals eat or some bland imitation manufactured for the tourists. When I put this question to the young woman who had served us, her eyes got wide.

"I'd never eat that!" she said, as if I'd insulted her.

"Well, what about your parents? Or grandparents? Is this the same stuff they'd eat or is it ... you know, weaker?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Do you know what that *is*?" she said. "There's no 'weak' *hákarl*."

It's easy to look at modern food culture and see an irreconcilable split between gourmets who get a whole novel's worth of experience from one sip of fine Champagne or nibble of caviar and those of us who will polish off a whole bag of potato chips without thinking because 1) the bag is open and 2) it tastes good. That split exists mostly in our minds. For one thing, we're all surrounded by a world full of flavors ready for exploring and, with very rare exceptions, we all have the capacity for that exploration. We can start with the items in our kitchen right now, no caviar necessary. On the other hand, to hear some folks go on about the intricate flavors in a sliver of young, local carrot or say anything detailed about wine or agree to eat rotted shark ... well, we can be forgiven for seeing that gulf of difference opening up before us.

If you'd asked me only a few years ago, I'd have told you that I stood closer to the gourmet side of the line. I'm an avid cook. Lawrence and I have hosted an open invitation dinner party every Thursday for

years now for the purpose of trying out new recipes. We've gone from Midwestern-Italian fusion cuisine (Al Capone and Tax Day) to South African (Nelson Mandela memorial) to Georgia (as an excuse to use Coca-Cola as a basic cooking ingredient). Before the serious cooking hobby, I worked for a decade in different areas of market development for food, investigating things like how to establish place-based food labeling systems and the future of artisan cheese. In graduate school, I researched survey techniques for determining customers' true food preferences. I had a brief, glorious run playing Clover the Dairy Cow, the official dairy mascot of Vermont. The *hákarl* took me by surprise. It suggested a new dimension of flavor that I'd never considered. What was this architecture of flavor where you can have multiple, separate levels within a single food? It also suggested that my knowledge of food and flavor didn't reach nearly as far as I might have liked to believe.

I was still contemplating the possibilities when Lawrence and I joined the rest of the wedding party at a remote inn perched between lava fields and the gray sea, with a 16th-century church that seated forty positioned like an outhouse a respectful distance from the back door. We naturally offered to buy a round of *hákarl* for everyone. The group didn't balk. This was, after all, a group of forty people who were willing to fly to Iceland on a bride's whim and were well into the Brennivin by the time I suggested a snack. I explained what they'd taste—that distinct architecture of three strong sensations each occurring separately from the one before. I wondered whether any other food behaved the same way. No one knew. Once the conversation of weird food got started, however, other guests had their own finds to share.

One of the bride's cousins, an enthusiastic rotted shark sampler, gave me a tip: "If you like *hákarl*, you should try Bjork. Not the singer. It's a birch liqueur. You've never had anything like it."

The day after the wedding ceremony, all the guests trooped out into the cold rain for a walk along the sea shore cliffs. The waves had dug arches and tunnels out of the rock. We shuffled carefully over rain-slicked grass to the cliff edges to observe them, then trekked along the cliff tops until they descended into a beach. There, we tumbled into a warm shack that became a steam bath the instant our sodden company entered. The proprietors sold fish chowder, hot chocolate,

and waffles with thick cream. A row of liquor bottles above the cash register provided additional warmth for those who wanted something stronger than hot chocolate. There, on that shelf, emerging from the steam, I spotted the Bjork. I ordered a glass.

The snifter I received held an amber-colored liquor infused with all the fragrance of a woodland waking up in spring. I truly couldn't decipher where aroma left off and taste began. Maybe it didn't. You can't drink a woodland, not really, but the scents of the liqueur implied that I could ... and that it would be delicious. It reminded me of pipe tobacco. The flavor seemed to exist entirely in its fragrance.

Now, I was getting somewhere. Now, I didn't just have random food experiences in a foreign land; I also had my own explanations (correct or not) for what made them unique. There were the flavors composed entirely of fragrance; there were the flavors that arrived in distinct phases. It was a framework for thinking about flavor that went beyond cataloging specific foods and drinks to outlining types of flavors to explore within. I hadn't thought this much about what made flavors distinctive at home, or what made them familiar, either.

The whole Iceland episode raised two questions in my mind: When would another friend get married in a place with weird food to eat (I'd encourage Indonesia, Morocco, Tokyo and/or Hong Kong), and how *does* flavor work, anyway? The first question remains a mystery. For answering the second question, though, I have the benefit of living in Vermont, a hub of food activity. Our citizens hover always on the brink of opening a specialty food business, and we are the center of the world's most important research into cookie dough for ice cream. I don't have to travel far to find people who have thought about flavor more than I ever will, who have reviewed lots of observations about what makes one flavor experience different from another and drawn conclusions based on sample sets larger than their own dining history. I could talk to these nearby flavor experts (or seriously skilled amateurs). I could also stand to read some of the entire bookshelf of cookbooks and other food writing I've amassed over the years. And pay more attention to the food and drink around me. None of these steps would represent a major inconvenience.

I understand that I could have admitted to not knowing much about flavor, shrugged, dished myself a bowl of Ben & Jerry's ice cream, and gone on to a perfectly adequate eating life. But I was curious. I wanted a framework for flavor that would let me head off in search of new flavor experiences and to get new experience from familiar flavors. That's a common desire for people who have a starting interest in food. Even for people who don't have a starting interest in food, a desire for exploration and discovery is still there, whether it's playing with the latest technology gadget, watching athletes break records for what the human body could do before, or hearing rock and roll for the first time. The Internet is saturated with "You won't believe this..." headlines because, as a rule, we're curious to learn something new, even something entirely inane involving cats. It stands to reason, then, that we would all feel the pull of a chance for discovery in one of the most common activities of our day: eating (or drinking).

The information presented here is meant to be fun and, frankly, easy. It doesn't include extraordinary measures to become a connoisseur. At no point will any reader of this book be required to eat rotten shark. Nonetheless, I hope that some will be taken by the desire to explore a little further afield than their daily routine. From there, it's a slippery slope to a *Star Trek*-like compulsion to keep going further into the unknown. And the next thing you know, you'll be on a plane to Reykjavik. Be sure to take pictures.

A Note on Flavor and Taste:

This book uses "taste" and "flavor" interchangeably, but "flavor" is technically more correct. You have taste buds that detect five different sensations we call "tastes": sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and savory. That's a pretty limited set of sensations and not really what we mean when we talk about the overall taste of a dish. If you ask someone to taste your grandmother's top secret marinara sauce recipe, you may want them to comment on, say, whether it has enough salt, but you also want them to experience a whole lot more than that. You want them to experience the *flavor*. But, if you ask someone to please pause and experience the flavor of your marinara, you'll sound pretentious. That is why we say taste when we really mean flavor.