

# TREAT YOURSELF

WITH A LITTLE PLANNING AND DETERMINATION, YOU CAN REROUTE YOUR CONVENIENCE-FOOD BUDGET INTO THE EASY, PLEASURABLE DISHES YOU DESERVE

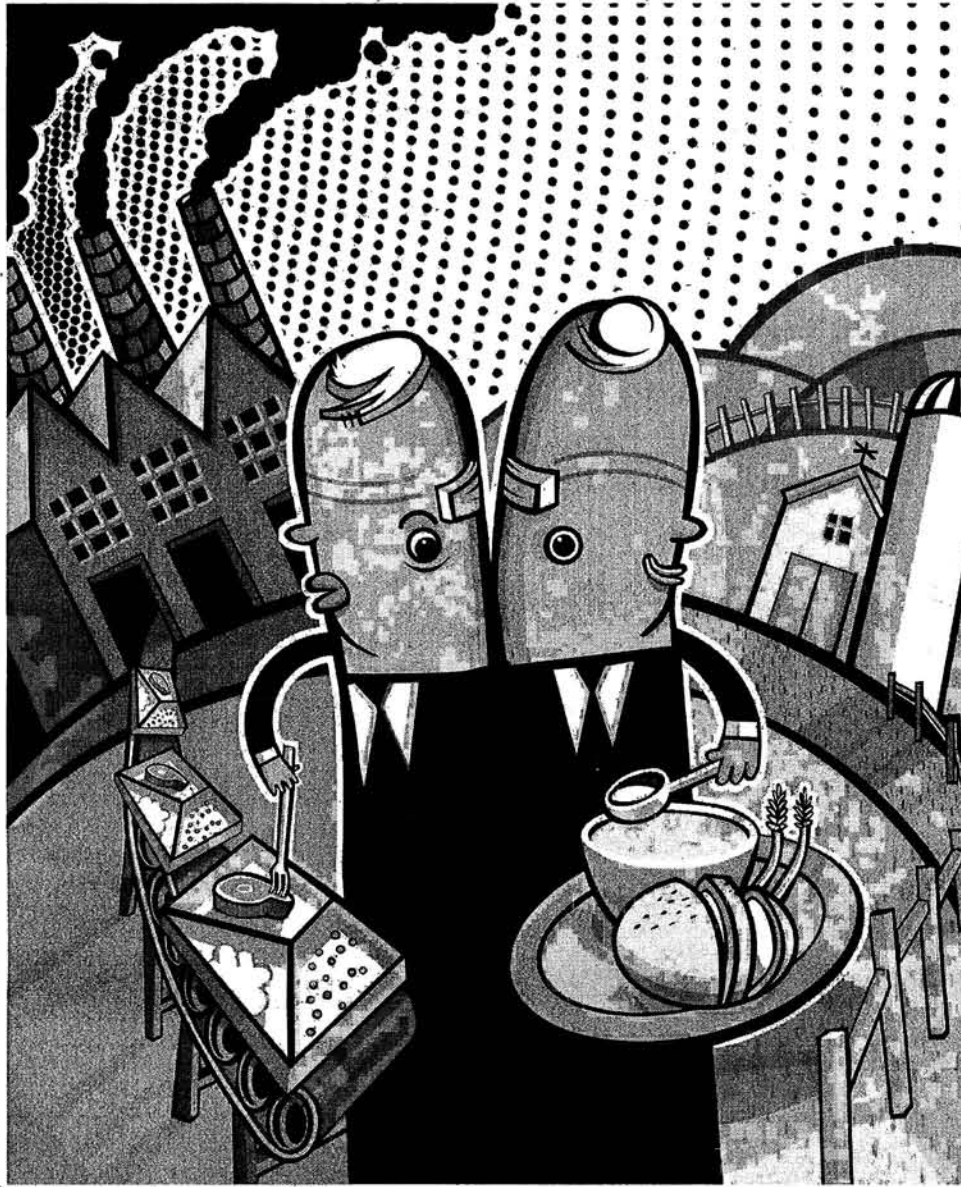
BY ANGELA MURRILLS

**H**ere's something to ponder as you sit there digesting the turkey. How about making it Christmas for your taste buds all year round by continually exposing them to the *crème de la crème* of edibles? Like organic vegetables, free-range meats, imported oils humming with truffles and walnuts. "Who, me?" I can hear you asking dryly. "With that holiday Visa bill looming?" Who else? People who love to eat will argue that *food* and *budget* don't even belong in the same breath. I disagree. Not all of us have bottomless bank accounts. I'm way too lazy and math-deficient to do the numbers, but I would bet that eating extremely well most nights of the week costs around the same as (or less than) consistently eating rubbish that came rolling off a factory assembly line.

What got me thinking about this was making a fairly luxurious risotto the other night, leisurely stirring and stirring, mind wandering, ladling in hot chicken stock once in a while, and finally showering on some real Parmigiano and watching the dark earthy streaks of the French wild mushrooms as it all came together. It might sound extravagant, but it's not. A kilo of Arborio rice is \$2.49 at Bosa's (562 Victoria Drive), where you can also get an excellent deal on Parmigiano. (The aged premium is on special for \$25.95 a kilo right now.) The worker cheese is still grateable even when rock-hard, and its rind earns its keep deep in a vast pot of minestrone. (For my favourite recipe, visit [www.straight.com/](http://www.straight.com/) and click on Dining.) Nor are imported wild mushrooms the heady indulgence they might appear. At Gourmet Warehouse (1856 Pandora Street, handily not far from Bosa's), around \$5 will get you enough authentic Gallic dried cepes for a half-dozen risottos for two. Chicken stock is basically chicken bones plus water, at its best when made with a free-range bird. Yes, they cost more, but teach yourself to disassemble a real chicken into drumsticks, thighs, breasts, wings, and remains (for stock), and it compares favourably with the cost of individual parts of a battery-raised fowl.

**Another secret of eating top-quality meat all the time is simply to eat less of it. Rather than a big T-bone, try a small perfect New York cut from a cow that has ranged freely and lived on grass all its life. A local company, the inventively named Nomad Cows, currently sells its Have You Herd trial pack, about nine kilos of dry-aged steaks, cross rib roast, ground sirloin, and braising cuts, for \$95. Info is at [www.nomadcows.ca/](http://www.nomadcows.ca/), and if you can wait for the monthly run to Vancouver, delivery is on the house. Give yourself wild salmon all the time, too, even if it's only the heads and carcasses for chowders or fish soups that breathe of Marseilles.**

Very trendily bistro, that is, as is having walnut oil around, also from France (\$5.99 for a quarter-litre at Gourmet Warehouse) to dress salads of watercress or arugula or Puy lentils topped with toasted walnuts and chopped onion. Invest in White Truffle Olive Oil, too (\$11.95 for two fluid ounces). Kept in the fridge once it's opened, that tiny bottle lasts forever and it miraculously elevates mashed potatoes. Am I hammering this home enough? Buy the best ingredients you can and you will eat splendidly. That's what all the chefs say, and they're right. "Eat



seasonally" is the other motto carved on their shields. Again, you eat better if you do, both in flavour and, oddly, in budget. Quick question: what costs less right now, imported romaine or B.C. red cabbage? When Okanagan apples are out there, as they are now, why mess with imported strawberries?

I know this sounds daunting. When you've just put in eight-plus hours, then made your way home in the rain, the shining lights on the horizon are the microwave and the Sony. But imagine instead having minestrone one night, roasted free-range chicken the next, and risotto the night after that. Feasts. And even perceived "famine" suppers aren't exactly deprivation when they mean scrambled eggs with wild mushrooms and truffle oil or a big bowl of homemade soup. Almost all cookbooks complicate soups unnecessarily. Years ago, a Portuguese friend showed me how to throw assorted veggies, very roughly chunked let me tell you, into a pan, add garlic and herbs, and cover it all with water. Cook till soft, purée with a Braun wand (about \$30 and it also whisks skimmed milk to a cloudy froth for your cappuccinos), and there's a batch of potato-leek or squash-onion or carrot-ginger or whatever else you invent. Put a loaf of good bread with it and a salad, and you will not, guaranteed, feel impoverished.

May you have many such feasts in 2005.

## Sweet dreams are made of beans for Japanese treats

From miso to *macha*, Vancouver's boundless appetite for Japanese cuisine keeps

absorbing more elements into its menus. Yet one area remains overlooked: traditional Japanese sweets, or *wagashi*. Part of the reason may be that westerners unaccustomed to the flavours deem them an acquired taste. Nevertheless, Asian tea culture and Chinese cousins of *wagashi*—moon cakes and red-bean desserts—are working their way mainstream. What's more, if you're invited to a Japanese home over the holidays (to which you must never go empty-handed), know an exchange student homesick for Shogatsu (Japan's traditional multi-day New Year's celebration of food and family, which overshadows Christmas), or are looking for a new culinary adventure, *wagashi* may be just the thing.

These traditional equivalents of western chocolates and pastries are meant to appeal to all five senses, from texture to presentation to the sound of their names (often derived from literature). Tea-drinking in Japan has gone hand in hand with light snacks ever since a 12th-century Zen priest introduced the Chinese tradition to his homeland. Originally savoury bites reserved for emperors and shoguns, the treats became popularized through the tea ceremony. When Japan's main trading partner, the Portuguese, introduced European pastries made with eggs and sugar in the 16th century, even more offshoots proliferated. Each prefecture has its own variation, and throughout the year seasonal kinds are made, such as the cakelike *nerikiri* for New Year's and *sakura mochi* (rice cakes wrapped in salted cherry leaves) for March's Hina Matsuri (Girls' Festival).

At her MacKenzie Heights home, Japan-born Vancouverite Chikage Fujiwada unveils a lacquer box filled with a stunning array she has made to illustrate some of the main types, including steamed, baked, and cold versions. They all have *anko* (sweetened red or white adzuki-bean paste) inside. Good news for the health-conscious: *anko* is rich in vegetable protein and fibre and low in fat. Fujiwada's father taught her how to make the sweets at his West Tokyo shop, opened by her grandfather. As with many Japanese traditions, however, mass-production and western foods are displacing *wagashi* shops. Nevertheless, artfully packaged boxes of these delicacies—eye candy unto themselves—are strategically displayed in department stores and train stations for respect-in-a-rush gift purchases. Though costly, Fujiwada-san uses imported Japanese ingredients for her baking because, as she shows me, they are distinctly different from Canadian products: her brown sugar is a nongranulated, molasses-tasting fine powder; her flour is silkier than Canadian versions; her food colouring is powder, not liquid; and *isupata* (a special ammonium rising-agent powder for *wagashi*) has no North American equivalent.

The more common type in Vancouver are *manju*, either with baked pastry or *mochi* (sticky rice paste) exteriors concealing *anko* centres. Imports can be found in Japanese food stores such as Fujiya (912 Clark Drive) and Konbiniya (1238 Robson Street). Handmade versions are often sold at Japanese Canadian events like the traditional Shogatsu rice-pounding demonstration at the National Nikkei Heritage Centre (6688 Southoaks Crescent, Burnaby) on Wednesday (December 29) or at the Japanese Language School (487 Alexander Street), where volunteers make and sell *yaki manju* (baked type) on most Saturday mornings.

Keiko Yagi, in her 18th year of *manju*-baking at the school, demonstrates how she makes them. The recipe's reliance on canned milk harks back to Japanese Canadians who had to be resourceful with limited supplies in World War II Internment camps. Yagi-san cuts off chunks of dough, rolls them into balls, then presses them into mini pancakes. She folds them around *anko* balls (from a purchased mixture), shapes them into ovals with the "bellybutton" (the joined dough) face-down, then glazes them with a mix of egg yolk and canned milk. After eight minutes in the oven, the oven-fresh pastry tastes pancake-delicious while the *anko* is deeply rich. Yagi-san says it tastes even better after a few days, when the ingredients have "settled" and, she says with a laugh, "aged". For those tasting *wagashi* for the first time, this type is the most western-friendly place to start.

To find out more about *wagashi* and Japanese culinary culture, try Victoria Abbott Riccardi's travel memoir (complete with recipes), *Untangling My Chopsticks: A Culinary Sojourn in Kyoto* (Broadway Books, 2003), about her experiences learning *kaiseki*, the rarefied art of Japanese-tea-ceremony food preparation. For your own homegrown experience, contact the Japanese Language School to find out when the next *manju*-making session (and even learn some Japanese at the same time) is by calling 604-254-2551 or e-mailing [vjls@vjls-jh.com](mailto:vjls@vjls-jh.com).

• CRAIG TAKEUCHI

## BREW OF THE WEEK

The "powerhouse" in Mt. Begbie Powerhouse Pale Ale (\$4 for a 650-millilitre bottle) refers to the Revelstoke Power & Light dam, built circa 1912 and depicted on the label—not to the kick, which is only 4.8 percent. Here's a smooth-textured, hearty-tasting, well-integrated, light amber-coloured, light malt roast-tasting, fresh, and fragrant ale; it's sweet off the nose but in no way sweet in the taste, ending superbly with a long flavour hold as it slides down. Deep and satisfying and—hey!—non-burp-making, it's a good one from the mountains; keep some cold for the morning after.

• JURGEN GOTHE

## FOOD OF THE WEEK

*Jamón serrano* is Spanish for "mountain ham", and it's similar to prosciutto. The only place on the West Coast you can buy the real thing (and it arrived just days ago) is La Grotta del Formaggio (1791 Commercial Drive, 604-255-3911). Dry-cured for about 15 months, the ham has a flavour that's a little sweet and a little nutty but not overly salty. You can pair it with figs or melon, but you don't need to get fancy. In Spain, the usual way to eat it is simply, with chunks of good bread and a glass of wine or sherry. About \$5 for 100 grams.

• ANGELA MURRILLS