

CAN THIS BE

LOVE?

by Bette-Jane Raphael

Eating out with him: Can you dine together and still entwine together?

When dining out, my father will eat the sole of a shoe if that's what the waiter brings him. He feels that complaining in a restaurant is as embarrassing as falling down drunk in it. My mother, however, believes that if you don't speak up for yourself, nobody else will, and when she speaks up for herself to the tune of one overdone steak, my father has a physical reaction so obvious he reminds me of The Incredible Shrinking Man.

Observing them—as well as a number of other long-lived duos who negotiate their restaurant incompatibilities without regularly dumping plates of spaghetti on each other's heads—has convinced me that tolerance of one another's restaurant behavior is as important to a couple's equilibrium as tolerance of one another's bedroom behavior.

This is, I'll admit, a somewhat self-serving conclusion, as my own behavior in eating establishments is, let us say, distinctive. (My lover thinks "peculiar" is more accurate.) For instance, I take about the same amount of time to choose a table as other women take to choose a fur coat, and I am always sure that we are receiving less attentive service, less appealing food and, generally speaking, less respect than the other diners in the restaurant. My mind is apt to wander from our own conversation to that going on between our waiter and the people sitting next to us, certain that he is telling them about a special dish of which he has purposely left us ignorant. "What are they having?" I ask suspiciously, looking over at an interesting plate being set down across the way, positive it is something infinitely superior to what we ordered.

My partner, who has the naive idea that people eat dinner out in order to relax, finds this atmosphere of intrigue and suspicion inimical to his appetite. He says it's like trying to have a picnic on top of the Berlin wall. This prompts me to point out one or two of his eccentricities, like the fact that he scrutinizes the silverware with the intensity of a jeweler studying a slightly suspect diamond. By the time our food comes we are so tight-lipped, we have to pry our mouths open in order to get it down.

Our dining-out differences pale, however, before Phil's and Andy's. When it comes to food, Phil is, shall we say, conservative. His palate was closed to new sensations by the time he was eighteen, and to this day he has the unshakable belief that anything his mother didn't cook isn't worth eating. On the other hand, Andy, Phil's roommate for almost three years, approaches a menu with the same spirit of adventure with which

Columbus approached The New World. Long after Phil has ordered his steak (without the Béarnaise sauce, please), Andy is engaged in learning about the seventeen ingredients in the special oyster casserole, undecided about whether to order it or stick with her first choice, something called Yemenite Surprise. Unfortunately, Phil thinks Andy does all this to torture him, and that her active interest in food is actually passive aggression against him. This accusation prompts Andy to call him a culinary coward who couldn't fight his way out of a food processor, an assault on his manhood that brings Phil to his feet and their meal to an abrupt end.

Let us move quickly along to Mel and Marjorie. Mel can down a bowl of bouillabaisse in about the same amount of time it takes to *spell* bouillabaisse. And he's not choosy. In fact, he'll consume anything that doesn't actually walk off his plate. Marjorie, on the other hand, is a precise and picky eater. She scrutinizes her food with all the care of an overzealous pathologist. And as she picks and chooses her way through a sandwich, setting aside a less than perfect piece of tomato, eating around a bit of fatty bacon, daintily placing her napkin, tentlike, over her discards, Mel gets more and more fidgety. "Come on, already!" he is apt to boom at her after sitting in front of his empty plate for twenty minutes, watching her dissect a piece of suspect meat. At which point Marjorie, who finds being boomed at even more distasteful than a brown-edged lettuce leaf, refuses to eat another bite. She pushes her plate, with its napkin-covered secrets, away from her, and they both feel rotten.

Finally, there are Sarah and Peter. Sarah was taught that good manners dictate one keeps one's eyes on one's own plate, and one's hands off anybody else's food. Peter, her long-time, live-in lover, believes they should share each other's dishes as unstintingly as they do all their other life experiences, and that when Sarah withholds a taste of her fillet of sole, she's actually withholding her love. He finds her disinterest in his duck à l'orange indistinguishable from a disinterest in him. I have seen their tempers stretched as thin as a slice of prosciutto, with out-and-out warfare averted only by Sarah's willingness to share a piece of cheesecake for dessert. Here, as elsewhere in negotiating a viable relationship, the message is clear: Small Compromises Reap Big Rewards.

Which is why I recently ate an entire portion of fettucine Alfredo without a murmur, even though I had a good suspicion that the waiter hadn't fully explained to us what the special pasta of the day was.

I'll do anything for love.