

THE BASIL MADE ME DO IT: Confessions of a Returned Californian

Broccoli that wasn't gray. Fruit that didn't look like it had infectious skin diseases. It was almost for these alone

I made sure that I got back to visit California at least once every six months during my three and a half years in Manhattan. One of the first things I would do after I got off the plane was go hunting for produce and when I was staying in Berkeley, I would make a pilgrimage to Monterey market. There it would all be: handfuls of coriander at one third the price of Balduci's and the Fairway, the best New York has to offer. Varieties of melons and tomatoes newly cultivated from boutique farmers and U.C. Davis laboratories since my last trip out. Strange-looking objects (fruits, vegetables, roots, condiments?) supporting the latest and coolest foreign cuisines to hit town.

Ah, but the basil. I couldn't get over the basil. No matter what time of year I made my return, there were always bunches of basil. In New York I had grown used to not counting on anything; you could never be sure when the entire city would be out of green beans, or roasting chickens or basil.

My apartment, a cave with a view of the street, was located in New York's Upper West Side. The building that held it was a 19th-century townhouse, converted to apartments in the late 1960s in such a way that residents of all 12 units got to know each other very well. I became especially friendly with the fellow who lived directly above me two floors up, an escapee from Staten Island who functioned as a combination dorm mother and janitor for the complex. He liked plants, so the second summer I was there, we collaborated on a rooftop garden. We grew tomatoes, herbs, petunias, New Zealand spinach. I insisted on a rosebush. He bought two different varieties of catnip for my cats. Because ours was a small building surrounded by highrises, the tar beach only got sun until 2 p.m. Valiantly we watered our charges by carrying buckets of water up a ladder through a skylight, or through complicated hose systems rigged up

across the roof from a nearby penthouse kitchen. I hated to tell him, but the tomatoes always tasted like petrochemicals. The basil we poured so much concern and water into, began to fade by October; I mentioned as we cut down the last stalk in the fall for drying in our kitchens, that in California, basil grew all year. He was incredulous—one more tall tale from the provincial hick—for our basil had clearly gone to seed.

There were compensations, though. If I were making lasagna or Midwestern chicken and biscuits at two in the morning, it was a comfort to know that both the Korean and Iranian grocery stores at the corner would always be open. Old Dutch Mill brand, the Platonic ideal of little chocolate-covered doughnuts, were within walking distance at the Thai grocery store that to its credit also stocked purple orchids. And I quickly came to see that West Coast oysters were not the Real Thing, and that there were advantages to being able to rely on regular supplies of pears from France and blood oranges from Italy.

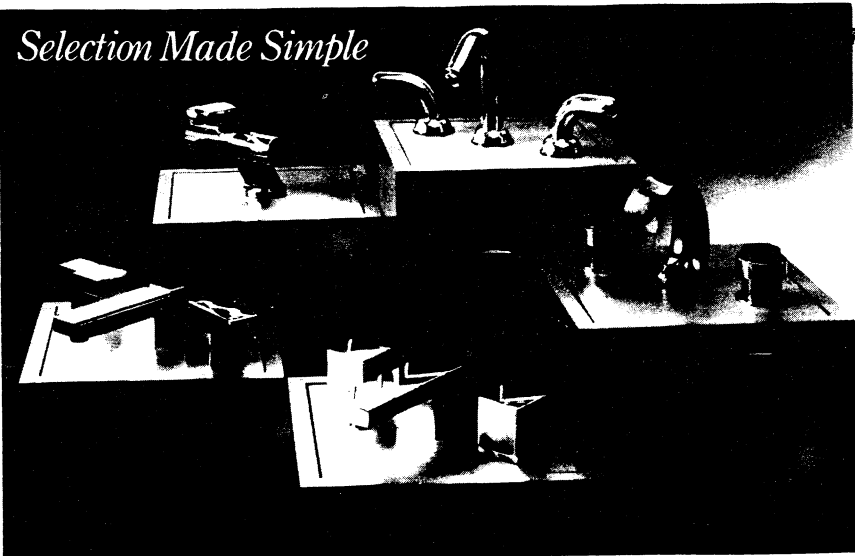
The relationship to nature did require some rethinking, however. In New York, if you wanted to know what the weather was like, you turned on the radio. Back here, you look out the window. But then there was the day hurricane Gloria came to town, bringing nature with her to the astonishment of Manhattan. Once the New Yorkers taped up their windows and realized that the bridge and tunnel people of Long Island and New Jersey were getting the worst of it once again, they enjoyed the spiraling clouds passing overhead. People looked at the sky instead of the skyline. From Riverside Drive you could see boats, moored up the Hudson for safety, whipping around on their anchors. Nothing could have been finer than walking through the center of the known universe when its air was clean and its inhabitants giddy with ozone.

Still, crazed for the natural world during my time in the Big City, at one point

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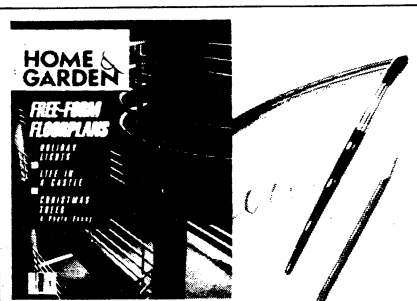
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I took a trip with a fifth-generation Californian to the Maine coast. We had been assured that its wildness and rugged beauty would equal anything on the West Coast. Veterans of camping at Big Sur and the mudbaths at Calistoga, we were eager to see nature after years of running around the reservoir in Central Park, which we considered a poor substitute for the fire-trail in Strawberry Canyon. As it turned out, it was a good thing that we were with each other and no one else, for no New Yorker could have borne our constant "well, it's not like California" comments. We climbed Mt. Desert. "They call this a mountain?" We decided that whoever had recommended this had clearly never hiked the Dipsea trail on Mt. Tamalpais.

The same friend had originally moved to New York to attend graduate school after living 10 years in the Bay Area. We shared among other things a serious interest in bonemeal, bulbs and the cultivation of old roses. Whatever the season she always tried to bring back boxes of strawberries whenever she made the trip back home: I would reciprocate by bringing her lemons from my parents' tree. At one point in her longings for the Left Coast, she tried to grow a packet of California Golden Poppy seeds on her fire escape that faced the Museum of Natural History. It didn't work. Still, she was waffling about moving back. After all, her husband might get a fellowship in Spain.

She called me in my new California apartment that masquerades as a shrine to the sun, wanting help with her decision. I smugly let her know that it had taken more than one ring for me to answer; these things take time if you have to walk from one room into another. I uttered the most diabolically persuasive phrase I knew: "window boxes." I rubbed it in further. "Lobelia." I told her I was growing basil out on my deck.

"You have a deck?" She vaguely remembered what a deck was. I also reminded her what it was like to live in a place where by standing in one spot you could not see all four of your walls. So she too, made the return of the prodigal: she now lives in a rehabilitated Post Modern Victorian in the Haight.

People want to visit when you move back to San Francisco—I had more houseguests in the first month in my Potrero Hill flat than in the last two years in New York. When the New Yorkers arrived, they admired the views of Twin Peaks, the backyard, the eat-in kitchen. They would marvel that the place had been listed on the bulletin board at the local health foods store, and that no broker had been paid 15 percent of the first year's rent, no super had been bribed, and that

no, I hadn't gone to school with the landlord's sister. In fact, when I would tell them I liked my landlord, that he was a nice guy, that he fixed things as soon as they broke, and that indeed, it was his borrowed futon they were sleeping on, they would shake their heads. They remembered that in New York, when I was without hot water for four months, my landlord thought he and I should split the difference. True, everyone in the building did get to know my entire bathrobe collection as I crept into different neighbors' showers every morning; as a renter living in Chelsea, this was a pleasure my landlord was denied.

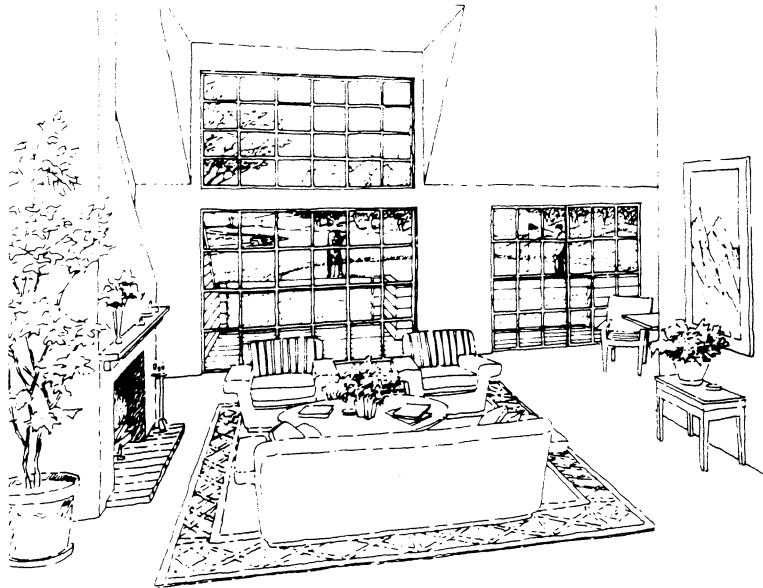
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But as an experiment in communal living, the experience could probably not be repeated in Northern California. Just as all New York conversations inevitably turn to real estate (and all Northern California conversations inevitably turn toward food) my kindly Manhattan neighbors had the compassion and esprit de corps that could only come from having a common enemy.

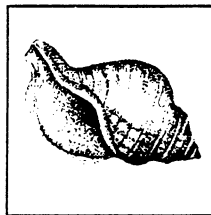
Taking one of these incredulous visiting New Yorkers down to Santa Cruz, we stayed with some people who designed and built their redwood house up in the mountains, a jasmine-ridden site that overlooks Monterey Bay. The place smells of oak and eucalyptus and you never need to turn a light on during the day to read. As long as they've lived there, they've always grown basil. Admiringly, my friend spoke like a true New Yorker: "What do I have to do and how much money do I need to get this?"

Now I knew that these hill dwellers were lucky, that like their New York counterparts who had the wisdom to buy an apartment on Central Park West before Columbus Avenue transformed itself into Union Street east, they had shrewdly made their investment before land prices got out of hand on both coasts. But we'd had pesto with fresh pasta, salmon from Monterey Bay and Ridge Zinfandel for dinner. So I told a white lie. All I said was "move here." ■

Paulina Borsook is an editor at McGraw-Hill and happy to be able to buy organic tomatoes.

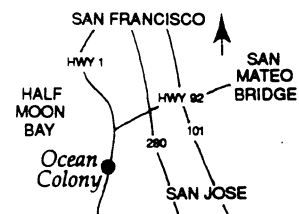


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