

**MARISOL****by Poppy Z. Brite**

You could say it was a bad patch in my life. I'd been suspended from my position as coroner of New Orleans following allegations of negligence in the Devlin Lemon case (these were ultimately resolved and I am now back at work). My dalliance with rock god Kyle Gass of Tenacious D was testing the patience of my long-suffering husband, Seymour. (Most D groupies prefer Jack Black, but I've always had a bit of a fetish for sidekicks.) I suppose it was only natural that I would fall in with the crowd at Marisol. They were a hard-drinking bunch, but they kept me well fed.

Marisol is a bit of a fluke on the New Orleans restaurant scene. Chef Peter Vazquez failed to endear himself to the old-line dining crowd when he told the Times-Picayune restaurant critic, "You'll never see crawfish or maque choux on my menu." I have heard that in the wake of this (excellent) review, Chef Pete was anonymously sent a pound of crawfish, each one dressed in a tiny ghost costume. The gift card read, "YOUR WORDS WILL HAUNT YOU FOREVER." That right there should tell you a great deal about the psychotic, meuniere-drenched ways of New Orleans' old-line dining crowd. Most of them are happy to sit quietly

dipping the splintery legs of their fried softshell crabs into the pools of brown butter on their plates, but a few feel compelled to police the eating habits of everyone else in the city. Perhaps you've heard of the Food Police, those guardians of cardiovascular health who seem to take sadistic pleasure in announcing that your favorite foods are bad for you. In New Orleans the Food Police don't care about your health, but they exercise constant vigilance against vegetarians, exotic ethnic cuisines, and any dish that hasn't been on the city's menus since 1870 or so. You should see their arteries when they die - cross-section one and it looks exactly like a Krispy Kreme doughnut.

At any rate, Marisol has been on the radar of the New Orleans Food Police since 1999. The place is infamous for "weird" flavor combinations, "disgusting" use of organ meats and offal, and a cheese list whose very excess seems to offend a city known for its excesses. (There were over forty cheeses on the list at last count, each served with its own house-made garnish.) Consider the Maine lobster wrapped in a crispy pig's ear with baby bok choy, toasted rice cake, and XO sauce. This was, quite simply, one of the best dishes I've eaten anywhere in my life. The lobster was the tenderest I've ever had, and it soaked up the combined flavors of the pork fat, the sweet glaze, and the spicy XO sauce to form a heavenly gestalt. The pig's ear

had been simmered for days so that it was also fork-tender, but retained some of its interesting gelatinous crunch. A pass through a blowtorch flame had caramelized the surface of the dish, making it dark and crackly. I ate every bite, then licked the plate, then gnawed on the rim. Since Pete has a repertoire of about eight hundred dishes and seldom repeats himself, I feel lucky to have had this dish the way you might feel lucky to have glimpsed Garbo on a Paris street or seen Charlie Parker play at Birdland. But it's the sort of thing that can inflame New Orleans as surely as claiming KFC makes better chicken than Popeye's.

(Popeye's Fried Chicken, incidentally, was founded in New Orleans. Possibly you know that, but it seems we seldom receive credit for our principal products simply because no one believes we're capable of producing anything beyond voodoo, jazz, and alligator-foot backscratchers. I once played tour guide to a pair of Bay Area pathologists who must have been jaded from the experience of living in a real city. As we drove past Ruth's Chris Steak House on Broad Street, I commented, "That's the original Ruth's Chris," and they said, "Oh, we thought it started in San Francisco, because we have them there." A while later we drove past the Calliope housing project. I said, "There's where Master P grew up," and they replied, "Oh, we thought he was from Oakland, because we saw one of his

billboards in our neighborhood." No acknowledgement whatsoever that we might birth our own steak chains and rap stars. This sort of cultural droit de seigneur, if you will, boils my blood so thoroughly that I can't bear to discuss it any further.)

On the shady section of Esplanade Avenue that separates the French Quarter and the Faubourg Marigny, in a pretty whitewashed brick building with a blue-and-white-striped awning, Marisol appears to be a charming little restaurant. There are sunflowers painted on the walls of the dining room and a lush sun-dappled courtyard in the back. For casual diners I imagine it is a charming little restaurant, nothing more. For serious food people it is a Mecca with more than a little of that city's underlying mystery and danger. These days, "Mecca" is used indiscriminately to describe any place people wish to visit, but one would do well to recall that infidels have been murdered for sneaking into Mecca. This is the kind of thing that doesn't seem out of the realm of possibility at Marisol. The stakes there are high enough to guarantee a spectacular dining experience, but too high for real comfort. If you are paying close attention, there's an edge to everything at Marisol.

To wit: The pumpkin-carving contest. I was the celebrity guest. You may well ponder the wisdom of promoting your business via a disgraced coroner cutting a face in a nogginlike gourd. Everyone at Marisol thought it was a great idea, so on

the Saturday before Halloween, I arrived at the restaurant with a handful of not-so-sharp scalpels. Tenacious D had arrived in town that afternoon to play a show at the House of Blues, and I was aching to see Kyle, but I'd promised to do this event first. Janis Vazquez greeted me at the door. Married to Chef Pete for four years, she is co-owner of the restaurant and acts as hostess, manager, accountant, P.R. flak, and raconteur. Despite the occasional outbursts of utter despair that come with the territory of owning a restaurant, she always looks cool and exotically pretty, and I was glad to see her. "Kyle's in town," I said. "What should I do?"

"Well, let's see. I know - you should go to his hotel room and refuse to leave until the two of you have spent at least three hours fucking like bunnies."

"But what about Seymour?"

"Ahhh, hell. Give him a hundred one-dollar bills and tell him to spend the evening at the Hustler Club."

"That's sick, Janis."

"You cut off the tops of people's skulls with an electric saw, and you call me sick," said Janis. "I adore your logic, Dr. Brite. And speaking of cutting off the tops of skulls, we've got the pumpkins all ready out back."

Janis fixed me a glass of Wild Turkey and ice with a splash of soda, and I walked through the restaurant to the courtyard.

Several of the waiters, waitresses, and regular customers were selecting pumpkins from a pile by the fountain. Chef Pete and Shayne the bartender sat slumped at a table in a shady corner of the courtyard. I gripped my drink in one hand, hoisted a large, warty pumpkin under the other arm, and walked over to them.

They lifted their heads at the sound of my approach, but then their chins sank toward their chests again as if the effort had been too much. Though they were both big, strapping men, today they appeared somehow diminished. Pete's slate-blue eyes were red-rimmed and crusty, and pain dulled their usual manic gleam. Shayne's fair Irish complexion had gone hectically blotchy.

"What in the world have you two been doing?" I said.

"You have to ask?" said Pete, and laughed his depraved-sounding laugh.

"Well, drinking, I assume. But I've seen you hung over before, and you didn't look like this."

"It was a really extreme night," said Shayne. "At least I think it was."

There followed a litany of half-recollections, that odd combination of boast and remorse unique to the badly hung over: "I found my keys in the trash this morning." "I found my head in the trash this morning." "Do you remember putting all the cocktail shakers in my car?" "Do you remember spitting on that

hippie?" "When I got home, even my dog wouldn't come near me."

"Dude, I didn't even get home."

I waited for them to wind down. When they fell silent, I said, "Was there some special reason for this bacchanal, or did you just decide you hadn't suffered enough lately?"

"Oh, I've suffered," said Pete. "I've suffered, all right. Look."

From under the table he pulled a copy of Big Easy, a glossy magazine left as a freebie in many of the city's upscale hotel rooms and lobbies. It fell open to a dog-eared page. I took the magazine and began to read a review of Marisol by Big Easy's restaurant critic, Lianne Apple. It wasn't so much a bad review as a completely clueless one.

**... it seems to me that Vazquez is making snazzy fusion food that doesn't disappoint, but frequently confuses. Why complicate a perfectly decent duck confit by putting it in an Asian-tasting broth? Why wrap a nice piece of lobster in a pig's ear? Where are the connections? Is he simply trying to be weird? I liked much of what I ate at Marisol, but I never quite felt that I "got" it.**

I frowned, not quite getting it myself. Pete had received stupid reviews before, and even the good reviews of Marisol usually contained a stupid comment or two. He was operating at a level too eclectic for many critics, who must search out common denominators of taste.

But as I scanned the rest of the page, I saw what had unhinged him. At the end of the review was a section called "Tidbits" where Apple listed restaurant news and miscellanea. Here she had written, "Kudos to Escargot's at the Hotel Bienvenu for its spectacularly overhauled cheese cart! Now offering fourteen different selections including Valdeon, Laura Chenel goat cheese, and Manchego, this list is a peerless journey through le monde du fromage."

I'd ordered from the cheese cart at Escargot's, and the waiter had appalled me by slicing all my cheeses with the same knife so that their flavors contaminated one another. I skimmed the Marisol review again. Apple hadn't even mentioned Pete's forty-plus cheeses, only commenting that his dessert menu seemed "surprisingly light," whatever that meant. Pete was obsessive about everything to do with his menu, but the cheese list was his special baby. Ignoring it while giving props to a lesser list on the same page was tantamount to a declaration of war.

"'Is he simply trying to be weird?'" quoted Shayne, and they both cackled like demons, then clutched their heads. Pete waved one of the waitresses over and said, "Would you get me the Tylenol, Nora?"

"A Tylenol?"

"No, the Tylenol. The whole bottle."

"That's not good for your liver after alcohol," I said automatically.

"You know what, Doc?" said Pete.

"You don't give a fuck?"

"Right."

I picked up my scalpel and began to carve my jack o'lantern, but it was difficult to concentrate on forming perfect evil eyes and needle-sharp teeth. I worried about Janis and Pete, and about Marisol. Restaurants are very important to me, and I am committed to making sure my favorites thrive - that was why I was on an unpaid vacation just now. I had no doubts about the quality of the restaurant, but as I have said, Pete set the stakes almost impossibly high. I feared he would eventually self-destruct. Hell, I feared I might be self-destructing, and I wanted to be certain of eating well until I did so.

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Tenacious D and their entourage had arranged to stay over a few days in New Orleans, and I brought them to a wine dinner at Marisol. Seymour came too - he is a very patient man, though trying at times. I sat at the head of the table with him on one side and Kyle on the other, and I felt giddy with happiness. I

would drink all the wine pairings, I decided, though I had already had two Wild Turkey and sodas. I could do it. I was invincible.

The last thing I really remember is asking Jack Black whether Gwyneth Paltrow was really as vapid as she looked. "Or is her face just made that way?" I think I said. I don't remember his reply, or any of the subsequent events except in awful, jumpy flashes like something Oliver Stone might have left on the cutting-room floor. There's Pete behind the bar pouring himself a shot of tequila; I stick out my empty glass; "You don't really want one," he says; "Yes I do," I leer. There's me staggering to the patio doors, only to find them locked; somehow it's suddenly very late. There's me bending at the waist and puking on the nice hardwood bar floor, thinking I am being very discreet. There's Seymour pouring me into our car while Kyle stands on the curb shouting, "Go for it, buddy." There's me calling the flower shop the next day, whispering through my hangover, ordering a dozen white and a dozen red roses sent to Marisol with a note that says "Sorry about your floor."

Janis called two days after the wine dinner to thank me for the flowers and tell me the restaurant would be closed a week for kitchen repairs. "How was Kyle's visit?" she asked.

"He hasn't called me since the wine dinner. I think watching me vomit a seven-course meal may have taken the romance out of it for him."

"His loss," Janis said kindly.

"Yeah, I guess. How's Pete?"

"Oh, you know. Still bitching about that damn Big Easy review. If I were Lianne Apple, I wouldn't feel safe in my own home."

I laughed at that, because I thought she was kidding.

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Even when the Times-Picayune reported that Lianne Apple was missing, I didn't think much of it. The newspaper story said she had been estranged from her husband for several months and that he was a primary suspect in her kidnapping. Foul play seemed almost certain. Readers learned any number of sordid details about Apple, including the fact that she had been born with a congenital defect in her heart. Surgeons had cracked her chest and patched it up years ago, but she still had a fragile ticker. An anonymous police spokesperson opined that even if an assailant hadn't meant to really hurt her, a good shock could have literally scared her to death.

The husband, located and interrogated, declared his innocence in increasingly desperate tones. To no avail: he was still cooling his heels in Orleans Parish Prison when Marisol reopened. Pete sent me an e-mail titled "Come In Soon For The Most Kick-Ass Menu Ever."

I did, and it was. I ordered the Arctic char with weinkraut and received the best piece of fish I'd ever tasted. A strip of skin left on one side of the filet provided the perfect crisp contrast to the meltingly tender, unctuous pink flesh. As I was running my index finger across the plate to get the last traces of fat and kraut juice, Jason the waiter appeared at my table with another plate. "Chef wanted you to try this," he said. "He's putting it on the menu tomorrow. It's called The Offal Truth."

I think I frowned a little; Pete didn't usually go for cutesy dish names. But then Jason set the plate before me and my frown faded as I caught a whiff of it. There were thin slices of heart braised with chanterelles and coarse mustard; tripe cooked à la niçoise with tomatoes, garlic, and black olives; crisp sweetbreads with artichokes and caramelized onions. I dug into this bountiful organ sampler and had taken several bites before I noticed something curious. I forked up a slice of heart and examined it closely, noting the trace of old

scar tissue and the distinctive marks of tiny, well-healed stitches.

I looked up and saw Pete standing by the kitchen door, the very antithesis of the swanning, preening head chef in his unmonogrammed white jacket and scruffy check pants cut off at the knees. He grinned at me. I smiled back, put the slice of heart in my mouth, and chewed. That was when I realized I'd do just about anything to keep eating his food.

"How's the offal?" he said, coming over to the table.

"Great," I told him. "Delicious. Maybe your best idea ever. But don't serve the brain."

"Why? You worried about Creutzfeldt-Jacob Syndrome?"

"No," I said around a mouthful of garlicky tripe. "I'm just afraid stupidity might be contagious."

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