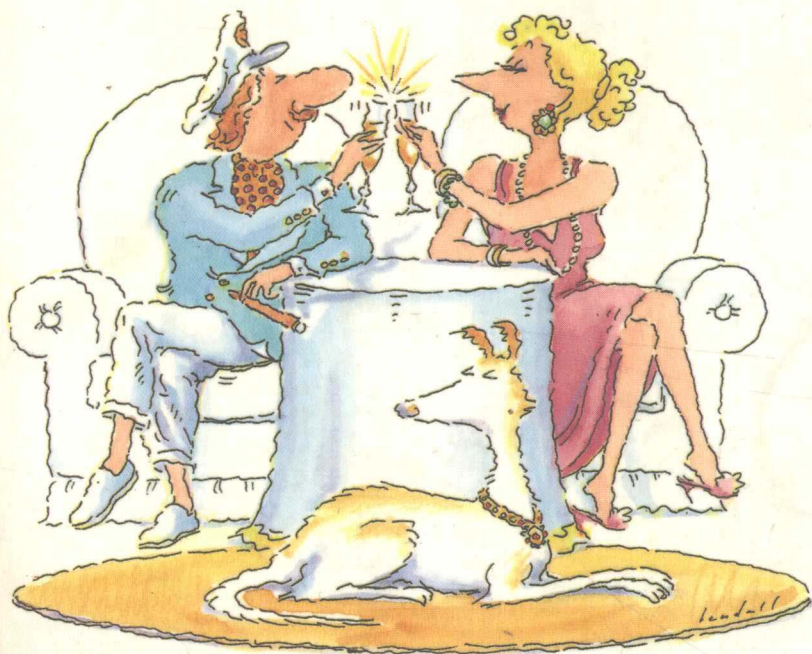


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER


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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

A Year in Provence



*Acquired
Tastes*



PETER MAYLE

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TASTES



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INTRODUCTION





MOST OF US, I BELIEVE, are born with a latent tendency toward extravagance, a lust for more and better, which lurks somewhere in the genes, ready to erupt at the hint of good fortune and the drop of a credit card. What else can explain the persistent purchase of shoes by a woman who already owns 399 pairs, the acquisition of a second helicopter, a fifth house, another dozen decorator cushions, a drum full of caviar, a methuselah of champagne? Who needs all that? Who buys it? And why?

The spending habits of the rich have intrigued me for years. Above all, I was curious to know if their little luxuries were actually worth the money. Were they paying for something special, or did the real pleasure, the fizz in the veins, come from the giddy feeling of being able to have whatever you want whenever you want it, and to hell with the cost? It was a question that recurred every time I brooded over an irate letter from American Express.

And then one day destiny intervened to help me find the answer. Martin Beiser of *GQ* magazine, a man of consummate faith and infinite expenses, had been told of my scholarly interest in the best that life is reputed to offer, and he was kind enough to give me my marching orders. Go forth, he said, and mingle with the wealthy. Do as they do, providing you obtain clearance from the Accounts Department first, and report back.

It is probably appropriate here to say a word or two about the circumstances in which I normally live. They're



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modest. I have one house, one small car, one bicycle, and four seldom-worn suits. Food and wine, since I'm lucky enough to live in an agricultural area of southern France, are good and inexpensive. My vices are relatively cheap, and I spend more money on books than anything else. I have no wish for a yacht, a racehorse, a butler, or even a crocodile attaché case with solid brass fittings and a combination lock, let alone the possessions that really gobble money—a vineyard in Bordeaux, for instance, or a collection of Impressionist art. I can admire and appreciate all these wonderful things, but I don't want to own them. They are, as far as I'm concerned, more trouble than they're worth. They end up owning you.

This was brought home to me one evening a few years ago at the home of a charming couple who suffered from being abnormally rich. One of their guests—it may have been me, now I come to think of it—accidentally nudged the heavy gilt frame of a murky painting in the living room. The alarm went off, and the security service had to be called and reassured and placated before we could sit down to dinner. While we were eating, our hostess spoke about another daily problem, that of the cutlery. It was beautiful old sterling silver, irreplaceable and heavily insured; a priceless heirloom. Unfortunately, the insurance was only valid if the cutlery was kept in a safe during its off-duty moments, and so knives, forks, and spoons had to be counted and locked up after every meal.

Well, you may say, these are only minor drawbacks to the otherwise enviable life of bliss that is enjoyed by the congenitally rich. But after pressing my nose up against the window and watching them in action from time to



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time, I'm not at all sure that they enjoy themselves as much as we think they do. And why? Because, damn it, something is always *not quite right*.

Expectations tend to increase in direct proportion to the amount of money being spent, and if you're spending a fortune you expect perfection. Alas, life being the badly organized shambles that it so often is, and with so much of it dependent on the behavior of erratic equipment (servants), perfection is rare. After a while, the rich realize this, and then they start looking for trouble. I've seen them do it. Details that we would consider trivial assume enormous significance: the breakfast egg is inedible because it is marginally underboiled, the silk shirt is unwearable because of a barely visible wrinkle, the chauffeur is insupportable because he's been eating garlic again, the doorman is either insufficiently attentive or overfamiliar—the list of maddening blots on the landscape of life just goes on and on. How can you have a nice day if some fool hasn't warmed your socks or ironed your newspaper properly?

I remember a fact-finding mission to a luxury hotel in Venice, a magnificent establishment with an equally magnificent chef. Impossible, I thought, to fail to enjoy dinner in such a place. But I was wrong. Sitting at the next table were four resplendent examples of old money from Milan. They were not happy. The white wine was not chilled exactly to their taste. A finger was lifted, but the waiter took longer than thirty seconds to arrive. Good grief, what is the world coming to? Throughout dinner, I could hear totally unjustified mutterings of discontent. No matter how delicious the food, how splendid the surround-



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ings, things were *not quite right*. And this atmosphere—almost suspicious, poised for disappointment—pervaded the entire room. There wasn't a jolly millionaire in sight. It was the first and only time I have ever eaten in a subdued Italian restaurant.

After a few experiences like this, the thought of living permanently among the rich doesn't appeal to me at all. But I have to say that some of their minor investments—the small consolation prizes that they award themselves as they struggle to get through each day—are extremely pleasant, and potentially habit-forming. Once you've tasted caviar, it's hard to contemplate its distant cousin, lumpfish roe, with any real gusto.

Perhaps the single most enjoyable part of my researches, which covered a period of about four years, was meeting the artists themselves, the people who provide the luxuries. All of them, from tailors and boot makers to truffle hunters and champagne blenders, were happy in their work, generous with their time, and fascinating about their particular skills. To listen to a knowledgeable enthusiast, whether he's talking about a Panama hat or the delicate business of poaching *foie gras* in Sauternes, is a revelation, and I often came away wondering why the price wasn't higher for the talent and patience involved.

In contrast to the pieces devoted to deliberate indulgence, I have included one or two items of involuntary expenditure. None of us can avoid Christmas, tipping, or lawyers, and it seemed to me that any review of the ways in which we are separated from our money should mention them, since they are permanently and expensively with us. So indeed is the IRS, but the thought of writing




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about it was too depressing, and any truly candid comments would undoubtedly have led to all my deductions for next year being disallowed by way of revenge.


As we're now going through a period of hard economic times, it may seem inappropriate to present these glimpses of high-level expenditure. But what would life be without the occasional treat? Anyway, as I had to keep telling the Accounts Department, true quality is a bargain.







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A

GENTLEMAN'S
FETISH





HERE ARE TWO OR THREE discreet establishments in London that for generations have catered to one of man's lesser-known vices. Their names are not advertised, except by word of mouth. Their premises have the hushed atmosphere that discourages loud speech or sudden movement. Conversation is muted and thoughtful, punctuated by occasional subdued creakings. The clients, almost to a man, sit or stand with heads bowed and eyes directed downward, as if reflecting on matters of considerable importance. And indeed they are. These gentlemen, after all, are investing \$1,300 or more in a pair of hand-cut, hand-stitched, hand-built shoes, created solely for the very personal idiosyncrasies of toes and contusions and bony outcroppings that make up the unique gentlemanly foot.

To some men—even those who revel in bespoke suits with cuff buttonholes that really undo, or made-to-measure shirts with single-needle stitching and the snug caress of a hand-turned collar—even to some of these sartorial gourmets, the thought of walking around on feet cocooned in money somehow smacks of excess, more shameful than a passion for cashmere socks, and something they wouldn't care to admit to their accountants. Their misgivings are usually supported by the same argument: what could possibly justify the difference in price between shoes made by hand and shoes made by machine? Unlike the miracles of disguise that a tailor has to



perform in order to camouflage bodily imperfections, the shoemaker's task is simple. Feet are feet.

They're wrong, of course. What they don't understand, and will never understand until enlightened by experience, is the addictive combination of practical virtues and private pleasures enjoyed by the man who has his shoes made by artists.

It all starts with a ritual of initiation, and like any good ritual this one proceeds at a measured pace. You are not here to buy and run. You are committing your feet to posterity, and you must allow at least an hour for your first visit, maybe longer if your requirements are the kind that raise an eyebrow. But that comes later. First you must meet your guide, the man who will escort you through the opening ceremony. In more humdrum establishments, he might be called the fitter or the head salesman. But this shop is one of the last outposts of late-Victorian baroque English, and he would probably prefer to think of himself as the purveyor.

He will greet you courteously, but his eyes will not be able to resist flickering downward for a brief assessment of your shoes. Nothing will be said, but you will be conscious, perhaps for the first time in your life, that another man is actively interested in your feet.

You sit down, and your shoes are taken off. They suddenly look forlorn and rather shabby. Don't worry about it. The purveyor is not concerned with them anymore; it's your feet that fascinate him. Having confirmed that there are two, of more or less the same size, he summons his acolyte, who may be a fresh-faced apprentice from the cobbler's bench or a wizened retainer. In either case he



carries a large, leather-bound book, opened at two blank pages.

The open book is placed upon the floor. You are asked to stand on it, one foot per page, and the purveyor kneels before you. Slowly, almost lovingly, he makes a map of each foot by tracing the two outlines onto the pages of the book. From those nearly prehensile big toes, around the mysterious knurls that embellish the little toes, along the sides, and deep under the arches, not a single wrinkle or irregularity is left unrecorded.

Once the maps are completed, the topographical survey can begin. Everything is measured: altitude of instep, curve of heel, contours and slopes of the metatarsal range. You might even be asked if you normally wear your toenails that length, because millimeters count. At last you are allowed to step off the book and prepare yourself for decisions. Now is the time to choose the style of your shoe.

While the choices are almost endless, it has to be said that you will not find Cuban heels, brass snaffles, three-tone snakeskin-overlaid broguing, or anything that might be considered a trifle gaudy. You, of course, have nothing like that in mind. What you want is a classic, timeless, brown lace-up shoe. Simple.

All you have to do is decide on the leather (calf, cordovan, crocodile, brushed deerskin); the precise shape of the toe (almond, slightly squared, standard rounded); the height of the heel (nothing too extreme, mind you, but an extra eighth of an inch might be arranged); the shaping around the arch of the foot (a chamfered waist is recommended here for a particularly smart finish); the extent of



decoration (again, there are limits, but some restrained work around the toe and instep is highly acceptable); and finally, the laces (woven or leather, flat-cut or rolled). These absorbing details must not be rushed, because you will be living with the results for a long time.

You eventually take your leave of the purveyor with expressions of mutual satisfaction for a job well and thoroughly done. He looks forward to seeing you again.

But when? Several months go by without a word. And then, just as you're beginning to wonder if your order has been confused with the Duke of Glencoe's stalking boots, you receive a postcard. More baroque language, requesting the favor of a visit for a fitting, assuring you of their best attention at all times while remaining yours faithfully, and generally giving you the impression that they have come up with the goods.

Your second visit to the premises is accompanied by a pleasant familiarity. The half-dozen men—the same ones you saw months ago, for all you know—are still bent in devotion over their toecaps. The difference is that you will shortly be one of them, and here to prove it is the purveyor with your shoes.

He holds them up for inspection. Two burnished offerings, the color of oxblood, with brass-hinged shoe trees—works of art themselves—growing out of them. The purveyor trusts they will be satisfactory. Good God, they're superb! And the minute you put them on, your feet assume a totally different character. They used to be frogs and have turned into princes. They have lost weight. Not only are these shoes lighter than a ready-made shoe, they are also narrower and more elegantly shaped. No wonder

