

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

March 23, 1997

Column: Editorial

Berkeley: It is its own place, but I'm coming home

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BERKELEY, Calif. - "Ah," said my wise friend Deirdre, "you are going to write one of those articles about `Berserkeley.' "

Nah - at least I hope not. On the other hand, you cannot expect me to resist the lunatic comedy of the place. Honest, there's a "Mexican restaurant" here that serves quesadillas with "duck, shitake mushrooms, braised fennel and eggplant" on that well-known Mexican specialty, the sun-dried tomato tortilla.

One night at a yuppie restaurant, I was faced with a choice between "Sun-dried tomato linguine with roasted garlic puree, shallots, bell peppers and white pesto" or "Warm frisee salad with duck confit, ginger figs, candied walnuts and grapefruit-tarragon vinaigrette." I said the only thing possible under the circumstances: "Y'all got a combo plate?"

OK, OK, so real people live here and have to get root canals; is that any excuse for florists calling themselves "botanical sculptors"? Is the apartment complex I've been living in pink, or is it "shrimp and salmon"? For that matter, are "aubergine, bone and bisque" foodstuffs or colors?

Assume, just for the sake of argument, that Berkeley is in fact what the rest of the country would be like if it were run by liberals. How does it differ?

Pedestrians have the right of way over cars. Handicapped people not only have the right of way - they're into gonzo-wheelchair competition. Traffic signals to help the blind cross the street don't go beep-beep-beep, as in other places; here they make beautiful bird songs. Dogs have their own parks. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard does not run through the black part of town; it runs through a white part of town. There are more little places to stop and drink coffee on Telegraph Avenue than there are days in the year. Except that no one here drinks coffee; they drink cappuccino, espresso, latte, au lait, mocha, and double decaf dooey-bobs.

Also, there are many flowers - flowers growing, flowers in stores, many kinds of flowers. I wouldn't want to stretch the Camelot metaphor too far, but I swear it has rained only at night here for the last three months.

I have seen exactly three women in Berkeley wearing high-heeled shoes, and two of them wore "sensible heels." If there are hookers in this town, they wear Rockports. I heard two people honk. Bumper stickers here are gentle and loving, like "Teach Respect for the Earth and All Living Things." A Berkeleyite feeling his testosterone may pack a stern message on his car, such as "Want My Vote? Cut Pentagon Bloat!"

Berkeley is bookstore heaven - wonderful, marvelous, fabulous bookstores. And Berkeley being Berkeley, there is also a citizens organization to support independent bookstores - this is in case you might forget yourself and wander into B Dalton in search of something definitive on deconstructionism or semiotics.

Personally, I think living in Berkeley is like dwelling with hobbits. Any day now I expect to catch them hiding their furry little feet inside their Birkenstocks. They are so kind and gentle. They all care. They help the homeless. They are proud of their eccentrics. Two of the most notable people in town are the Naked Man and the Pink Man.

A Berkeley story: Some years ago the Berkeley Police Department decided that the drug problem was out of control and that they needed some drug-sniffing dogs to help with enforcement, so they signed up for some trained German shepherds. But locals felt that this might bring up unpleasant memories for Holocaust survivors, besides having Bull Connor overtones, and so they opted for drug-sniffing beagles instead.

Are there Real World problems in Berkeley? Of course. The cost of housing is horrific, but that's true of California as a whole. The poor students live like sardines. The rich folks live on the hills, of course, and the rest of us are in the Flats, a much more interesting part of town.

Diversity is such a political buzzword these days that you can forget what it actually means until you spend time in Berkeley. A stroll across campus or along a Berkeley street is like some PC lesson in multi-ethnic, multicultural diversity. Black, brown, Japanese, white, Chinese; ashrams, sari shops, Tina Turner Buddhists chanting ram-rom-om, bagel shops run by Pakistanis, croissant shops run by Vietnamese, the Black Muslim Bakery; gay and lesbian knitting classes, Little League teams that look like a junior division of the United Nations, St. Joseph-the-Worker Elementary School featuring

Roman Catholics of every nation, skaters with turquoise hair and rings in their noses; God Hill, where all the theological seminaries are clustered.

The right wing, ever behind the cultural curve, is now accusing the left of fostering "identity politics," which means a pernicious harping on one's ethnic heritage. Berkeley is well beyond identity politics. For one thing, everyone seems to have more than one affiliation. Japanese Hispanics, gay Lubavitchers, Finnish acupuncturists, Irish-African-Americans (that's quite a St. Paddy's Day party). I am told by administrators at UC Berkeley that the student body is 60 percent "other." Mostly you have to guess. Samoan? Goan? Aztec? At faculty parties, I brag that I have a student from Nebraska whose mother makes casseroles with Cheez Whiz.

And what difference does all this ethnic and cultural diversity make (aside from producing some breathtakingly beautiful humans)? In some ways, not much; the students all gripe when you give them homework assignments. On the other hand, there is some kind of racial sensitivity that sneaks up on you out here. I have been reading the commentary on the current Clinton administration "scandal" involving Asian political contributions with horrified fascination. If you were to substitute Jew for every reference to Chinese, and Israel for China, the biggest fight since the Dreyfus affair would have broken out by now.

So now it's home to Texas, for the same reasons I always go back to Texas. It's simpler - the bad guys still wear black hats, and the good guys still wear white hats. And it's funnier there - let's face it, the reason we get to laugh more in Texas is because it's just existentially ridiculous. I've been missin' y'all.

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