

The Soul of San Francisco

AN ESSAY

BY CAROL EDGARIAN



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IT'S AN OLD story: a girl with a magnificent face and sunny disposition attracts many suitors, some rich, some poor, some potentially detrimental to her character. Having options, she chooses money, and for a while her life is dazzling and quick. She doesn't think about consequences; she's too busy enjoying herself. Introspection will come later, after the music fades and the fickle money walks. San Francisco, city of gold dust and wireless dreamers, of causes and capitalists—a city, finally, of immigrants is mending after the break. For locals, it's a time of retrenchment; for visitors, an open invitation to sample the best of the city's pleasures.

It's been twenty years since the morning I trudged my moving boxes up shag-carpeted stairs to rooms in the eaves of my boyfriend's sister's house. The cultural mix in that Mediterranean-cum-Dutch colonial was a San Francisco microcosm: myself white; the boyfriend and his sister Filipino; the sister's husband a Rasta who, along with his sister and her family made his living growing weed in the garage. The house was on Plymouth Street at the edge of St. Francis Wood—a middle-class

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neighborhood a bit shabby at the seams, like much of San Francisco back then. Good bones in a consignment frock.

For too long the city had been resting on its sixties flower-child laurels. Easterners and Southern Californians considered it a second cousin to L.A. and nothing to New York. San Francisco was the quirky fringe: a home to liberal politics; a classy underdog with an edgy bathhouse scene; a center of nouvelle cuisine and commercial design; a harbor for Asian and Central American exiles; a land for mischief-makers, do-gooders, and eccentrics, from Carol Doda to Wavy Gravy to Herb Caen.

The boyfriend and I parted, but San Francisco stuck. I moved successively, to Nob Hill to Pacific Heights to a flat in the Haight—alone, in love, alone, in love—a transit, if a person could ever be so young, much like the tawny afternoon sun.

For people in flux, San Francisco, all treasure and heart, has always been a haven. Whereas New York hones the initiate, San Francisco encourages a familial conversation in which everyone has a voice, even if no one's listening. Easy acceptance, a temperate climate, liberal politics, gorgeous views—you get the fuzzy attraction.

But the old ease dissipated in the gulfstream, NASDAQ nineties. The tech revolution brought rude traffic and stratospheric real estate prices. Three-bedroom starter homes in modest Noe Valley sold for upwards of a million bucks. Starlet restaurants and shops were born weekly. A mood of intolerance evinced itself in a political movement to end the “homeless problem” once and for all. The city of acceptance became defined by nose-bleed net worths, aggressive consumption, and the forced exodus of young families who couldn't afford the bill.

Now the For Rent signs are out again, and it's possible to get into a hot restaurant without making a reservation two months in advance. But the new money ethos has left its mark and the question, What's the authentic San Francisco? A question for the country as a whole, but we are here, where the boom began, on the dream coast.

IT'S QUIETER NOW, a friend says. We're walking along San Francisco Bay, in the revamped Crissy Field. For years, this turn-of-the-twentieth-century airfield, scenically located under the wing of the Golden Gate Bridge, had been deteriorating in the less and less utilized historic army post, the Presidio. Restored largely by a donation from the Haas family, whose fortune began when paterfamilias Levi Strauss sold denim to the original gold rush miners, Crissy Field is the best gift San Francisco gave itself in the nineties. Gone are a hundred acres of military asphalt and chain-link fence, replaced by a paradise of cypress, hillocks, and undulating dunes, a

twenty-eight-acre salt grass meadow, and a tidal marsh that flows again for the first time in a century.

Curmudgeons say that Crissy Field has been sterilized, but curmudgeons see dimly. The reinvigorated waterfront is lovely.

Here we are, blowing off a morning's work to walk the shoreline promenade in the company of runners, bicyclers, crab fishermen, windsurfers, dog-walkers, and mothers carting toddlers to the sandy shore. The restoration has invited the whole town to the water, which is a good thing. According to the last Census, 239,233 San Franciscans are Asian; and 109,519, Latino—the two groups accounting for approximately half the city's population. But until lately, the Marina District bordering Crissy Field acted as a Caucasian moat, keeping the rest of the city from the Bay.

The walk along Crissy Field is a three-mile round-trip, to Civil War-era Fort Point at the base of the Bridge and back. No crowds, no hassle. Even on weekends space abounds. Halfway out is the Warming Hut, formerly for pilots landing at the field and now a gift shop/snack bar with a menu crafted by famed Chez Panisse chef Alice Waters. The fare includes shade-grown organic coffee, panini with roasted turkey and havarti on artisan bread, and, for the kids, organic peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches with fresh-pressed apple juice and carrot sticks for under five dollars.

We stop for tea on what happens to be a stunning day: brilliant sky, runnels of swift fog, white boats on the water, views of the undulant Marin Headlands, Alcatraz, Angel Island, and to the east San Francisco, the most European of American cities, rising up in its soft whites.

THE LIFTING OF barriers that brought locals to the Bay has worked in the opposite direction as well. Across town in the Latin-flavored Mission District, one of the many brightly colored, primitive murals along Balmy Alley reads, "Culture contains the seed of resistance that blossoms into the flower of Liberation." The statement strikes a plaintive note.

Culture. Resistance. Liberation. Nowhere in San Francisco did the technology boom have a greater impact than in the Mission. It was a nexus for the kids who came west, lured by the promise of making millions before turning thirty or ever having to don a suit. Their brash vitality, new cars, and ready cash choked the streets and jacked up the rents, displacing Latino families, who in an earlier generation replaced the District's Irish.

Mission neighborhoods, in particular the Valencia Street sunbelt corridor from Sixteenth to Twenty-fourth Street, exploded with nouveau, instantly classic

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restaurants, the best of which—Delfina, the Slanted Door, the Blue Plate, and Tartine—are marked by the owner/chef’s distinct vision. The new Foreign Cinema, where you can watch an art-house flick over a plate of grilled lavender pork chops, initiated the unimaginable—valet parking in the Mission—and it wasn’t only parvenus clogging the streets but longtime locals who were discovering the best scene in town.

My husband, Tom Jenks, and I used to take our kids to the Mission, seeking a fix of Mitchell’s ice cream or lunch at La Taqueria, where for thirty years they’ve been turning out burritos that are a world complete—the envelope and the letter. But during the high point of the boom parking was too much of a hassle, and we stayed away.

Now we’re back. On this night Tom and I are set to dine at one of the new places, Alma. We’re early, so we stroll down Valencia St. and veer into some of the shops: into Dema, with its funky, gamine-cut clothes, then Laku, land of elfin velvet slippers and whimsical hats. Down the block, Good Vibrations, a funky, worker-owned cooperative currently celebrating “twenty-five years of pleasure” sells sex toys and books for all erotic predilections. It’s date night, and the store is packed, the friendly, flirtatious clerks wrapping the gadgets in brown paper sacks as though they were meat and fruit.

Out on the sidewalk, cool air is coming up Valencia, as it does most evenings with the marine layer and sunset. There aren’t many people passing by, and clearly the throngs of dot-commers are gone, leaving the neighborhood to the bohemians—students, artists, and musicians—to the working-class San Franciscans who hung on, and to the Hispanic families who, thanks to falling rents, are beginning to come back.

We arrive at Alma. A place called “soul” better have some and, blissfully, it does. Chef Johnny Alamilla has taken a modest corner of Valencia and turned it into a must-visit Latin infusion joint. We sip our Micholada (a Mexican Bloody Mary) and Tequila Royales, dine on wild striped bass ceviche, white corn and roast garlic flan, churrasco-style pork chops, warm banana bread pudding—comfort food with an exotic twist, and delicious. We leave prepared to come back, grateful that the boom seeded places like Alma, and that the best of the new survived the bust.

THE SOUL OF the city has quietly settled back into the neighborhoods, while downtown San Francisco, with its grim, gutted retail space and shameful, bus station-like revamp of Union Square is a stark reminder of what went wrong. Too much, too fast, with little foresight. If Grant Street, with its empty facades and litter, looks like a rented hall the morning after a terrific party, that’s exactly what it is.

What thrives downtown exists in the cracks, and you have to know the map. On Claude Lane, an alley near Grant, between Sutter and Bush, Diana Slavin quietly produces a stunning line of impeccably tailored clothes for women. On Sutter Street,

and in its satellite storefront on Maiden Lane, deVera sells jewel-like treasures, objet and gifts. At Bix, tucked in an alley on Gold St., there's one of the best bars and menus in town. The waiters and staff with their formal attentiveness and wry, self-parodying hauteur seem to be, like the high-ceilinged, dusky, extravagant place, throwbacks to the 1930s and '40s, and Bix, once merely hip and happening, has become a San Francisco institution much like the old Trader Vic's.

Downtown, as the first to reap the boom and to suffer the aftermath, will recover slowly, while elsewhere in the city, the return to liveliness has been swift. In China Basin, once a no-man's-land, the new PacBell ballpark is an instant hit. There at McCovey Cove, where baseball fans fight in dinghies in the drink over Barry Bonds' out-of-the-park home runs, the Giants' ballpark has a viewing area behind right field where anyone can come for free and watch three innings of any game, including the World Series. This gesture of largess sprang from Giants owner Peter Magowan's recollection of a Norman Rockwell painting of a pitcher as seen through the knot-hole of a fence, and speaks of how this nonrestrictive city holds onto its romantic American notions.

"Our indulgences have been scaled back, humbled," says Megan Ray, who turned the bust into an opportunity. Laid off in October 2001, the former director of business development for Excite@home decided to pursue a dream of making small, fanciful Parisian cakes. The result is Miette, French for crumb or morsel, and that's all you'll have after diving into her all-organic chocolate crème fraîche cake, or her gingerbread, or her Parisian macaroons, all of which she sells at the farmers' market at Ferry Building Plaza. She works ten-hour days, six days a week, the same grueling schedule as in her dot-com career, only now the money is modest and the real reward comes from fulfilling the dream and the heart's desire.

MODESTY. SIMPLE PLEASURES. These words, now in heavy circulation, are a far cry from the everything-new, everything-now credo of the boom. What's replaced giddy and smug? The new emphasis is on fairness.

My husband posits this bit of irony, as we zip in a cab to Nob Hill, to spend a night in a hotel named for a robber baron, Collis P. Huntington. He, along with Charles Crocker, Mark Hopkins, and Leland Stanford, put down a bare \$50,000 in seed money to organize the Central Pacific Railway. The hotel's rich past notwithstanding, it has in recent years suffered from a stodgy, Alistair Cook-stayed-here reputation, but in the new era stodgy reads as pedigree; the Huntington stands apart as a treasured independent. It is now being restored to elegance by Fisher Weisman, a talented San Francisco design team.

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It's Columbus Day weekend, and the hotel is full. As we spread out in our newly renovated suite—all chocolate velvet, toile, and cream—a waiter arrives with a tray of biscotti and tea. From our eighth-floor window, we can see a northeast panorama, across Huntington Park and Nob Hill to Chinatown and then the Bay, where pleasure boats are thickly gathered, jockeying to see the Blue Angels air show. On cue, the jets roar over, shaking the bones of Collis Huntington's original brick wall, while over the Bay the fog pulls back to the touchstone bridge.

Downstairs, at the Nob Hill Spa, the eternity pool and rejuvenating services offer tranquil pampering, but it is too gorgeous to be inside.

Since it's Columbus Day, we walk to North Beach, the Italian district. Here brash, nonsensical juxtapositions abound: in a two-block radius from the corner of Columbus and Broadway there are spicy sex shows, Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookstore, Molinari's Italian Delicatessen, and Chinatown's Imperial Tea Court.

On this morning, North Beach is in the throes of preparing for its annual Italian Heritage Festival. We walk up Columbus Street, where waiters are putting tables out on the sidewalks. At Mario Bohemian Cigar Store Café there's a queue for coffee; we keep on, crossing into Washington Square. In the parking lot by Sts. Peter and Paul Church, booths are being set up, the grills already firing. Everyone is Asian—the cooks and table-setters and balloon makers. For the moment, in the Italian heart and soul of the city, there's not an Italian in sight.

What's the new authentic? Surely it has to do with a blurring of distinctions, and a desire, more keen than ever, for home and place. The neighborhood Chinese kids celebrate the Italian explorer as naturally as they walk into the shop next door. The barriers, at least at this hour, scarcely exist. Everything-new, everything-now having become—by grace and a good dose of *carpe diem*—everything for everyone.

IT'S LATE WHEN we get back to the hotel, and our plan to take a favorite walk through Russian Hill before dinner gets put back. We climb into the suite at the Huntington and drop San Francisco from our minds. We'll get to it in time. The city has always been an insider's town, and given the ease of traveling from one part to another, there's nothing to stop one from choosing *à la carte*.

On another day I'll go to Glide Memorial, as pilgrim to mount, to hear one of the Reverend Cecil William's gospel-fueled sermons. Or I'll go to the Italian Athletic Club in North Beach for a bit of tango or catch the Wurlitzer show before seeing a flick at the Castro, or meet friends at Zuni Café, as one might pull up at the general store, for gossip and some of Judy Roger's timeless Mediterranean cooking.

I'll shop for antique French ribbon and LeClerc cosmetics at Bell'occhio, eat tapas at Pascal Rigo's ever-popular Chez Nous, buy artisanal bread around the corner at his boulangerie, and know I've been to the Paris that no longer exists.

And if I want to be reminded of San Francisco's kitschy past, I'll visit the Greco-Roman Columbarium, the repository of urns and ashes dating back to the late 1800s, where each niche is a story, and where the caretaker-shepherd Emmitt Watson, hired some sixteen years ago to do a quick cleanup and paint, presides seven days a week, beginning each day by throwing open the doors and calling into void, "Good morning, y'all!"

Diversity is here for the choosing.

I'll watch the hang gliders diving off the cliffs at Fort Funston, stop for a brunch of polenta and eggs at Rose's; and still have time to catch a matinee performance of Word for Word, a local theater group that brings wit and resonance to short stories by writers such as Alice Munro and Tobias Wolff.

I can reap this city's abundance or leave it, traveling to the headlands across the Golden Gate Bridge, which for me and many locals, is the beginning and end of the journey; that bridge—that wing of daring and possibility—which lifted my heart the first time I went over, and every time since.

You see, the girl with the boxes dug in, got married, had babies, stopped moving. It was the city that didn't stay put.

It should be clear by now that holding San Francisco to one definition is the work of pinning a spirit to the wall with your thumb. Its soul is elusive. Even the weather cannot agree. If it's sunny in Noe Valley, then everything from the Avenues to Jordan Park is under a blanket of fog. Short sleeves on one side of town, a down parka on the other. A rose that blooms in Potrero Hill molds on Lake Street.

San Francisco has had incredible luck (two gold rushes) and wretched luck (earthquakes and city-leveling fires), but the city's essential character was forged long ago in the first gold rush of 1848. That year, the population of the former Yerba Buena (good herb) encampment went from 2,000 in February to 20,000 by August. It was a city of tents and shanties, described in a 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* as "the most extreme of all democracies . . . never before nor since in America was there a like test of self-development. Unusual courage and self-reliance were necessary for success." In those early days, gambling was the central passion.

So the die was cast. San Francisco, forty-seven square miles of beauty and pluck, waits for her next beau. ●