Celebrated journalist R. W. (“Johnny”) Apple was a veteran political reporter, a New York Times bureau chief and an incisive and prolific writer. But the role he was most passionate about was food anthropologist. Known both for his restless wideopen mind and an appetite to match, Apple was also a culinary scholar: witty, wide-ranging and intensely knowledgeable about his subjects. Far Flung and Well Fed is the best of legendary Times reporter Apple’s food writing from America, England, Europe, Asia and Australia. Each of the more than fifty essays recount extraordinary meals and little-known facts, of some of the world’s most excellent foods—from the origin of an ingredient in a dish, to its history, to the vivid personalities—including Apple’s wife, Betsey—who cook, serve and eat those dishes.

Far Flung and Well Fed is a classic collection of food writing—lively, warm and rich with a sense of place and taste—and deserves to join the works of A.J. Liebling, Elizabeth David, M.F.K. Fisher and Calvin Trillin on the bookshelf.

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My Personal Review:
R. W. Apple was one of my newspaper heroes; I read every story with his byline with great interest and pleasure and was lucky enough to spend an hour learning about the world during a conversation in a bar in Teheran just before the fall of the Shah. His columns and books are a great pleasure to read, even years later. This extract from his last column gives you a flavor of his approach and appetites:
"AFTER half a century of assiduous eating in restaurants around the world, first avocationally and more recently professionally, I have become accustomed to certain questions: "What's your favorite restaurant?" "What will you order for your last meal on earth?" "Which is best -- French cuisine? Italian? Chinese?" All unanswerable, of course. Now comes a more modest proposition: Name 10 restaurants abroad that would be worth boarding a plane to visit, even in these fraught days.

"O.K. Here's my list. Please note, this is neither an enumeration of my favorites (though some of those are included) nor a ranking of the world's best (like those fatuous lists put out each year by Restaurant magazine in London). Rather than reciting a long list of two- and three-star gastronomic temples, I have chosen purlieus both grand and small, better to reflect my own eating habits. And rather than loading up my list with French and Italian addresses, I have arbitrarily restricted my choices to one per country, for much the same reason. I would expect no one else to choose the same 10, but on the other hand, I would be astonished if many of my nominations disappointed.

"FLEURIE, FRANCE Auberge du Cep, Place de l'Église; (33-4) 7404-1077; [web link deleted]

"French country cooking -- or bistro cooking, as its urban variant is called -- deserves, but is not often accorded, a place among the world's culinary glories beside French haute cuisine. Based on regional products, honestly handled, "unfoamed and unfused" in the words of my friend Colman Andrews, late of Saveur magazine, it is the specialty of this small restaurant on the main square of a prettily named village in Beaujolais. It is a specialty unflinchingly embraced by its proprietor, Chantal Chagny, who five years ago banished lobster and truffles from her menu and turned her back on two Michelin stars in favor of the simpler dishes she adores, like herb-crusted, perfectly fried, never-frozen frogs' legs, crisp-edged sweetbreads, soup made of garden herbs, roast wild duck from a local river and rosy tenderloin of regional Charolais beef, France's best.

"Love and skill are lavished on the simplest dishes -- tiny, tender lamb chops, neglected freshwater fish like perch and pike-perch (sander), eggs poached in red wine (oeufs en meurette), toothsome squab, black currant sorbet, even snails -- great fat ones, bubbling happily in their shells, bathed in garlic, parsley, butter and Pernod. Here is the food most of us travel to France to taste, and who can resist it once tasted? Here, too, are the little regional wines we search for -- especially Beaujolais, 60 of them, including 30 from Fleurie itself, one of the 10 designated crus known for excellence."

Apple's range is remarkably wide -- politics, wars, international affairs, travel [he carried his own pepper grinder], bourbon and bacon, potatoes
and tomatoes, langoustines and mangosteens, barbecue and Bouillabaisse, New Orleans and New Zealand -- and his other books are equally rewarding for anyone interested in travel:


Apple's Europe: An Uncommon Guide. The predecessor volume to "Apple's America".

Calvin Trilling quoted Mr. Apple's attitude toward his 70th birthday party, and [from "The Times" obituary] "toward the rich, long life and career that produced it: 'It's my understanding that Apple has simplified what could be a terribly difficult choice by telling them to bring everything.'

If you love great food and great writing, this book will satisfy both yearnings.

Robert C. Ross  2009

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