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Counting stars, from Manhattan to San Francisco

By Manny Gonzalez

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With these descriptions, you'd think there'd be tons of starred restaurants in virtually every city, but it's actually a rather rare and much-coveted distinction, and a lot of people take their Michelin stars very seriously. Some years ago — and this is not a joke — a French chef committed suicide, reportedly because he feared a demotion from three to two stars.

So, are the stars a good guide to dining pleasure? Let's find out.

In the course of a visit to New York I managed to eat at nine Mi-

chelin-starred restaurants in New York and San Francisco, plus one formerly-starred.

Andanada (1 Star). Now this one was an out-and-out disappointment. On the Upper West Side, just a bit north of Columbus Circle, Andanada is billed as a *tapas* restaurant. Situated in the basement of a brownstone, it featured rather basic sort-of-Hispanic décor, including a garish wall painting. One or two of the *tapas* were tasty, but the rest, as well as the main-course *paella*, were ordinary in the extreme. Most of New York seemed to agree with me: on a Sunday evening, despite a superb upscale neighborhood location, it was about 20 percent full.

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Dark and slightly clubby in appearance, the Tavern offers very competent food and warm service and is a great place to get together with friends, especially friends who are willing to treat you at about

\$120 a head. To get a reservation here, mark the date you want to go, and exactly 30 days before (Eastern Standard/Daylight Time), go to the Union Square Hospitality Group's website they don't accept earlier bookings and you have about a 1-day window before a date sells out.

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Marea (2 Stars). On Central Park South, Marea serves modern Italian to a well-heeled Midtown crowd and rich Chinese tourists (so it looked when I went). For a relatively-modest \$80++ for the businessman's lunch (\$55) and a glass of wine (\$25), I had a kind of asparagus dish and a mushroom risotto that were both knock-outs, and a dessert of some kind that

However, as soon as you enter, a *maitre c'* for your section (in my case, an African-American named Miguel) comes by to welcome you and put you at ease.

The restaurant has a fairly standard 4-course *prix fixe* for a starting price of about \$125 (plus supplements, wine, tip and tax). My opener was very good — Compressed Hamachi, a *sashimi* tuna blended with *foie gras* and truffles and made into a stiff terrine. But it went downhill from there, to a caviar-and-sauerkraut tarte with the merest hint of caviar on it, then a competent but forgettable Nova Scotia halibut.

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have VIP connections as I do, maybe you can cut the line.

When I told an old friend I was passing through San Francisco, he asked which restaurant I'd like to go to. I said The French Laundry, fully expecting him to laugh at me. But, two days later, he said we were good to go. And we went. If you need a reservation at The French Laundry on short notice, you need to go to this man — not me.

As we motored up to Yountville, of course I insisted that I would pay the bill. Of course they said yes. When we arrived, the general manager, Michael Minillo, greeted us at the door and said "Mr. and Mrs. _____, it's so nice to see you back" (I omit the name in case he is being watched by the FBI or the IRS). I have to admit I was impressed, but there was



The author and his hosts snag a much-coveted table at The French Laundry, and were even welcomed with a personal note from chef Thomas Keller.



was, Michelin probably no longer considered it imaginative, one of the hypothesized cornerstone criteria (the others being *terroir* — use of local ingredients and influences, and technical skill), and hence the de-listing.

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didn't impress.

What did impress was the service, by this guy in charge of the rear section, where they send all the marginal diners. This gentleman was the best server I have ever encountered; every word, every pause, every raise of the eyebrows was carefully calculated to make you feel that Jeeves himself was waiting on you.

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feuille, for example.) But all over the world, lazy chefs are just constructing something like an Oreó and calling it *millefeuille*, and that's what Gabriel Kreuther did. He and his French chef should know better.

Now for a quick hop to San Francisco, before returning to Manhattan.

The French Laundry (3 Stars), Napa Valley. This was the surprise of my culinary journey, because I never expected to even get

more to come.

At our table, the best in the house, there was an ornate card. It was a personal note from Thomas Keller, the celebrity chef-owner, wishing my hosts and "your guest" (that's me) a wonderful evening. Whoa, I remarked to myself, this was heavy-duty Clout by any standard.

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Perignon '08 and without asking permission just opened it. I felt a hole open up in my stomach, as this bottle costs over \$200 in a wine store, and would certainly be marked up to at least \$800 at a top restaurant.

Five minutes later, my host pushed his champagne glass away (and never touched it again), and said, "Bring us a good white Burgundy." I thought he meant a Chablis – maybe \$200 at the restaurant. But when the manager came back, it was with a Chevalier-Montrachet, which would no doubt cost over \$2,000 at a place like this.

I was now contemplating a bill which might reach \$5,000 for the three of us, and was having palpitations wondering if my \$5,000-limit credit card would bounce. But in the end, I need not have worried. My friend apparently has so much influence that, after he complained about one of the courses, the management shook in fear, and decided to comp the whole meal – everything! So, the truth is that I don't remember what we ate, but I guess it was good. Except for the battered sea-slug, which tasted like slug.

Benu (3 Stars), Downtown San Francisco. In the dog-eat-dog world of Michelin stars, chefs are constantly on the make, looking for the Main Chance. Corey Lee used to work for Thomas Keller, then quit to open his own restaurant. The mystifying name Benu is an Egyptian word for phoenix, as apparently Corey considered himself re-born when he set up his own shop.

There is no a la carte menu, just the full 20-course tasting menu. The inspiration is decidedly Asian, and while some courses seem to be originals, others are "takes" on traditional dishes, like *xiao long bao*. The seemingly never-ending succession of plates was interesting, but in the end emotionally unengaging, nothing like a really good crispy *pata* (also Asian).

Benu recently remodeled its interior. The tables are bare, the walls are now a blank charcoal grey and half the diners (there are about 40 seats) are facing said blank wall. Personally I didn't like this approach, but such is the draw of 3 Michelin stars that as of this writing, reservations need to be made about 1½ months in advance.

Back in New York –



Gabriel Kreuther's compressed hamachi was the highlight of the meal.



The alleged Scandinavian bouillabaisse at Aquavit. In the three glasses are different takes on aquavit, which is any spirit flavored with caraway seeds (above).

Aquavit (2 Stars). By some people's judgment, THE best restaurant in the world is one in Copenhagen. Called Noma ("Nordic food"), it has been #1 in four out of the past five years, though in 2015 it slipped to third place. I haven't been there, but it has done wonders for people's opinion of Scandinavian cooking, and Aquavit (East 55th St. and Madison Avenue, which is nowhere near Copenhagen) is undoubtedly one of the beneficiaries.

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course billed as "Scandinavian Bouillabaisse." The shrimp salad was prettily-presented and tasty, but still just a shrimp salad. The bouillabaisse turned out to be seven bites of miscellaneous seafood and one tablespoon of foam, again lovely to look at, but nothing that made my heart sing.

(By the way, if you ever want a really good bouillabaisse, don't go to Marseilles, where it is too authentic – a means of recycling fish caught by accident, which were too spiny and couldn't be sold to the general public. My choice for a terrific un-authentic bouillabaisse is Chez Freddy, in Nice; they also

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Anyway, New York City perhaps agrees with me on Aquavit. Despite its quite small size, as of this writing, it is possible to get reservations on the same day you want to go.

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The interior at Bernardin is very glitzy modern and looks like a million dollars.

I have to say that the food was pretty good, especially the complimentary opener, which was three kinds of raw shellfish, done in different ways. For the rest of the meal, suffice it to say that it was also mostly seafood, which is what the place is highly touted for. My dessert was Peruvian chocolate cake and caramel ice cream and it was just fine, but not as good as thick strawberry milkshake.

Where Bernardin is a bit of a letdown is in the service. It is so efficient and impersonal, and the dishes arrive with such clockwork precision, that you soon come to feel that you are part of a conveyor belt, and have exactly two hours to order, eat and get going.

And now, the best for last –

The Modern (2 Stars). Starting out some years back as the cafeteria of the Museum of Modern Art on West 53rd St., The Modern has morphed over the years into a high point of Manhattan cuisine. Like the Gramercy Tavern, it is owned, managed by Danny Meyer's group, which is also responsible for Shake Shack.

Though the interior décor is a bit icy and monochromatic, this is a restaurant that's firing on all cylinders. The food is very good, and there's enough of it. No cuisine minceur here. Right off the bat, they serve you a knockout *amuse-bouché* that consists of a slow-shirred egg with minced vegetables (I know it doesn't sound very exciting, but taking 45 minutes to bake an egg while still leaving it runny results in a dish of sublime character).

The dishes throughout the four

Is change really coming?

We believe so. But we all need to be patient and not be quick with complaints and negative reactions. And as one authority said, we must also pray.

The homemakers and even career women are one in wanting change – specifically where the daily upkeep of their families and homes are concerned. Daily they are beset with the problem of keeping their original household budgets. The latest good news is a fuel price decrease, but there are other escalating costs. Power rates will increase (if they have not already increased), prime commodity costs went up, transport suppliers have asked for return of their old fares (which got lowered sometime ago). How do we survive this?

There are many ways. One is to strictly monitor food consumption, meaning cook and serve only enough so there will be no leftovers. If there are leftovers, let your family be willing to eat them the next time they sit at the dining table. Often, as we look into our refs, we would find bits and pieces of cooked food, mostly forgotten and allowed to spoil after a few days.

Also look at your grocery and marketing lists. If buying for a week's supply, plan the food stuff you need only for that specific period and make a list. Stick to that list and don't be tempted to get what simply "attracts" you, such as a buy-one-take-one (normally the take-one is only half of the normal contents) pack or an attractively packaged collection of some canned goods and/or biscuits. Don't worry about losing these bargains. Supermarkets are forever offering sales.

Avoid using the oven often. Surely all of us are aware that this consumes more power, thus your electricity bill will increase. Maybe air conditioning units should give way to electric fans. The coolers now available in the market are as efficient. These are the ones which you fill up with water.

In My Basket



Lydia D. Castillo

The homemakers and even career women are one in wanting change – specifically where the daily upkeep of their families and homes are concerned.

Therefore, be imaginative in looking for and getting savings.

Here are some new discoveries we found in a recent food and beverage trade show. Prestige Plastics, which carries an extensive collection of food savers, has introduced colored covers for their products. It has also extended their line with the healthy selection of apple cider, the vinegar blend from New Zealand under the brand name ACV Health in 500 ml bottles; Wescobee apple cider vinegar with honey and the Killepitsch (such a tongue twister), a premium liqueur from Dusseldorf, Germany, a herbal concoction. All these are available at most supermarkets.

Eng. Bee Tin, a favorite *hopia* maker with the purple packaging, whose *ube* flavored product has caught hopia fanciers, has recently introduced their new variants – ube blended with *macapuno* (each piece indeed has the special coconut shavings) and the *leche flan*-filled pastry. They are all super and will keep long when stored in the refrigerator.

Be patient then for change and still have a good life. Happy Sunday to all!

E-mail me at lydiadolores34@gmail.com.



Le Bernardin's sleek interior (above). It takes The Modern 45 minutes of baking to produce this soft-shirred egg, and it's worth all the trouble and the wait (right).



courses (\$128 for lunch, and no tipping!) are recognizable to the average palate – pasta, sea bass, lobster, chicken, beef – yet each has a distinctive, original treatment that makes your stomach stand up and take notice.

And the service is very Danny

Meyer – warm, friendly, designed to make you feel at ease and at home, no matter how much of a yokel you are. During my two meals at The Modern (one was not enough), I got to meet Jason the headwaiter, Tony the assistant manager and Barbara the sommeliere. We talked a bit

about food, a bit about wine, a bit about the fact that I didn't live there and they might not see me again for some time. Still, I distinctly felt that I was among friends, and that they were interested in providing me with a superior dining experience without needing to count the dol-

lars they might make off me.

If you can afford only one fancy restaurant in New York, this is the place I recommend.

The author is founder and CEO of Plantation Bay Resort in Mactan, Cebu.

18 MICHELIN STARS, A SURVEY FROM MANHATTAN to SAN FRANCISCO

Part 1

Travelogue/Humor by Manny Gonzalez, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

Michelin (mish-lanh) makes tires. In the early, early days of automobiles, tires didn't last very many miles, so it was worthwhile for tire-makers to encourage people to drive more, to wear the tires out faster. Some bright person in Sales came up with the idea of the Michelin Guide, which would list the sights, hotels, and restaurants around France worth driving to. (The farther the better, one imagines.)

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La Grenouille (0 Stars). (*luh-ghren-uy*) Some years ago, this was the top restaurant in New York City, perfectly located just off Fifth Avenue, and mere mortals like us could not get in. But times changed, the stars fell away. I wondered How Are the Mighty Fallen? So I went there for lunch.

The playful name means "The Frog", from the love/hate British term for the French ("Frogs"). Which in turn comes from "frogs", as in, to eat. Now, I have had frog, and I have the same thing to say about it as for snake, lizard, quail, partridge, grouse, pigeon, and most birds, including chicken:

"Tastes like chicken".

So I did not have frog at La Grenouille, though they really serve it.

What I did have was excellent, including an inexpensively-priced Dover Sole meuniere, and strawberry tarte. But as good as the food was, Michelin probably no longer considered it *imaginative*, one of the hypothesized cornerstone criteria (the others being *terroir* - use of local ingredients and influences, and *technical skill*), and hence the de-listing.

(Michelin will not in fact disclose exactly what its criteria are, except to recite generalities about quality and consistency. But what its criteria do *not* include are décor and service, which means that 50-90% of what most people react to in a restaurant simply do not figure in Michelin stars.)

If you are not bothered by the lack of Michelin acclaim, La Grenouille is still a great place to dine in. And the waiters (all French) have mellowed over the years (I guess). There was a guy

beside me who was evidently from the Midwest, and ordered the “foy grass” for his young lady companion. All the servers kept perfectly straight faces.

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What did impress (not that Michelin cares) was the service, by this guy in charge of the rear section, where they send all the marginal diners. This gentleman was the best server I have ever encountered in all my life; every word, every pause, every raise of the eyebrows, was carefully calculated to make you feel that Jeeves himself was waiting on you. It was awesome.

Gabriel Kreuther (1 Star, rising fast). This chef used to work at another famed restaurant in Manhattan, then very recently opened his own place just around the corner from the New York Public Library and almost immediately was awarded a star. Kreuther has a bland, impersonal decorating scheme. However, as soon as you enter, a maitre d’ for your section (in my case, an African-American named Miguel) comes by to welcome you and put you at ease.

The restaurant has a fairly standard 4-course prix fixe for a starting price of about \$125 (plus supplements, wine, tip, and tax). My opener was very good - Compressed Hamachi, a sashimi tuna blended with *foie gras* and truffles and made into a stiff terrine. But it went downhill from there, to a caviar-and-sauerkraut tarte with the merest hint of caviar on it, then a competent but forgettable Nova Scotia halibut.

Dessert was not good at all. “*Millefeuille*” means “thousand leaves”, a filo-like pastry with very thin sheets piled high, with something in between for flavor. (The Filipino Napoleon is a *millefeuille*, for example.) But all over the world, lazy chefs are just constructing something like an Oreo and calling it *millefeuille*, and that’s what Gabriel Kreuther did. He and his French chef should know better.

to be continued.

Next Week: Part 2



Columbus Circle, seen from inside the Time-Warner Building, which houses several restaurants the author couldn't get reservations at, such as Thomas Keller's Per Se. (But he got in to Keller's French Laundry in Napa Valley; see next installment.)



La Grenouille is a peach-and-pink bomb. No amount of Photoshop-ing could get rid of the tint. This shot was taken at 12 noon on the dot; the place was full by 12:45.



Though a little cluttered, Gramercy Tavern is regarded by many as the Most Popular Restaurant in New York City.



After lunch at Marea, the \$50 for a 20-minute carriage ride in Central Park seems downright affordable.



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The French Laundry (3 Stars), Napa Valley. This was the surprise of my culinary journey, because I never expected to even get in. For over a decade, The French Laundry has been regarded as *the* best restaurant in North America, so most people need to reserve a year in advance. However, if you have VIP connections as I do, maybe you can cut the line.

When I told an old friend I was passing through San Francisco in a couple of weeks, he asked which restaurant I'd like to go to. I said The French Laundry, fully expecting him to laugh at me. But, two days later, he said we were good to go. And we went. See picture. If you need a reservation at The French Laundry on short notice, you need to go to this man. Not me. The other one, who apparently is the Godfather of Chinatown, while his wife must be an Empress Dowager emeritus or something equivalent.

As we motored up to Yountville, of course I insisted that I would pay the bill. Of course they said yes. When we arrived, the general manager, Michael Minillo, greeted us at the door and said "Mr. and Mrs. _____, it's so nice to see you back" (I omit the name in case he is being watched by the FBI or the IRS). I have to admit I was impressed, but there was more to come.

At our table, the best in the house, there was an ornate card. See picture. It was a personal note from Thomas Keller, the celebrity chef-owner, wishing my hosts and "your guest" (that's me) a wonderful evening. Whoa, I remarked to myself, this was heavy-duty Clout by any standard.

But things got out of control from there, when the sommelier appeared with a bottle of Dom Perignon '08 and without asking permission just opened it. I felt a hole open up in my stomach, as this bottle costs over \$200 in a wine store, and would certainly be marked up to at least \$800 at a top restaurant.

Five minutes later, my host pushed his champagne glass away (and never touched it again), and said “Bring us a good white Burgundy”. I thought he meant a Chablis - maybe \$200 at the restaurant. But when the manager came back, it was with a Chevalier-Montrachet, which would no doubt cost over \$2000 at a place like this. (Not that I ever found out; this story has a happy ending.)

I was now contemplating a bill which might reach \$5000 for the three of us, and was having palpitations wondering if my \$5000-limit credit card would bounce. But in the end, I need not have worried. My friend apparently has so much Influence that, after he complained about one of the courses, the management shook in fear, and decided to comp the whole meal - everything! So, the truth is that I don’t remember what we ate, but I guess it was good. Except for the battered sea-slug, which tasted like slug.

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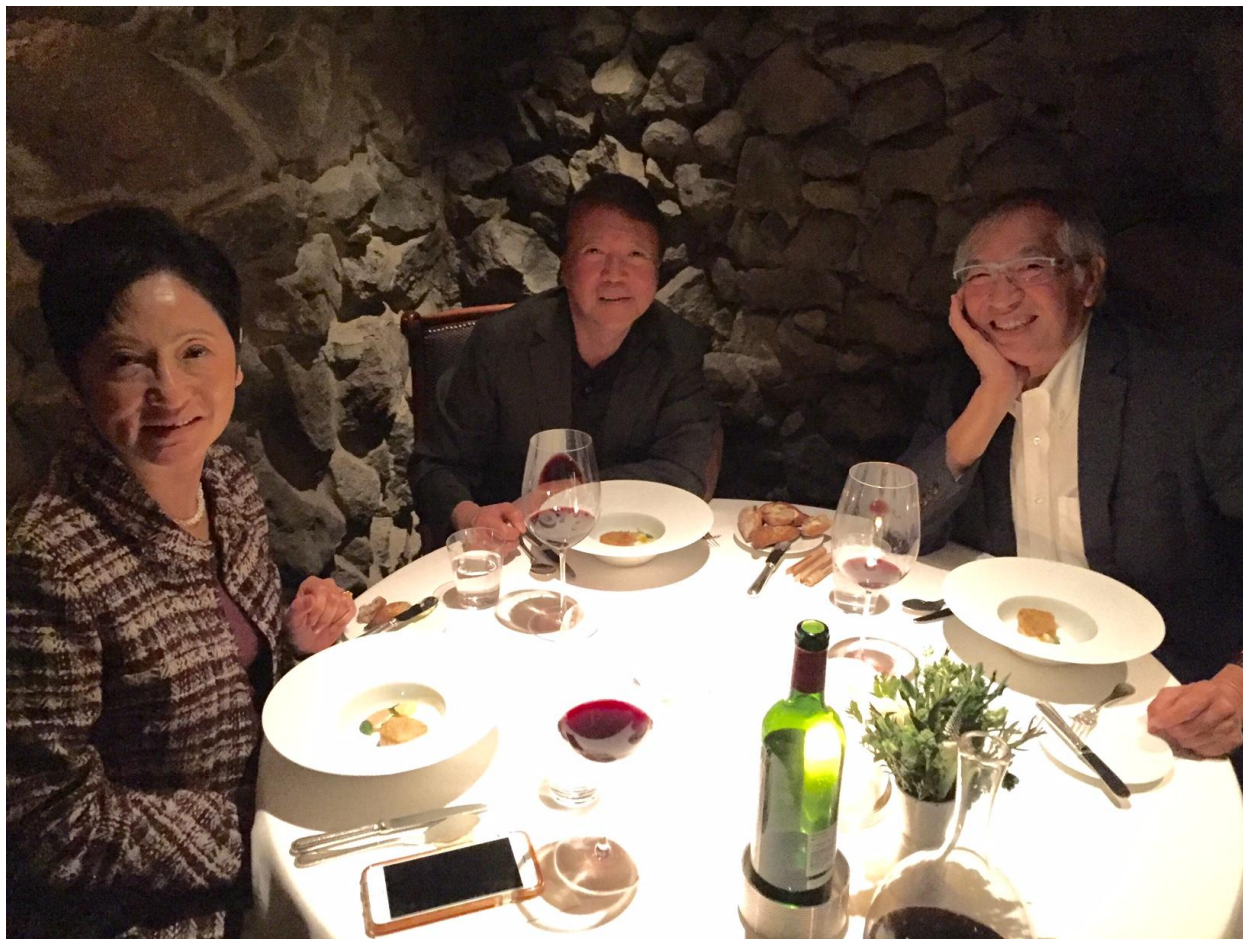
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Though the interior décor is a bit icy and monochromatic, this is a restaurant that's firing on all cylinders. The food is very good, and there's enough of it. No *cuisine minceur* here. Right off the bat, they serve you a knockout *amuse-bouche* that consists of a slow-shirred egg with minced vegetables (I know it doesn't sound very exciting, but taking 45 minutes to bake an egg while still leaving it runny results in a dish of sublime character).

The dishes throughout the four courses (\$128 for lunch, and no tipping!) are recognizable to the average palate - pasta, sea bass, lobster, chicken, beef - yet each has a distinctive, original treatment that makes your stomach stand up and take notice.

And the service is very Danny Meyer - warm, friendly, designed to make you feel at ease and at home, no matter how much of a yokel you are. During my two meals at The Modern (one was not enough), I got to meet Jason the headwaiter, Tony the assistant manager, and Barbara the *sommeliere*. We talked a bit about food, a bit about wine, a bit about the fact that I didn't live there and they might not see me again for some time. Still, I distinctly felt that I was among friends, and that they were interested in providing me with a superior dining experience without needing to count the dollars they might make off me.

If you can afford only one fancy restaurant in New York, this is the place I recommend.



Hard up for a reservation at The French Laundry? Get help from the Godfather of Chinatown, San Francisco.



Nothing like a personal note from Thomas Keller to make you feel important.



The alleged Scandinavian Bouillabaisse at Aquavit. Those three glasses with colors are different takes on aquavit, which is any spirit flavored with caraway seeds, usually plus something else. Why the Scandinavians fixated on caraway seeds is anyone's guess.



Le Bernardin's sleek interior. Simplicity of table set-up is now the norm among better restaurants everywhere.



It takes The Modern 45 minutes of baking to produce this soft-shirred egg, and it's worth all the trouble.