



BACK IN TIME

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Long Layover Lunches

We talk about air travel, but we're only airborne for a portion of the journey. The rest of the time we're at the airport. We check into our flight and sit in the departure lounge until it's time to go. When there are stops to be made along the way, the length of the layover is crucial. If it's too short it means a panicky sprint to another gate, sometimes another terminal, and we're obliged to spend an anxious time on a train or a moving walkway. That's no way to enjoy an airport. The best way to enjoy an airport is over lunch during a long layover. Lillian and I have managed to pull this off now and then; sometimes at the whim of fate, sometimes with a little advance planning.

We were at O'Hare in Chicago late one morning, waiting for a plane to take us on the last leg of our trip to Traverse City in Michigan. The flight wasn't due to leave until later that afternoon, so we settled into the "outdoor" patio of an Italian restaurant near the food court and perused the menu. Lillian ordered chicken piccata, which is harder to find than it should be, and I picked the daily special, a large bowl of *pasta e fagioli*. It's amazing how delicious a simple peasant dish of pasta and beans can be when prepared by someone who, I'd be willing to wager, learned how to make it from his or her grandmother. If they were a Neapolitan family, they probably called it *pasta fasul*, as Dean Martin did in his famous song: "When the stars make you drool just like a *pasta fasul*, that's amore." Sometimes a waiter will provide the kind of experience that restaurant managers dream of. Ours, that day, was such a man. Though not an Italian by birth, he was one in spirit and helped to create a memorable moment in time, a carefree bubble of sorts, that I can only describe as magical. With nothing but an ornate, black, wrought iron railing separating us from the steady flow of foot traffic on the busy concourse, we felt transported back to the afternoon we once spent at a sidewalk restaurant on the Via dei Fori Imperiali in Rome with a glass of the house chianti in hand, watching the world go by.

On another trip, coming home from Alaska, we had a long layover at Sea-Tac. The Seattle-Tacoma International Airport is one of the busiest in the United States, and the terminal was well endowed with things for idling passengers to do. There was, for example, *Vino Volo*, a chic wine bar whose name means 'wine flight' in Italian. 'Flight' is a collective noun—we say, "a flight of stairs," for example—which wine tasters use to mean a selection of wines; in this case, three. We ordered a flight of reds and some snacks from a well-thought-out menu. The smoked salmon was out of this world.



When it was finally time to leave, we bid a wistful farewell to *Vino Volo*, which had been our home-away-from-home for a few very pleasant hours.

But there is one layover that stands out in memory, head and shoulders above the rest, and that was in Monterrey, Mexico in the mid-1990s. We were coming back from San Miguel Allende, flying out of León, Guanajuato in a tiny little puddle-jumper that was far too tiny for my liking. I barely managed to control a fit of claustrophobia when I had to bend over and narrow my shoulders in order to squeeze into the cramped cabin. But Monterrey was halfway home. It was a cold, grey, rainy morning when the flying pencil we were traveling in landed, and we had a four-hour layover ahead of us. We repaired to the old-fashioned restaurant on the first floor and sat in a booth by the plate glass window. The window was huge, two floors high and just as wide, with a panoramic view of the runways. The watery light filtering in from the outdoors picked out the white cloths on the tables in the dining room. As we waited for our meal, we watched a mechanic drive a forklift back and forth between two parked airplanes. He wore a heavy coat and gloves, his bare head sunk down on his shoulders. His equipment left tread marks on the shiny, wet tarmac. It looked a lot later than noon out there.

The consommé was served in a white bowl: shredded chicken and rice in a clear chicken broth. The waitress brought some limes and little dishes of chopped onion, radish, cilantro, and avocado, and set them all on the table in front of me. I scattered a couple of spoonfuls of each into the bowl, followed by a generous squeeze of lime, Mexican style. It was a magnificent soup. The broth had a rich, mellow taste, and the garnishes added a pleasing texture and pretty colours as well as their own harmonious flavours. I finished the bowl and ordered another one. When the waitress set it down in front of me, she nodded in the direction of the kitchen and said, "The chef says thank you."



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As I raised a spoonful of soup to my mouth, my gaze drifted out of the window. I looked at one of the parked airplanes, then panned across the rain-spattered tarmac. The mechanic was standing quite still in his heavy coat, looking at me. We stared at each other for a second. Then he smiled and patted his belly. I could read his lips as he spoke the words *buen provecho*. I nodded and smiled back as I slid the spoon into my mouth. "What did he say?" Lillian asked.

I thought for a minute, suddenly warming to the prospect of talking about the cultural aspects of language. "He said *buen provecho*. We don't really have a comparable expression in English, so we say 'bon appétit,' which we borrowed from the French." Lillian looked out of the window and waved at the mechanic. He waved back with his big, gloved hand, then turned away and went back to work. It wasn't long before our flight was called, and we were on our way again, in a bigger plane this time.

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