

WEST POINT MARKET Cookbook



Russ Vernon

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Foreword

The Secret Need for Octopus



I suppose it's strange to be thinking of a grocery store in terms of one's "hopes" and "dreams" and "spiritual well-being." Then again, it's strange to be thinking of West Point Market as a "grocery store."

So maybe that's why, when I think of West Point, I begin to think of wishbones. I have this unusual regard for wishbones and the entire wishbone ceremony. All my adult life, every time I have grasped that offered prong, I have affected a decidedly competitive stance, concentrated very hard, and I have always made the same wish, for This One Thing. The person on the other prong has never known this wish because the nature of wishes is that they are held inside, like suppressed hiccups, which, if no one ever told you, are actually vaporous leprechauns trying to escape through your esophagus, and the more of them you hold inside, the more likely you are to discover gold. Which is to say that my heart reserves a small place for fate and superstition.

So, after many, many years of trying, all of a sudden and with uncommon dramatic flair, This One Thing came true. It happened. I got a phone call announcing that it was for real, one of those phone calls that feels kind of like a Busby Berkeley routine, with cascading daisies forming kaleidoscopic spirals across the ceiling and the person on the other end delivering the details of This One Thing while dressed in a white tuxedo and top hat and actually singing these details in the form of a cabaret sea chanty and you, the receiver of the news, running up the wall to launch into a deft backflip that lands you in the outstretched arms of a dozen German barmaids. That sort of thing.

And my very first thought was to celebrate, to spontaneously whip up some sort of ceremony so that my wife and I could savor this moment properly, knowing that thousands of wishbones had been sacrificed in the making of this evening, and such an event was unlikely to happen again any time soon. And the first practical consideration amid the last fading notes of the Good News Concertina was that West Point Market would be closing in less than half an hour and I needed to get there pronto to select something bubbly from the wine racks and something celebratory from the Prepared Foods case; I needed to get to that place which exists for just such a moment as this.

I have never thought of West Point Market in any other way, nor should I, nor should you. In fact, as I considered how to introduce this book of West

Point recipes, my initial plan was to document a visit there to buy a bottle of ketchup. Right? You, the reader of this book, would immediately be in on the joke. No one goes to West Point Market for ketchup. You go there for other reasons entirely, reasons that only begin with food/drink and quickly rise to things of the ether and of the spirit. Dreamy things. Hopeful things. The sorts of things you hear in music and see in sunsets and that bounce around on the mattress with suppressed leprechauns.

Breathless, I jumped into the car and rushed to beat the market's closing. Naturally I wanted to share the news, and naturally, this being That Sort of Day, as I passed through the automatic glass doors I saw, standing right there at the check-out, two friends of the very sort who would want to know of this development.

These friends, whose sudden appearance is filed here under the heading "Nonfiction Suspension of Disbelief: No, Really I Am Not Making Any of This Up," were two young ladies of a certain bohemian type. The type that might, say, have spent the previous night drinking absinthe, slept through the day, and gone out to West Point Market for comfort food. (For the record, the number of friends I have in this category is statistically insignificant.) And there they were, standing right in front of me, as though this were a game of Good News pitch-and-catch.

I motioned for them to "c'mere-I-have-something-to-tell-you" and as they came closer, I detected a distinct gray cloud of what-the-cat-drug-in.

"What—" I open-ended the question.

"We drank absinthe last night."

"A bottle."

"She threw up."

I glanced toward the wine department.

"Um, you didn't. . ."

There is no other place in all of Ohio that might prompt me toward the conclusion that this was actually where the scandalously exotic elixir had been purchased. And, no, they confirmed that the bottle had been smuggled into the country somehow, all very mysterious, and that its consumption and the aftermath represented an entire saga, the conclusion of which was that such an event could only end with cheese.

The one girl held up the bag to illustrate this.

"Guess what," I said, and I told them the news and they expressed their shared delight, although the one looked like she really could use that cheese. We said our goodbyes and I hurried then into the warm path of this place that always smells like coffee and chocolate. Allowing myself the delusion that I really could tell one bottle of Prosecco from another, I looked over the options and selected one in the middle, then hurried through the aisles to complete my mission.

There is something about this course through the store—through the Great Wine Forest, around the Whispering Cave of the Cheeses, past Mrs. Ticklemore's Tearoom (Nonfiction Suspension of Disbelief II: that's the actual name) and into the Plain of the Killer Brownies—that is at once directly familiar and just beyond objective description. Like the sound of an approaching blimp and



the concept of the Don Drumm wedding gift, it's something we natives share and understand intrinsically and it improves our lives in a particularly local way. It's the best kind of provincialism, the aspect of life in a place that enjoys certain flavors exclusively. I suspect I'm like most people in these parts in that I am not a regular at West Point. I only go there when I need something special, or I want to feel in some way special. This is the place where, the only time in my life I ever needed to purchase octopus, I was able to. I bought octopus off the rack, as they say in the sport-coat business.

There is a comfort to this, the knowledge that something you didn't know you needed is available, and the knowledge that the place where you live—the deliciously mundane Akron, Ohio—is a place where other people secretly need octopus, secretly drink absinthe and occasionally, maybe once in a lifetime, have everything go dreamily right, if only for an hour or two.

And so it was on to the glass case, where I selected two breaded chicken breasts and some fancy green beans and some artichoke salad, making it to the finish line just as the lights began to click off behind me, darkening the shop to allow (presumably) the elves to creep in and do their work undetected.

Back home, we opened the Prosecco and poured, raised our glasses to toast, dimmed the chandelier, lit candles and sat down to eat. I bit into my chicken breast and when I did, my teeth connected with something. I reached up and pulled it out:

The winning end of a wishbone.

I keep it and the Prosecco cork in a little cup on my desk, as reminders of one very fine day and also as reminders that these days are rare indeed and life is so tarnished by compromise, trifle, and hurt that you need to do everything you can to keep the special places special.

I can never untangle those reminders from their source at West Point Market, nor from the recognition that the Akron landmark has been so very carefully groomed by three generations of the Vernon family that it can only be seen as a special place, one that harbors flavor and graciousness and the sorts of surprises you didn't know were coming.

—David Giffels