

# Gourmet

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## HIGHWAY HIKING WITH MICHAEL HEBB

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The renegade cook leads three fellow explorers on a 32-mile walk through Los Angeles to their dinner destination: the I-5 freeway.



ou having a tea party?” shouts a woman from the rolled-down window of her SUV.

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“Yes!” screams one of my dining companions, who has walked 32 miles to eat supper on this traffic island.

Cars whoosh past on the I-5 freeway overhead, a neon sign glows in the distance, and the first bite of ceviche hits me with a wallop. The grapefruit was plucked from a tree in Anaheim, the orange juice stolen from Pomona. The lemon thyme came from a kindly gardener at the start of our trip 36 hours ago. It is the best ceviche I have ever tasted.

If ink in the media world could leave a visible trace, Michael Hebb (formerly Hebberoy) would be black and blue all over. The 33-year-old started “creating tables” 13 years ago, joining partner Naomi Pomeroy (they fused their names when they married in 2004) to launch Family Supper, an **illegal restaurant**, in 2001. The duo expanded to start “real” Portland restaurants—Clarklewis, Ripe, and Gotham Building Tavern—garnering critical praise. Then, early in 2006, the bottom fell out of the dream: Some say that Hebb was dishonest about the financial health of his company (a charge he denies, saying that “we were just reading the books wrong”); a stormy divorce, restaurant closures, and a cloud of negative media attention followed.

But now the restaurateur has started over in Seattle with a new partner and a new obsession: **cooking and eating dinner** in weird places. After hosting a candlelit supper in a Seattle airport hangar and chatting about pornography with Gore Vidal in Hollywood, Hebb is now fixated on the I-5 freeway, which winds 1378 miles from Washington State through California. It is a civic space that millions inhabit collectively every day, solitary in their cars, so he wants “to imbue [the] landscape with meaning that has become utterly bereft of it.” Partnering with art curator Stephanie Snyder, he plans to stage a dozen dinners along the freeway over the next two years. I wrangled an invite for the first, excited to take part in a sort of gonzo-locavore expedition—we would forage for dinner ingredients on private property and in 7-11s alike along the way—and in perhaps the ultimate exploration of a city’s edible bounty. (Full disclosure: Michael is a distant acquaintance from Reed College, which we attended simultaneously for a few months, abating his leeriness about letting a reporter join his trek.)

Why walk? “Because no one walks in L.A.,” he says, plucking rosemary from the community garden of Pomona College, our starting point and the site of an exhibit based on our journey. Two safety-orange stools are folded and strapped to his back, along with two military blankets rolled cigarette-thin. Ashwin Balakrishnan, the quiet student-photographer, sports an identical getup, while I don a bright orange plastic tabletop. Matt Wiggins, a tall, cheery fellow who is a friend of Michael’s from the Portland days, is charged with shooting video of the journey. He hauls a heavy orange pack holding our gear, which he periodically trades with Michael.

We tread through suburban Claremont, which is wreathed with mist, and after a mile, I hear an elated cry. “I see lemons!”

The man who comes to the door of his modest home is wide-eyed. Michael explains his project with a smile.

“Cooking a meal?” asks the man, scratching his head. “All right, it’s weird. Awful weird.” He watches Michael scabble in his trees. Lemons tumble into the pack.

Nearby, a tree gleams with oranges. When no one responds to a knock, Michael and Matt start batting down the fruit. A sprightly white-haired woman trots by, and asks if we got permission. Michael charms her in a flash. We’re working on an art project, he says, an excursion, and DeeDee—though she keeps her pace—lets us tail her to a neighbor’s door. “Hon, take these people to your garden.”

Lucky for us, gardeners have a proud streak, and DeeDee’s friend Kathleen, a sixty-something woman with kind eyes, struts among her pineapple sage, snap peas, nasturtiums, and lemon thyme. It is a windfall.

By now the mist has become a light rain. We take shelter at mile six, a McDonald’s. I am ravenous, and order three cheeseburgers. Michael concocts his preferred “pain cocktail”—one Ibuprofen, one Pamprin, and a slug of corn whiskey. I accept an Ibuprofen, as my feet are starting to smart, and because we are fortifying ourselves for a steep walk through Chino Hills.

We are walking along Carbon Canyon Road, where wildfires have recently blazed through. The sun is setting, fast. Outside a liquor store at mile 13, the shopkeeper drags on his cigarette, eyeing the ravine. “Pay

attention when you walking. People run you over, man.” I wonder again where we will sleep. Michael had said something about a chapel just off the road. I decide not to ask—not yet.

It is desolate out here in the dark, and cold—L.A. drops to about 45 degrees at night in January—and I feel frightened for the first time. I am also hungry, and my feet are killing me. When I see another hill between my dinner and me I yell at Michael, who had promised “it’s all downhill from here” several miles ago.

“Dinner requires a hill,” he replied coolly. I inwardly curse him (and the man at the sporting-goods store who sized my feet and persuaded me I was an 8, not an 8 1/2). But a restaurant twinkles on the horizon—Sol de Mexico, an oasis of salsa and tequila—and pulls us up the hill.

Tequila shots, Pacificos, and Ibuprofens follow in short order, and the pain eases. The eats—chiles rellenos, enchiladas, *frijoles*—suddenly feel like the pinnacle of fine Mexican cuisine. The conversation turns once again to this chapel, where Michael thinks we should at least take a nap. He reckons our wool blankets and liquor will keep us warm. Matt—a seasoned outdoorsman—counters, “But liquor is false warmth.” Michael brushes this off, and the group debates the merits of getting “real sleep” tonight, which I promote wholeheartedly.

Finally Michael says, “It’s literally five miles to hotel land. I got no problem with that.”

We phone in a reservation, and set out.

We soon see the “chapel”—a towering white cross set into a mound of dirt rising twenty feet off the ground. Michael clammers up the crude steps set in its side and poses for a picture, leaning against it. The flash makes the crucifix blaze in the night. I have seen these crosses from the road. I would not have slept a wink here.

Michael had assured us that this stretch—also known as California State Route 142, a scenic road whose twists and turns Wikipedia declares unfit “for trucks or large vehicles”—will be safer at this time of night, with fewer cars. But it is 9:30 P.M. on a Saturday night—the dead center of the weekend. It is also pitch black, and the shoulder of the road is often only two feet wide. So we hustle where it is slender, leaning over the railing like lithe Gumbys when vehicles rip by. It is a dreamlike walk only two miles long, but it feels epic. Michael walks ahead, waving a traffic cone covered in reflective tape at oncoming cars, and hooting.

It finally hits me. I am with a crazy man.

But there are no cabs, and—as the song goes—nowhere to run to, since the highway drops straight down to our left. When we at last arrive at a sidewalk, we clamber onto it as though out of quicksand. We pause to rest in a park, and pass around the bunch of herbs from Kathleen’s garden to inhale deeply. My tender feet are now all I can think about. We have come 21 miles today.

The next morning, we wake up in a hotel suite with stiff legs all around. At the all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet, we discuss the menu for The Feast, and I propose ceviche—our abundance of citrus juice will help minimize cooking. Michael agrees. As we continue down the road, making our way into a new suburbia named Brea, he spies a tree whose foliage dangles over the wall, and fills his shirt full of bright kumquats.

A solitary oil drill dips its head into the ground as we enter Anaheim, only five miles from our destination. Matt and Michael walk ahead; a homeless man approaches Ashwin and me. His eyes are red, and he totes three sleeping bags lashed together. “You guys homeless?” he asks.

I swallow hard. “No, we’re just going to the highway to have dinner.” For the first time, the conceit of the project circles me like a vulture, and I feel enormously guilty. For whom are we making this landscape

meaningful?

Anaheim is stuffed to the gills with ethnic markets and chain shops. We buy chorizo from a Filipino market and chocolate dipped-cones from a Dairy Queen. We procure shrimp, sea salt, olive oil, and a few other staples at Albertson's. (This apparently counts as foraging.) Michael leans on the wall outside with bloodshot eyes. He is the picture of exhaustion.

And then we spy it at last, just beyond the Angels stadium: The I-5. Cars mass in a smoky, gasping line. The men dart ahead, and Michael howls with glee.

While he assembles the table, I sit on a stool to slice shrimp and chorizo. The traffic passes quietly on three sides. Our tri-cornered island is big, bigger than my apartment, and has traffic lights on two corners to slow the cars. I feel safe. Perhaps it's calling it an "island" that makes this so. It is enormously satisfying to slice open a Mexican squash, to taste the tart grapefruit, to gnaw on chorizo. It feels right to be cooking here.

A cop shows up within minutes. He's afraid he'll have to move us. Michael handles him with velvet gloves. We are with A University, he says calmly, and with all due respect, sir, he believes we have the right to assemble here, since there is a crosswalk to this traffic island.

The officer drives off, and we are not bothered for the rest of the night. Strangely enough, there was never a moment when I thought Michael would lose that battle. He may have stretched the truth like taffy, he may have almost gotten me killed last night, and his logic may be punched full of holes. But here I am, making dinner on a traffic island—a woman who has to have her back to the wall in restaurants in order to relax—and there's no place I'd rather be.

Our menu is Chardonnay-and-citrus sangria; shrimp ceviche with Meyer lemon juice, orange juice, segmented grapefruit, mint, and Serrano chiles; escarole hearts with goat cheese and kumquats; white beans with dandelion greens, sage, and rosemary; and a sauté of chorizo, Mexican squash, and fire-roasted tomatoes. As we squeeze lemons into the ceviche, I recount the interaction with the homeless man to Michael, and ask if it bothers him. "We weren't pretending at being homeless," he says, lighting our tiny camping stove, "because that would be one thing—that would be disrespectful."

But is it a lark? A Quixotic journey? Stephanie Snyder, the curator, a fiery woman with dark glasses, has just driven from Pomona to join the dinner. "We want to understand what it means to *be* social in an anti-social landscape—in a world where sociality has been so mitigated by technology that something like this seems absolutely absurd," she says. They are lofty words. But I look beyond her, at the parade of cars lining up to take the on-ramp. A window rolls down, a driver stares, a window rolls back up, a light changes, and a car darts up onto the freeway. We are definitely making an impression.

I ask Michael whether he's accomplished his goal. "Yeah. I think we have made this landscape incredibly more meaningful for us." Our table glows in the sunset, a perfect square. It is beautiful, and delicate, its tangerine gleam a halo above the charcoal-colored pavement. But some other, ugly, metal table has also shown up, brought by two more interlopers—artists Michael has invited from L.A. They have also delivered three devilishly attractive chairs, with soft backs, and arms. Chairs a person could relax into.

I eyeball our tiny, uncomfortable stools, and hobble over to one. Michael does the same. Matt sits across from me, and Ashwin, wordlessly, by my side. We look up at the three outsiders. They laugh. "Damn straight we're gonna sit at our table," says Michael, and perhaps for the first time, his words ring utterly true.

The ceviche is miraculous, the chorizo fantastically salty. Dandelion greens—bitter against buttery beans—have never tasted so good. A little boy presses his entire upper body against the top of his backseat window to get a better look. I tune out the highbrow dinner chatter, and wave at passersby. Some wave back.

“Why am I the only one waving?” I blurt out at last. “Are we simply having dinner among like-minded people here? Is this really ‘imbuing a landscape with meaning’?”

Michael bristles a bit, and turns to me. “This dinner is a culmination of thirteen years of throwing dinner in atypical spaces, and I’m working with a curator who can bring it to people who are *not* like-minded.” He pauses, and adds benevolently over the candlelight, “I think it’s great that your impulse is to wave. But I’m going to be doing this for the next thirty years, and I’m more interested in the people at *this* table.” The implication—that he’ll exert intense change on one small group of people at a time, is not one I can argue with. Because a city I thought I could never like—one teeming with celebrities and limos, and glittery sidewalks—is now totally under my skin.

We finish eating, and collect our things blearily. My legs feel full of rocks. I grab yet another Ibuprofen 600 and what looks in the dim light to be a water bottle—a red, shiny vessel with a twist-off cap. I take a slug and immediately, violently spit it out. It’s *kerosene*—fuel for the stove. After a thorough rinse with water, a call to a bizarrely nonchalant poison-control hotline staffer, and more than a few muttered expletives, I have to laugh. I have traveled 32 miles along side streets and highways, picking up grit all the way, and now I am drinking petroleum. Los Angeles, in the end, exerts its influence. I have become a car.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ASHWIN BALAKRISHNAN

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