

Ross' Rave: Fresh mini-éclairs

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Fresh mini-éclairs. Baked right here in the store. All natural filling and low cal. Box of 12, \$8.99 in the refrigerated section.”

“Fresh mini-éclairs. Try one. All natural min-éclairs. Only \$8.99 a dozen.”

Ruth Ann’s hands talked, too. One pastry after another, each on wee doilies. Row after row on the table in front of her. No sooner would she put one out and three would disappear.

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For some reason, which I still don't fully understand, Richard liked going to Costco, and he liked going on Saturday afternoon.

“It's like the beach,” he said. “All these people, big parking lot, kids running about, long lines at the concessions. What fun! The great unwashed.”

Mostly, I suspect, he went for the free food. He’d graze along with all the others in the herd. A few salted pecans here, some lasagna there. Peach nectar from a can. Should someone try to hand him 1/16th of a Mars bar in a little paper cup, however, he’d demurely refuse. “No, no. I’m trying to lose weight,” patting his gut. I knew he was saving himself for Ruth Ann.

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She was a carbo harpy. Her voice was soft, yet firm. It had the pitch and modulation to attract even the most steadfast Atkinsenian. Her delivery precise, and gentle and alluring. It could tickle ears all the way to frozen foods. And, her face! She was ruggedly striking. Not in a Cover Girl way, but hers was a face of friendly seriousness and intent. She was neither pretty nor homely. Her

eyes were sharp and her expression oddly magnetic. What was absolutely absorbing, to me, however, was how passionate she was about what she did (What attracted Richard, were her éclairs).

I hovered a slight distance from her table, watching, riveted by her skill. She never wavered or hesitated, or stumbled, or misspoke. Each éclair landed where she had intended it to land. No crumb or wrapper would litter her stage. Her hands danced a puff pastry shell game. One after another the crowds would stuff éclairs into their fat wet mouths while I stared at a woman at work.

A fresh batch of haddock fingers (WTF?) popped from a toaster oven over by prepared foods, and the swell shifted. Ruth Ann and I were left, momentarily, alone.

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“How do you do it?”, I asked.

“What?” I caught her off guard but not out of character.

“You are absolutely amazing. I’ve seen you selling muffins, cookies, croissants. You always draw a crowd.”

“Last year I sold 197,305 dozen mini-éclairs. That was more than any other store in the country.” Her face was electric with pride. “We are the top grossing cakes and confections retailer in the western region. I love my job!”

She radiated sincerity. Ruth Ann was the genuine article.

A few weeks later I found myself in a new library, a new university, a new country, a new culture! There I stood, facing 20 sets of eyes (the only part uncovered) all staring at this middle aged, white, Western man explaining how important information literacy is in their lives.

Who exactly am I kidding? I have absolutely no idea who these people are, where they live, what they ate for lunch, how they got to school, why they are even here. Oh, sure, for the last three weeks, one talking head after another oriented us newbies about the city, the region, the religion, the students, the expectations, the goals. Yada, yada, yada. But it's like someone explaining rugby to some sap who is about to play for the first time. Yes, I understand that a bunch of guys pretty much assault a bunch of other guys and then they all take showers together and drink beer. And, while I find some of that appealing, when a 200 lb cube of testosterone is trying to rip my arms off, the reality of the game sets in fast. That's the way I felt standing in that room.

But I'm a veteran. I've been teaching this stuff for 8 student generations. This should be, as Ruth Ann would say, "a piece of cake."

But it isn't. I stumble, I blather on and on about critical thinking and making choices, and bias in media, and proper attribution. Dark eyes blinked. My spidey sense knew I was in deep trouble. I started to listen to my own voice as I talked. And, as most teachers know, when you start hearing your own drivel, you might as well just pack it up and go home.

"It's the culture, the gender, the new classroom setup, the foreignness. It couldn't possibly be me that was blowing it." But it was me and I had to own up to it.

"It's about genuineness," a more seasoned, middle aged, white, Western woman said later to calm me. "You have to believe that what you are doing in the classroom will have an impact your students' lives." "And," she said, "you have to have confidence that the way you communicate that to your students is genuine."

I was reminded of one of Roger's core conditions for learning, "Realness is the facilitator of learning." It wasn't that I disbelieved in what I was doing, it was that I didn't know that what I was doing had meaning for them.

After the next class, a student named Maryam Al Mahaddi shyly asked me if I knew how to cite a non-commercial, videoconference in APA style.

"No," I said, "but we can find out together."

"Thank you, sir", she said.

"My pleasure," I replied, but what I wanted to say was, "Fresh mini-éclairs. Baked right here in the store."