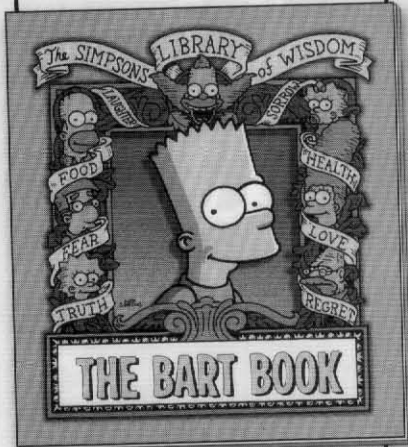


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ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

CURIOSITY SHOPPING

Leaving the neighborhood for the holidays.

BY JUDITH THURMAN

I'm not sure why I so rarely venture beyond my home turf to shop for the holidays. Sloth and habit, like an invisible cattle fence, have confined me to an outgrazed pasture. After the elections, however, I felt a pressing need to expand my horizons. My maternal grandfather baked *kipferl* for the last Hapsburg emperor, and, even though that was a cen-

tenary, perhaps because whenever I go for a dental X-ray the lead blanket reminds me of lying in my carriage half-buried under my mother's groceries. On the morning of my belated return visit, an elegant matron with a jewelled *bindi* and a Vuitton tote gave me directions to a few of her favorite shops, though she noted that I might find the merchandise somewhat



tury ago, I briefly thought that I might be eligible for Hungarian citizenship. When I couldn't find his birth certificate (his only legacies were a rolling pin and a pinochle deck), I resolved to start by living less provincially in my native city.

Perhaps most destinations in a globalized world are more mundane than one imagines. There is a realm, however, where silk, gold, and spices predominate over acrylic ponchos and distressed denim. Two dollars takes one there, aboard the No. 7 train to Jackson Heights. When my parents lived briefly in the neighborhood, fifty years ago, it was unremarkable except for its dullness. I can't recall going back since the subway cars had rattan seats and leather straps patinated with palm grease. But I have surprisingly vivid memories of shopping on Roosevelt

depleted, as it was the last day of Diwali.

Signs and flyers for the post-holiday sales were, indeed, just being posted in the dazzling bazaar of South Asian shops—scores in a four-block radius—that are clustered near the subway entrance at Seventy-fourth Street. (Diwali is an important Hindu “festival of light” that marks the beginning of the winter sowing season—and also, apparently, of the sewing season. Celebrants decorate their homes with oil lamps and votive candles, set off fireworks, exchange sweets, and buy new clothes or have them made.) But the clientele that morning was mainly veiled wives in black burkas and bearded men wearing shalwar kameez, most of them from Pakistan or Bangladesh, who were shopping for Eid-al-Fitr—the sighting of the new moon

SAUL STEINBERG: “WOMEN” (1950) © THE SAUL STEINBERG FOUNDATION

that marks the end of Ramadan. Eid, too, is an occasion for festive home decoration and new finery.

Ramesh Navani is an urbane partner in India Sari Palace, at 37-07 Seventy-fourth Street, one of the neighborhood's largest and oldest emporiums. He moved to Queens from his original shop, on lower Madison Avenue, in 1976, and he cheerfully invited blame "for starting the trend that made the neighborhood so crowded," though the ubiquity of young mothers pushing double prams probably has something to do with it. His customers are mostly from the subcontinent, but designers and stylists looking for interesting fabric also patronize the establishment. (Here one might note that the dimensions of a sari—six yards by forty-four inches—are ideal for making curtain panels, balloon shades, or table runners). One can buy an eighteen-foot swath of raw, Japanese, or tissue silk in a panoply of prints and colors for about \$60, though a gorgeous wedding sari of crimson damask embroidered with gold thread, which takes an artisan in Rajasthan three months to produce, can set a bride's father back \$1,500. The saris of Orissa resemble a cardiogram: a supple ticker of spidery, abstract notation on parchment-colored silk (\$250). And a blocked writer on one's gift list might feel inspired by a sari from West Bengal, where stories of village life from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are woven into the cloth.

In search of readier-to-wear gifts, I inspected a collection of Bandini-speckled crushed-silk scarves from Benares (\$45-\$75) at Sahil Sari Palace (37-39 Seventy-fourth Street), and dallied at the menswear counter, beguiled by the kurtas. A long, collarless tunic over drawstring pajama pants is \$25 in a linen-cotton check in ecru and gray, and \$85 in white silk with an embroidered placket. It's even safe to buy one for a mate who favors plaid flannel nightshirts from the L. L. Bean catalogue: if he won't wear it, you can.

Chandelier earrings predate the invention of the electric light by several millennia—the Indus Valley was the cradle of bling—and they are back in vogue. Bombay Jewelers (74-08 Thirty-seventh Road) is one of the myriad boutiques with mirrored walls and crystal fixtures which sell these and other timelessly glitzy baubles of

22k. gold, some encrusted with cabochon emeralds and rubies. A filigree "tumbler" cuff is \$2,500, and a selection of snake-like bangles are \$3,000-\$4,000 a pair. A handsome presentation box is free with any of the showy parures (a necklace and earrings) at Sonar Gao Jewelers (37-50 Seventy-fourth Street). Most Indian jewelry is sold by the gram, and I swiftly calculated that my own weight in gold is about \$798,000 before lunch. But "there's a lot of bargaining here," as K. C. Chouhan, the proprietor of Silk 'n Gold (37-49 Seventy-fourth Street), puts it, and for those hard-to-please pierced teens on your list diamond nose studs start at \$70.

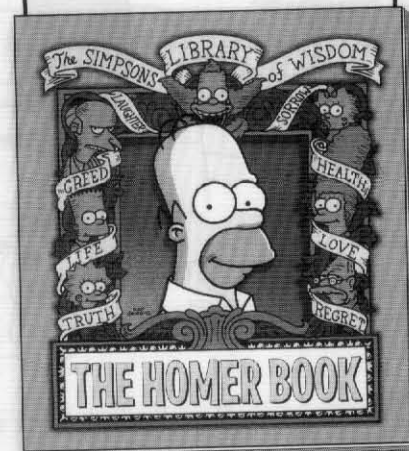
To rest my eyes from the glare of so much splendor, I sought refuge in the cavernous Butala Emporium (37-46 Seventy-fourth Street)—a souk after my own heart, which is to say, a dusty dime store filled with offbeat stocking stuffers at single-digit prices. One could splurge with impunity on Ayurvedic beauty products, including herbal Kajal pencils (\$3.99) or a package of henna hand stencils (\$1.99). The wise men would have been happy to note that frankincense and myrrh incense are here \$4 a box.

It is well known that the Russian temperament tends toward excess at both ends of the spectrum: feats of stoicism and prodigies of indulgence. The indigenous gifts to be found in Brighton Beach (indigenous in spirit if not in provenance) don't rival the tsarist exorbitance of those at A La Vieille Russie (781 Fifth Avenue), where a collection of charming bagatelles by Fabergé includes a "stamp moistener" in salmon-pink enamel (\$26,000) and a rare, fin-de-siècle bell push—a silver pig with an electrified, garnet nose—(\$125,000). But the French influence on the Slavic imagination is still palpable at Magic Corsets (231 Brighton Beach Avenue), one of several lingerie shops that cater modishly to unblushing local appetites. *Ouverte* hosiery and fetish footwear are among its wares.

A short totter in stilettos takes one to Classic Fur (221 Brighton Beach Avenue). Its proprietors, Anatoly and Raya Alter, emigrated from Ukraine in the nineteen-seventies, and their establishment—a palatial duplex ablaze with fluorescence—has become a clubhouse, of sorts, for the make-goodniks of La Nouvelle Russie. The sumptuous array

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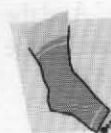
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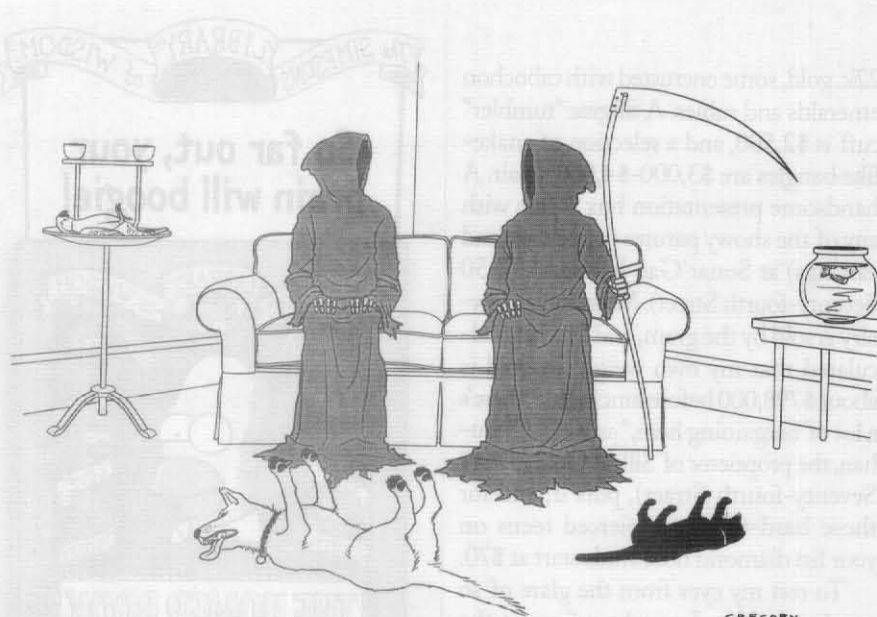
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GREGORY

"I really don't think we need any more pets."

of fur and leather is rather like the inventory of a superior video store: Hollywood glamour in one section, Eastern-bloc realism in another, and a niche for adult cartoons. "Just name it, we've got it," the soignée Mrs. Alter said. A plaid fox poncho in neon blue, red, and yellow is \$2,000, and a classic floor-length sable coat lined with tulle lace (\$25,000) gives new meaning to the notion of deep pile.

Sheep's clothing isn't just a wolf's disguise. The warmth of shearling, I learned from the proprietor of Majestic Fashion (3165 Coney Island Avenue), depends upon the shagginess of the pelt. The long-haired Toscana breed yields desirably toasty jackets or coats in campfire colors—charcoal, marshmallow, and hot chocolate—which start here at \$300. Velvety, hooded strollers of reversible broadtail (from \$1,000) are a temptation for any consumer who, like me, finds herself invoking the old poacher's motto "Hung for the lamb, hung for the ewe." And the unsheepishly budget-minded can splurge on a mink ponytail holder: \$5-\$20.

I noticed plenty of white beards, if no Santas, on Thirteenth Avenue, the main shopping street of Borough Park. The old-fashioned hardware shops do a lively trade, as Orthodox Jewish couples marry young, and every family obeying the commandment to multiply needs four sets of cooking pots and dishes—one each for milk and meat, and two for Passover.

Fresh produce seems somewhat scarcer than bakery cookies (the absinthe of the Chosen People), and smoked fish, stuffed cabbage, dried fruit, sour pickles, nuts, hard candy, and sunflower seeds also abound. Bare heads, on the other hand, are as rare as cleavage or tattoos. On Sunday afternoons, Bencraft Hatters (4202 Thirteenth Avenue)—a haberdashery owned and run by three generations of the Goldstein family—is crowded with men in black shopping for beaver *streimels*. Strangers are welcome, and many come, as the Bencraft inventory is (you should excuse the expression) catholic. In addition to Borsalinos of supple felt or a Florentine straw (\$135-\$250), there are Stetsons, panamas, boaters, homburgs, and baseball caps in cashmere or wool; fedoras, grousers, berets, and newsboy caps of Irish tweed (\$60); Greek fisherman's caps with an embroidered brim; and a variety of cuffed fur hats with or without earflaps. The popular Rabbit Trooper is \$40.

I hoped I could find an antique menorah somewhere in Hasidic Brooklyn, though I got the same response everywhere I asked: "Good luck." But hundreds of candelabra, modern and traditional, most of Israeli provenance, are in stock at Eichler's (1401 Coney Island Avenue), a cornucopia of Judaica. Much of the merchandise and literature is esoteric to the unobservant (if anyone on your list is in need of a *tzitzit*, you have come to the right place), but you can

also stock up on Hanukkah toys, cards, candles, music, chocolate coins, and folkloric gifts like a hand-painted latke dish (\$30) or a Star of David "tidbit" server (\$6.99). A low menorah of lightweight sterling that burns oil in liquid or cartridge form (\$290) was anomalous in its simplicity, and the salesman—somewhat mystified—told me that it was selling briskly. "It looks like Art Nouveau," I said. "Never heard of him," he replied.

Down the street at Silver Island (1435 Coney Island Avenue), a small boutique with mahogany woodwork, Israel Shtaubber polishes and restores heirlooms in addition to selling traditionally wrought new pieces such as Passover plates, mezuzahs, matzo bins, challah knives, and *tsinder* (candle lighters.) Filigree menorahs start at \$100. For \$300-\$2,000, one can buy an impressive "wine fountain" that, with Rube Goldberg efficiency, automatically dispenses a measured dose of Manischewitz to a row of thimble-size kiddush cups without spilling a drop.

Fifth Avenue in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, is the main artery of a Mexican barrio whose hilly streets of pastel and brick bowfront houses slope down toward the water, and whose butcher shops sell *mofongo* and *lechón*. Holiday shoppers were browsing for party favors at Irma's Craft Store (505 Forty-sixth Street), a dainty boutique afloat in tulle and ribbon which specializes in piñatas, wedding-cake decorations, First Communion crowns, and the frills necessary for a proper *quinceañera* (the fifteenth-birthday bash at which a Latin girl comes of age).

One could get into shape for a New Year's Eve on the town with a course of dance lessons (four for \$55) at Salsa de Hoy (504 Forty-sixth Street) or, depending on one's date, karate at the martial-arts school that shares the studio. A custom-made mariachi suit—slim pants or skirt and an embroidered bolero festooned with golden chains and *botonaduras*—is about \$450 at Zapateria Mexico (4505 Fifth Avenue), which also carries such *vagüero* essentials as fringed suede chaps (\$90-\$120) and tequila-bottle holsters of tooled leather (\$80), with cartridge belts designed to accommodate shot glasses. *Machismo* has its charms. Among them is a solid-gold rooster on a twenty-four-inch chain

from A&M Jewelry (4814 Fifth Avenue), where one can also find a large selection of I.D. necklaces and jumbo-diameter hoop earrings.

One is always intrigued by a shop that takes over the premises of a private house. It offers the mildly voyeuristic thrill of gaining entrée to an exclusive world. Ralph Lauren perpetrates that clubby illusion at his flagship store, in the Rhineland mansion, and two enterprising Harlem partners—Greta Wallace and Princess Jenkins—have achieved a similar feat on a cozier scale at The Brownstone (2032 Fifth Avenue). Its hive of bedrooms and parlors with sloping floors and Victorian woodwork now shelters a gallery of Afrocentric fashion and crafts. The convivial atmosphere is less that of a commercial enterprise than of a bohemian boarding house where “guest designers” come and go. Most of The Brownstone’s offerings are one or two of a kind, and they included, on a recent visit, romantic slip dresses made to order of vintage-looking floral silk by Edwing d’Angelo; chunky, hand-knitted shrugs that Wallace sells under her private label, Simply Greta (\$95); surreal necklaces of leather tendrils by Imani (a mother-daughter team) that resemble faux coral or false eyelashes (\$375-\$575); and Myra Kooy’s exuberant satchels of fur-trimmed snakeskin or ragged suede with handles of copper plumbing pipe (\$150).

Around the corner, at Djema Imports (6 East 125th Street), Moctar Yara, the gracious proprietor, stocks ethnic textiles from everywhere in Africa, and makes a speciality of mud cloths from his native Mali. The resident tailor will run up a handsome brocade caftan (\$180) or any other garment that a customer desires, using house fabric. A yard of batik from Burkina Faso or of vibrant West African cotton is \$5. Thousands of prints are stacked floor to ceiling, like paintings at the Louvre, and Yara’s advice is to take one’s time and to look “with soft eyes.” Gift shoppers in a rush could choose to focus on the old masters. Sumptuary laws once restricted the wearing of kente cloth—a strip-woven patchwork—to Ghanaian royalty. A regal precolonial spread in ochre and saffron would fit a queen-size bed (\$800, though bargaining is not frowned upon). Artisans of the Kuba tribe in Congo appliquéed nar-

row panels of homespun raffia with graffiti-like, abstract cutouts that echoed the markings on a scarified Kuba body. Fine vintage examples of Kuba cloth invite comparison with the mysterious calligraphy of Cy Twombly. (A Twombly fetches about a million; a forty-eight-inch length of Kuba cloth is \$600.)

Harlemites looking for a chic accessory patronize The Scarf Lady (408 Lenox Avenue), a compact shop as smartly fitted and packed as a steamer trunk. A handwoven latticework muffler of cashmere and angora (\$78) is one of more than five hundred wraps. Paulette Gay, the owner, also sells interesting hats, handbags, and jewelry, some by community artisans. An abalone-and-leather bib (\$250) and long *sautoirs* of baby-tooth beads in risotto colors (\$45) tempted me to go back for seconds.

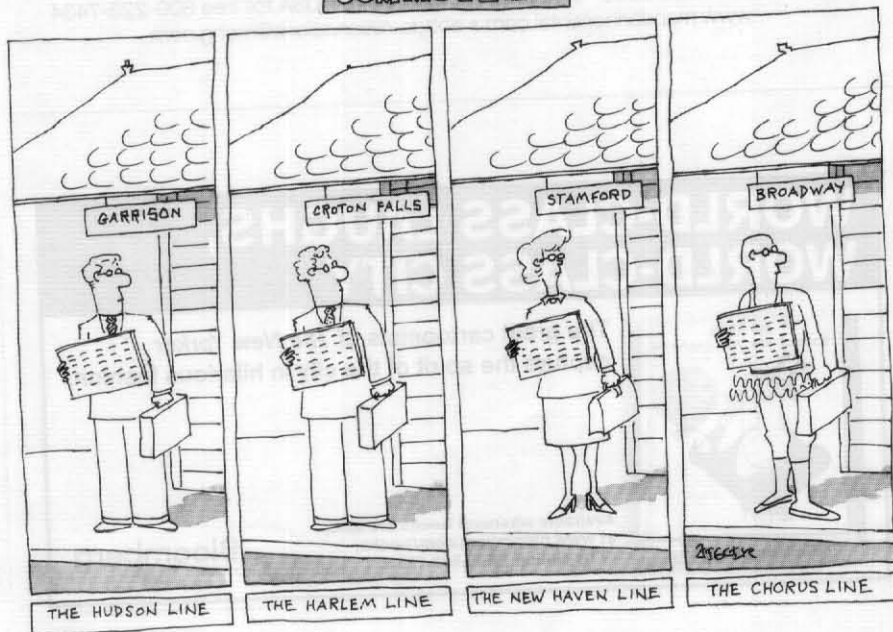
Ten stops on the Lexington Avenue express whisk one from Harlem to Brooklyn, but it is more fun to treat the local like an elevator in a department store—pushing all the buttons and exploring the temptations on every floor. At 116th Street, I turned east to Casa El Rodeo (228 East 116th), where I found a selection of handmade cowboy boots in exotic skins like ostrich and manta ray; red and blue crocodile belts; and snappy crocodile cross-trainers. A few blocks to the west, the holiday season was in full blast at El Barrio Music Center (100 East 116th Street), which carries the neighborhood’s

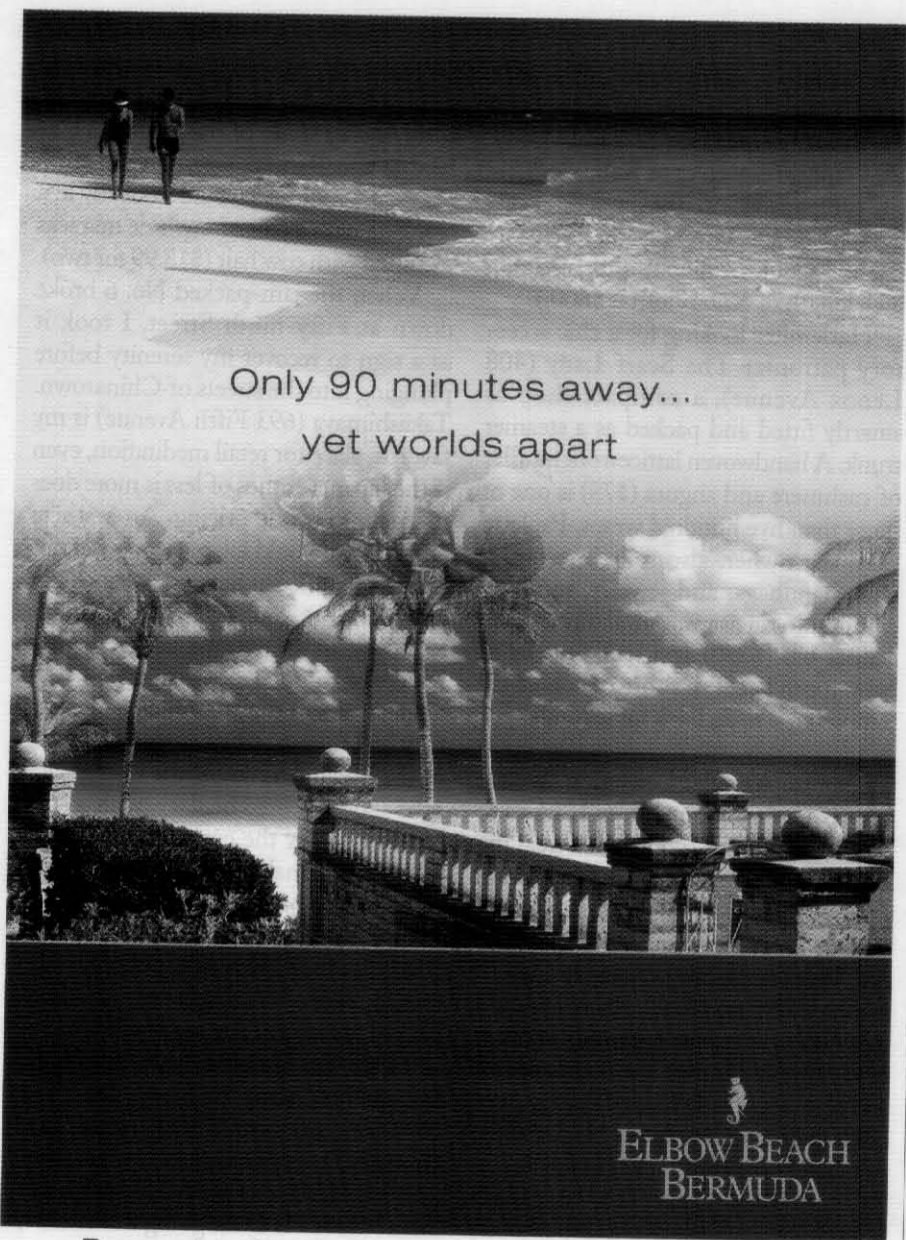
largest selection of *jibara*—the folk music of Puerto Rico. A tape that features *los dos grandes* of the genre, La Clandria and Ramito, singing Christmas songs, is \$9.99, and would fit neatly in a stocking with a pair of rawhide maracas trimmed with cow hair (\$13.99 for two).

When the jam-packed No. 6 broke down at Fifty-ninth Street, I took it as a sign to recover my serenity before plunging into the streets of Chinatown. Takashimaya (693 Fifth Avenue) is my favorite place for retail meditation, even if the Japanese ethos of less is more does not pertain to the pricing. An aesthete on one’s list would love a lacquer service plate by Kunikatsu Seto, a master of the art (\$1,800); one of his sake bowls (\$1,200); or an antique basket with a handle of bamboo root (\$1,400-\$4,200) which dates to the late nineteenth century and thus qualifies as a genuine gift of the Meiji. And any of the vintage lacquer trays—footed or flat—with a surface rippled by the carver’s blade (\$45-\$250) would make an appropriate platter on which to pass a selection of exquisitely wrapped sweets from Minamoto Kitchoan (608 Fifth Avenue).

Chinatown’s vitality is inexhaustible, and so are its gift shops. The challenge is to sift the treasure from the dross, but the proprietors of Kam Man Food Products (200 Canal Street) have already done so. Theirs is a vast and orderly bargain wonderland of well-designed Asian housewares. As I was going downstairs,

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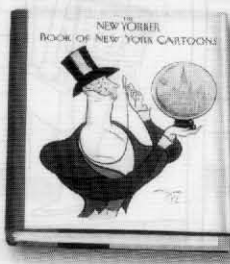
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two employees of the food department brushed past me carrying a roasted pig, and its aroma whetted my appetite for some new dinner plates. It was hard to choose, however, among the traditional cherry-blossom or bamboo patterns; the crackled glazes (celadon, coral, sapphire); and the square or rectangular plates in black and white (\$4.25-\$16.95). A service of delicately veined trompe-l'œil porcelain leaves was especially fanciful. The biscuit-and-seaweed-colored bowls and teacups had "shrivelled" rims, and the serving dishes had stem handles (\$7.95-\$13.95). Any child growing up in a takeout culture should master the use of chopsticks at an early age. A training set in pink or blue plastic (\$3.95) would tickle a tot just learning the difference between potstickers and shumai. But fetching miso bowls decorated with bears, kittens, or whales (\$3.95-\$6.95) are also suitable for jello.

The Santas were tolling their bells and the lights of Yorkville were twinkling when I emerged from the subway at East Eighty-sixth Street with my bags of loot. (I also bought a rice-paper dragon kite for \$12.50 at Wing On Wo & Company, at 26 Mott Street, a shop in business since 1925, and a selection of tiny creatures—crickets, a flamingo, and an elephant—woven of palm fronds by Yu Shao Hua, a "grass artist" who sells his enchanting work at the corner of Canal and Mott Streets.) My home turf, as it happens, was once an outpost of the Hapsburg Empire, and I live two blocks from the brownstone where my grandparents settled, in 1890. Though the savory Magyar spice shops and the less than savory beer gardens where the Bund held secret rallies in the nineteen-thirties have long since closed, one can still buy sweet or hot paprika, smoked sausage, and poppy-seed strudel at the Yorkville Meat Emporium (1560 Second Avenue), which is run by the Gubicza family, and several varieties of Christmas stollen at the venerable Schaller & Weber (1654 Second Avenue), a German gourmet shop that also sells festive boxes of *Glückschweinchen* (candy pigs) and Austrian chocolates. There wasn't any fresh-baked *kipferl*, but at Blue Danube Gifts (217 East Eighty-third Street) I found a recipe for vanilla *kifli* in an illustrated cookbook of holiday desserts, "66 Karácsonyi Édesség," by Lajos Mari and Hemzo Karoly (\$24). Now all I have to do is learn Hungarian. ♦