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Food for Thinkers: I Like Coke

January 22, 2011 • 12:30 pm PST 26 responses Like 28



NICOLA TWILLEY
Food Editor



DAN MAGINN
Architect

Architect [Dan Maginn](#) (his name should be familiar to the GOOD community as the author of the [Square Feat](#) series, among other guest posts) possesses an eclectic and somewhat unexpected range of food expertise. Looking to improve your sandwich-making methodology through the application of architectural design principles? He has a [step-by-step guide just for you \(PDF\)](#). Intrigued by the similarities and differences between Italy, the country, and Arthur Bryant's, the [famous barbecue restaurant? Maginn's your man \(PDF\)](#)

For GOOD's [Food For Thinkers](#) week, Maginn decided it was time to turn his designer's eye to Coke. Warning: this post is *The Real Thing*®.

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I Like Coke

(A reservedly unabashed appreciation of a well-designed fluid by Dan Maginn)

Notes on Not Being Dead Yet

I have an active daydream life in my waking hours—full of intrigue and grand delusion and balloon guns and porpoise attacks. Night time, however, is another matter altogether. I dream in French, it seems, which is odd because I don't speak French. To clarify (sort of): I typically dream in the spare style of quasi-existentialist filmmaker [Jean-Luc Godard](#). Aside from the dream I had in high school in which Madonna was my girlfriend (my actual girlfriend! We went to Baskin Robbins and played tennis), my dreams feel like outtakes from *Breathless*—disconnected scenes involving rote tasks like doing taxes, going to Costco, looking for scotch tape in the basement. Stuff like that.

Last week, I had an especially vacant and eventless dream in which I was able to experience an approximation of being dead. In the dream, I was floating, like a sea cucumber, in deep space. It was a very unsettling feeling, and I woke with a panicky start, alerted by a plaintive “bwhhaaaaaa” sound emanating from my transitionally-situated, pillow-stuck mouth. Heart pounding, I found I could still taste the bitter

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inevitability of my eventual exit from conscious existence on this planet. And it sucked.

As I lay in bed, three thoughts occurred to me in succession. My first thought was large: That in 100,000 years, I will have been dead for nearly 100,000 years. My second thought was in response to my first thought: That I really, really liked being alive, not dead, and would profoundly miss the people and places and events that have intersected my life-arc when it was all over. And finally, perhaps in response to the grand scale of my first two thoughts, it occurred to me that I would miss the mass of underappreciated life-details that might otherwise get lost in the shuffle of 100,000 years of non-existence. Little things, like the taste and smell and brilliant color of a ripe Florida orange, for instance. Or the thump of a Golden Retriever's tail on a carpeted floor. Or the satisfying click of a mechanical pencil. Stuff like that.

Perhaps because I was sleep-parched from my existential nightmare, I found my mind shifting to a surprisingly specific track: How much I would miss the familiar embrace of a perfectly ice-cold, mouth-stinging, adrenaline-massaging Coke when I was gone. Not wine or beer or scotch, which might seem more appropriate, given my relative adulthood. No—I would miss a friendly soft drink.

But not Pepsi.

Coke.

In fact, it seemed to me that if I were to be granted 5 minutes of actual physical existence 100,000 years from now—5 actual, measurable, not-floating-sea-cucumber-yes-Dan-wearing-pants-on-earth-minutes—that I wouldn't want to spend those 5 minutes with my family or friends or Thomas Jefferson or Martin Luther King. No—I would prefer instead to be left alone, and to have a Coke. Primarily, to enjoy its familiar mouthfeel and tongueburn and mindgrip and general refreshingness after such a long time afloat in the timeless spacegas. But more importantly, to use it as a sense-key to unlock the dozens of seemingly nonessential earth memories in which it played an overlooked but nevertheless important role.

Notes on Coke

Coke is nearly perfect—or, at least, it can be perfect if the right conditions are present. It is simultaneously elegant and ordinary, effortless and aggressive, obvious and mysterious. It appeals to young and old alike. It is the Pixar of beverages.

It is sleek and powerful and full of secrets, beautiful and terrible both. The design of Coke is so successful because it effortlessly balances the seemingly disparate forces that comprise it, sort of like an AK47. We can appreciate it for its advertised thirst-quenching and energy-generating benefits, but we can also learn to appreciate its more sinister side, which we take for granted. Coke is full of acids, and prickly bubbles to help deliver these acids deep into the shag carpet of your tongue. It kind of hurts to drink a coke. And that's ok.

Coke is sweet. It is full of nourishing sugars, plus vanilla and nutmeg and other spices that Grandma used to put in her pumpkin pie. And who doesn't like Grandma? We all like Grandma. Coke is also a wee bit bitter. The sugar is in there, in part, to help mask the taste of the ingredients that you won't find in Grandma's spice drawer. You know, like Phosphoric Acid—the same stuff that Grandpa used to remove rust from his shovel. The goeey stuff he kept out in the barn in a galvanized tub, on the shelf with the ancient cans of paint. You know, the barn—that place where he would drink hooch and strangle the chickens.

Grandma and Grandpa. Light and Dark. Luke and Darth. Pleasure and Pain. Proctor and Gamble. Coke beckons you with its inviting red label... and then hisses at you when you open it, like a snake. Warning you about something.

All this said, I don't mean to come across as a saucer-eyed, logo-wearing Coke booster—I'm not. I'm not a full-blown Coke Person—and there are such people. I reckon I'm more of a Semi-Proustian Coke Afficianado. I believe that not all Cokes are Great Cokes, or even Good Cokes. (I just had a Coke an hour ago for instance, in the Kansas City Airport. It was the size of a truck tire and not that cold and it tasted a bit like jet fuel.) Like anything, Coke underperforms when it's out of shape—but when it's at the top of its game, it can be as close to perfection as a human-designed object can be.

Notes on an August Day, 1974

This I now know: The secret to having Memorable Cokes—100,000 year Space-Cokes—is to Not Have Very Many Cokes At All. To Very Rarely Have a Coke, in fact—but to always be on the lookout for those times in which one should consider Having a Coke. And then, when one of those times presents itself, to Have a Coke. And to pay attention to that Coke, and as a by-product, to pay attention to the host of underappreciated miracles that surround us every day.

I distinctly remember playing baseball on countless oven-roasted summer afternoons as a kid, in St. Joseph, Missouri. After the games were over, we would slap high fives with the other team with pointed disinterest, and then race down to where the concrete-block concession stand stood (running faster than we did during the game, now that I think about it) where a red-eyed, zit-faced 17 year-old dude straight out of *Dazed and Confused* would supply each of us with a free, ultra-small Coke in a waxy red paper cup, usually with two or three enormous skateboard-wheel-looking ice cubes in there, taking up valuable Coke-space. Those red cups couldn't have held more than 8 ounces, and the Coke itself was gone in under a minute. But goddamn, those were Great Cokes: anticipated like Christmas for two hours in the Gerald-Fordy, pre-Gatorade, pre-Big Gulp heat of the game. Enjoyed for a divine instant after the game. And then, like so many perfect things...

Gone.

** Editor's Note: A confession: I have not drunk a real Coke since about 1990 (I prefer my soft drinks sweetened with [a slug of rat poison](#)). But since this is the week of [breaking out of food ruts](#), it seems that Coke as appreciated by Maginn might be the perfect beverage to wash down [John Thorne's Vienna Sausages](#). If you try the combination, let us know...*

[Food for Thinkers](#) is a week-long, distributed, online conversation looking at food writing from as wide and unusual a variety of perspectives as possible. Between January 18 and January 23, 2011, more than 40 food and non-food writers will respond to a question posed by [GOOD's newly-launched Food hub](#): What does—or could, or even should—it mean to write about food today?

Follow the conversation all week [here at GOOD](#), join in the comments, and use the Twitter hashtag [#foodforthinkers](#) to keep up to date.

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