

THE ART OF FRUGAL HEDONISM

A guide to spending less while enjoying everything more

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*A guide to spending less while
enjoying everything more*

ANNIE RASER-ROWLAND WITH ADAM GRUBB



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2. RELISH

'RELISH' IS A WORD WORTH MUSING UPON. It can sound almost indecent, with its suggestion of immoderate sensory intensity. Your authors regard this full engagement with the pleasure potential of life as the very finest skill in our frugality armoury.

We humans are ripe with nerve endings. Why waste them? Your author Annie remembers being a kid running around the bulk foods store with her best friend, plunging arms into the giant bins of dry beans and rating the different varieties for how fun they were for arm-plunging. She seems to recall that the kidney beans won, and while it is possible that you might be asked to take your business elsewhere if you try this as an adult, it does serve to illustrate how thickly strewn our daily lives are with sensual delights just begging to be noticed.

If you are walking home on one of those scorched afternoons where the heat is shimmering and your muscles are all warm and loose and the air is heavy with eucalyptus oils being baked out of the street trees, you might as well choose to enjoy all that sensory information coming at you like a molten sledgehammer. Sound challenging? Try this trick: treat it as if you'd *paid* for the experience and all its sensory elements. Soak it up with relish, and notice that you do not have to buy something to actively consume it.

Smack your lips and make appreciative noises when you're eating something tasty. Half-close your eyes when a sea breeze nips at the little hairs on the back of your neck. Stroke your dog's ear between thumb and forefinger and marvel at its silkiness. Snuggle into your bed on a cold night and actually grin about how good it is. Gaze at twinkly water until you feel a bit tipsy. Enjoy the rocking movement of the train. Go for a barefoot walk somewhere where you can curl your toes into brittle grass, mud or sand. Listen to music while doing nothing else at all. Call it mindfulness, call it living in the moment, call it relishing – it's recommended by psychiatrists, hedonists, Buddhist monks and cheapskates alike.



*Stroke your dog's ear between thumb and forefinger and marvel at its silkiness...
Human earlobes also good.*

What are some of the free or cheap things you're already relishing? Afternoon naps? Singing? Learning about colonial Australia's bushranger culture? Could you spend more time doing these things, or give yourself more space to really engage with them?

Conversation is surely one of life's greatest free relishables, and is certainly worth devoting time to. It too benefits from fuller engagement – people become more conversationally nimble and generous when they fully immerse themselves in the pleasure of talk. Help this happen simply by

putting aside telephones and other devices of distraction*. You might also like to question the dominance of the restaurant or bar as default catch up venue. As the wining and dining budgets of many of our friends increased with age, your authors started suggesting alternatives to these spending-obligatory social occasions (given that a single event could easily vaporise a quarter of our weekly income). We soon noticed that the conversations we had while walking along the creek, or warming our hands round mugs of tea at a friend's kitchen table, were generally more engrossing than the distracted 'consumption-accessorised' conversations. A couple of people really can have a hell of a good time saying particular words in particular orders – BYO brain, no accessories required.

It is easy to use spending money as mental confirmation that something of value is being obtained. We can equally choose to relish and recognize value in experience, atmosphere, sensuality, or company. The more we make such choices, the less urge we have to treat ourselves by 'buying something nice' when life feels hard. That urge might become transformed into a yen to go lie in the park on a blanket and watch clouds for an hour. And before you protest that such experiential pleasures take time that most modern humans don't have, let us remind you that time is *exactly* what you can choose to have more of when you spend less money...

By the way, we're not inferring that you *shouldn't* relish your paid-for consumption – in fact it will go much further if you do. Try ordering one espresso at a café and making it last for an hour. Revel in each drop of that

* Does this ring true (apologies to pun-averse readers) to you? Well there's evidence for it too. Researchers from the University of Essex put strangers into pairs to discuss 'meaningful' topics. For half of the pairs, a mobile phone was left in the room, lying discreetly on a book on a nearby desk.

Those in the room with the phone reported feeling radically less trust, empathy and overall relationship quality. It wasn't *their* mobile phone, it wasn't even switched on, and yet it affected participants' sense of connectedness even if they *didn't consciously notice the phone's existence*. One hypothesis is that a phone subconsciously suggests the possibility for alternative social connections, and thus causes us to participate less fully in the here-and-now.

oily black dynamite rolling around your taste buds. Have occasional sips of water to refresh the flavour. People-watch while you luxuriantly observe the shifts in your brain chemistry as the caffeine moves in. You'll feel astounded to witness surrounding tables fill and empty as people hurriedly consume huge meals and multiple coffees, often leaving them unfinished as they pay up and move on, seemingly unmoved by the experience. Yet simply by milking the moment for all that it's worth, you get to leave feeling like you just had a seriously decadent experience.

It might take a little practice

It is very very easy to not relish when life feels like it is thundering ever onward at such a hurly burly pace. Many people get completely out of the habit. There was a captivating passage in an otherwise rubbish book Annie read while stuck in a provincial Indonesian port town. She couldn't leave the grounds of the tiny hotel next to the airstrip for three days, because apparently once the light plane she was waiting for finally made it through a gap in the inclement weather, it would want to take off again immediately.

The book told of a pair of teenage sisters, one of whom had recently died, and was hovering as an embittered ghost over her living sibling. She was seriously resenting her non-corporeal status, and envying her sister for still having a body. In one part she watches her sister walk down a gravel driveway, and pines to feel those wet stones crunching underfoot. She swears to forgive everyone who sinned against her in life, if only some higher power will give her a mouth for just a few minutes, so that she can pick up a handful of that wet gravel and roll it around on her tongue. She imagines tasting all the different minerals, and feeling the sharp corners and the smooth facets of the gravel move against the roof of her mouth. She exults in the very thought of such sensory overload, then crashes into fury that it will never again be hers.

This passage was just perfect for a lock-in. Annie had no trouble passing the final two days in and about that little room, as she – yes – tasted gravel, investigated the sensory properties of a peanut for half an hour, and experimented with relishing the smell of the semi-rotten mangoes fallen from the tree outside her window. She also worked on her one-arm pushups.



...But is this the hand of that slightly twee cinematic heroine of relishment, Amélie, or is it the hand of your humble co-author Annie?

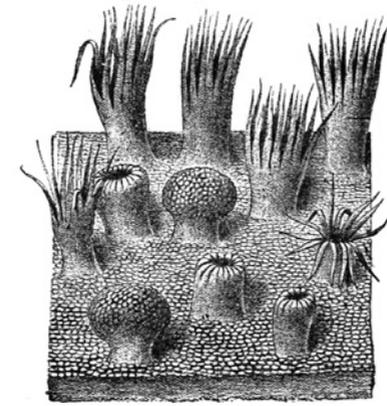
Some mindfulness teachers suggest starting your journey to greater sensory engagement by simply pausing whatever you're doing for five minutes, three times a day. Contemplate your surroundings and the feeling of being in your body with unhurried curiosity. Observe the contact of your feet on the ground, and the feeling of your head resting atop your spinal column. Try and sense your heart and lungs in your chest, expanding and contracting in that ceaselessly helpful way they have.

Other practitioners prescribe an exercise with a raisin, where you focus on every detail of its appearance, texture and smell for two minutes, then spend another two minutes eating it. Your authors personally prefer a cumquat. There really is *a lot* going on with a cumquat.

7. HAVE AN OPEN RELATIONSHIP WITH RECIPES

YOU ENCOUNTER THE CONCEPT of the latest famous chef's pinenut-studded hotcakes with caramelised quince compote, and feel a sudden passion to possess it, just like *The One In The Picture*. It may almost feel important – as if your life would be a better life with that dish in it, a meal that someone has bothered to write about and place in a shaft of sunlight on a scrubbed wooden table to photograph. It probably is quite yummy too. But be warned, dear reader! Make a frequent habit of faithful recipe replication, and you will spend oodles on one-off ingredients, many of which will have exactly two and a half teaspoons removed from the jar, before swiftly segueing from *Essential* to... mouldering in the back of the fridge.

The Frugal Hedonist chooses a culinary path of more flair and independence. Develop some cooking instincts and then base your meals on whatever happens to be in season, cheap, or in the cupboard right now. Go totally freestyle, or if you do like to use recipes, learn to substitute. No breadcrumbs to help bind your meatballs? Grind some oats in a blender and use those instead. No apple cider vinegar, but plenty of lemons? Lemon juice plus a pinch of sugar will probably be just fine. Most deliciousness is a push and pull between sweet, sour, and salty elements, with a tasty fat to carry the flavour (and to help you absorb the nutrients). Also consider including something with bitter notes to cut richness, or an *umami* component to give robust savouriness, and things will usually turn out scrumptiously. If all that fails, grill some extra cheese on the top.



*Your taste buds as imagined by Gray's Anatomy (1918).
They certainly look ready to party.*

This is how all the fancy stuff gets invented anyway! Italian peasant Z did not decide to squeeze the juice of unripe grapes onto meat so that it could later be marketed in small bottles as verjuice and make lots of dosh for gourmet food companies. Peasant Z did it because they recognized that their dinner would taste better with a sour note, and had nothing else acidic on hand. Your authors find that our own cuisine escalates in sublimeness the more we come to rely on the random. A harvest of chestnuts and under-ripe apples lead to a fabulous goat, chestnut, and tart apple stew. A yen for Earl Grey tea provokes experiments with steeping a sprig of thyme in regular tea, which turns out to be super nice.

We do use recipes for learning. A good trick is to find three recipes for something similar to what you want to make. Then see where they overlap to give you a rough idea of proportions. For example, we had lots of nettles and potatoes in the garden, and some haloumi that needed using, so we looked up a few gnocchi recipes to get a feel for ratios and essential preparation techniques. (If we hadn't already had the flour called for by all three gnocchi recipes, we would have just made a fry-up with our ingredients instead.) Recipes are also good for trying out whole new flavour combinations that use the raw ingredients you find yourself with in even more artful ways – green tomato pie anyone? But, basically, in the words attributed to Charlie Parker,

“Master your instrument, master the music, and then forget all that shit and just play.” You’ll know you’ve gotten there when you have friends coming for dinner and you make a gravy that involves Vegemite, with complete confidence that no one will notice.

Vegemite Gravy

(you can use Marmite or Promite if you are from a Non-Vegemite-Worshipping-Nation)

Okay, we recognize the irony of including a recipe here, but what the heck...

Butter (or lard, or ghee, or oil)

Onion, very finely chopped (optional, but it’s nice to add some garlic or mushrooms at the end of step 5 if you don’t use it)

Plain flour (if using cornflour instead, use much less and mix to a smooth paste with a little water before putting into the pan with the fat)

Stock made from bones/meat/vegetable scraps, or water and half a stock cube... or just use plain water

Vegemite (or a glug of soy sauce)

Some old red wine (or red wine vinegar)

Rosemary or thyme or both, finely chopped

Salt and pepper

1. Melt knob of butter in a frypan over medium heat, and fry onions gently until really soft, then remove them from the pan.
2. Melt a small knob of butter in pan, then remove from heat.
3. Slowly mix a spoonful of flour into the butter to make a paste (a roux).
4. Return pan to a low heat and quickly start stirring in some stock until you have something with a consistency like cream.
5. Add about a teaspoon of Vegemite, a dash of wine, the rosemary and some salt and pepper. Add the fried onions back in.
6. Cook while stirring for about 5 minutes, or until thick and tasty.