

WINES TO ADMIRE

Jancis Robinson indulges in world-class vintage Montroses

PAGE 8



FT Weekend

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BLOBJECTS OF DESIRE

Karim Rashid wants to make design more democratic

PAGE 15



Arch-foe of the food extremists

Advocate of dietary moderation K. Dun Gifford tells Paul Sullivan it's time to stop demonising food and learn to eat sensibly

I hate extremists," says K. Dun Gifford. He is thumbing through an anti-foie-gras pamphlet handed to him by protesters outside Union Square Café in New York. Glancing at the menu, he smiles: "They shouldn't be picketing for a crummy terrine of foie gras - fresh foie gras seared with apples, okay, okay. How wimpy."

Gifford has faced down plenty of extremists. As a campaign adviser he was by Robert F. Kennedy's side when Sirhan Sirhan assassinated him. And after working for Edward Kennedy, Gifford became a target of wrath for acting as an intermediary with the family of Mary Jo Kopechne, who died in the senator's car.

But for the past 15 years, Gifford, 66, has been focused on food extremists through Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust, a think-tank he runs. Oldways promotes the Mediterranean diet and olive oil. It lobbied the US Department of Agriculture ahead of its introduction this year of new food guidelines. It opposes fad diets - particularly low-fat and Atkins' low-carb - and

abstinence. "We need to teach people that food is glorious and you don't have to eat a whole lot of it to be satisfied," says Gifford. "The path to success is managing calories. You can't do that unless you enjoy your food."

The lawyer practises what he preaches. After a lunch of pasta and scallops washed down with Montepulciano, he can't wait for dessert - cinnamon ice cream and caramel sauce. "The message for us is the pleasures of the table. Eat what you want. Balance your calories."

This year Oldways has launched Managing Sweetness: "We don't think there is anything intrinsically wrong with Coke. If you want to demonise Coke, then you probably have to demonise coffee with sugar, because they're both caffeine products with sugar."

Oldways is expanding its Whole Grains Project to persuade food producers to reduce the percentage of processed grains in their products. In return, Oldways has created a bright yellow seal for producers to affix.

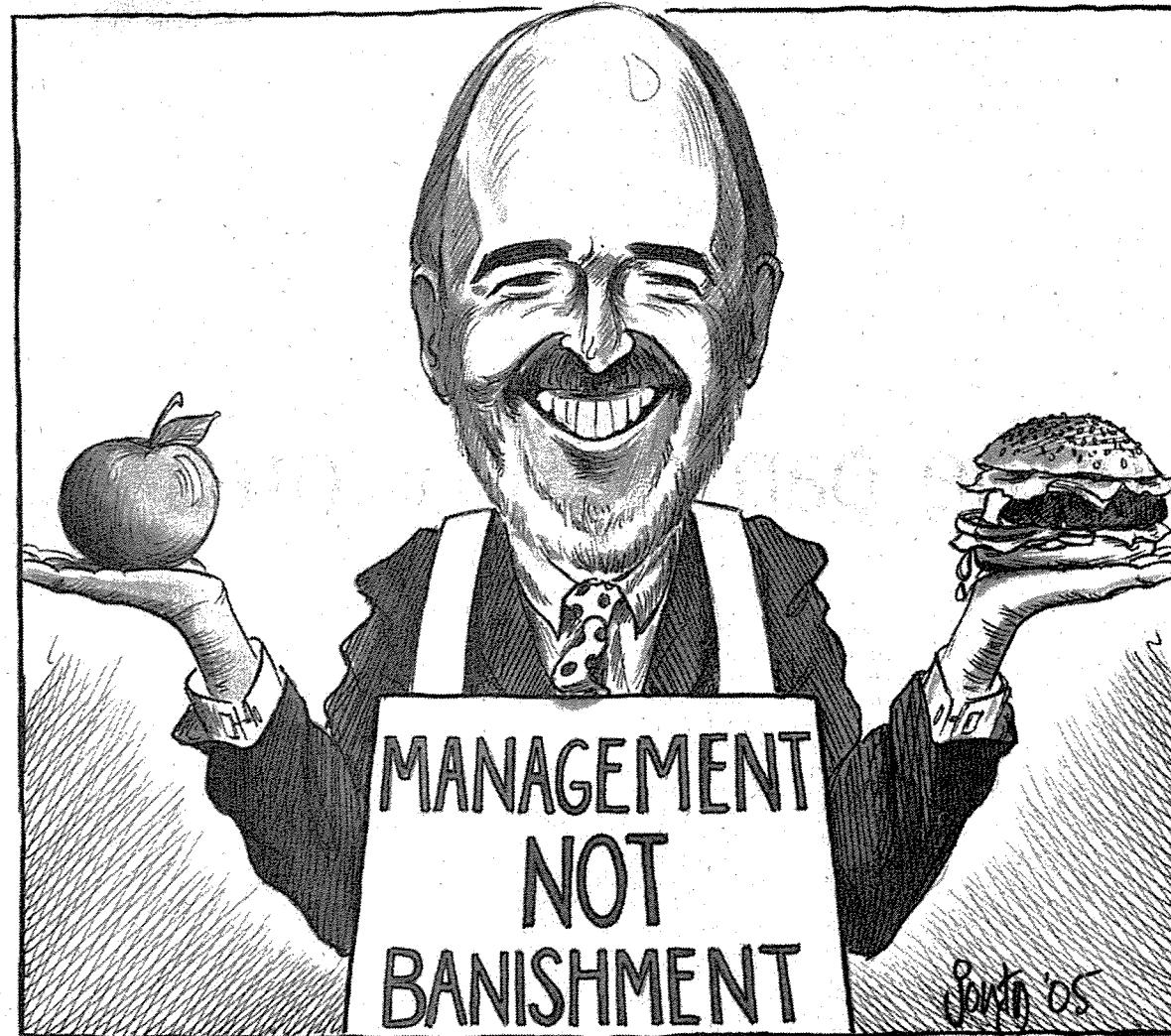
It may seem unusual for a food think-tank to advocate both Coca-Cola and seven-

grain-bread, but it is consistent with the "management, not banishment" philosophy.

"Don't make it bad to eat foie gras. Don't make it bad to eat only plant protein. Don't make it bad to eat sugar. It isn't," he says. "You can drink a Coke or a Pepsi. You can eat a hot dog at the ballpark. Don't think you have to stop eating or drinking this stuff. Enjoy it. Understand it. And balance your calories. Bingo."

In the 1980s, after a decade at a property company that owned the Ritz in Boston, Gifford met Charles Ritz, who taught him about wine and food service. He started lunching with Julia Child, who introduced French cooking to millions of Americans, and wine maker Robert Mondavi, and helped them run the American Institute of Wine and Food. By the middle of the decade he was a restaurateur and co-owner of a Boston cookie company with Senator John Kerry.

However, it wasn't until Gifford visited China in 1987 that he started thinking more about food health issues. In Qufu, birthplace of Confucius, he attended a banquet of 30 small courses



Pyramid selling: K. Dun Gifford helped devise the Mediterranean diet pyramid as a weapon in his long fight with low-fat dogma

accompanied by 30 thimbles of alcohol. He awoke the next morning with "a mai tai hangover" and the seed for Oldways: that food prepared in traditional ways was better for people.

"I knew you couldn't sell a concept about traditional food ways. Nobody would care," he says. "I knew you

had to sell health. I knew you had to back it up with bulletproof science. And I knew we had to have authority figures around us in the field to give credibility."

What resulted was the Mediterranean diet pyramid "as a model of healthy eating habits" and an antidote to the low-fat craze. Old-

ways' research showed that without fat, satiation was not triggered, so people ate more. Satiation came with healthier, mono-unsaturated fats such as olive oil. Oldways won the backing of the World Health Organisation and the Harvard School of Public Health.

"We knew we had a hit

with the Mediterranean diet, so we really went after that," he says. The formula was adapted for Asian, Latin American and vegetarian food pyramids. Oldways is now working with the European Commission to increase olive oil consumption in northern Europe. Oldways has positioned

itself between the extremes of the debate. Gifford says it has much in common with the left-leaning Center for Science in the Public Interest, but diverges on sweetness. The CSPI recently published a study criticising soda-drinking among teens.

Yet Oldways has no problem working with manufacturers. It helped small olive oil producers get their products on US shelves, and is working with conglomerates from Frito-Lay to Cargill on whole grains.

"When I had my first meeting with General Mills, I said we have exactly the same goal with some minor modulation," he says. "We want people to put your whole grain product in the cart and you want them to put the whole grain product in the cart. We don't necessarily want them to put your highly refined product in their cart."

On managing sweetness, Oldways has taken its lead from the American Diabetes Association. "They specifically don't tell [diabetics] not to eat sugar," he says. "It's academics and advocacy groups that do."

Bringing nuance to the debate may be Oldways' greatest challenge. Americans like fad diets, and counting calories is not the sexiest slogan. But Gifford hopes hard data can startle people into changing habits, the way lung cancer figures jarred smokers. If not, Americans - who grew 10 per cent fatter from 1990 to 2000 - will continue to suffer the health effects of obesity.

"It's not Coke, it's not cake, it's not meat, it's not junk food," he says. "It's too much - that's what it is."

Paul Sullivan is an FT writer in New York