

# COMMENTARY

## The French Connection



It's time to revise the script. When "The French Connection" first appeared on the silver screen in 1971, set and filmed in a gritty New York, it included passages like this:

"Brooklyn is loaded with guys that own candy stores, two cars, and like to go to night-clubs!"

Or this, some of the best hot-grill writing about an illegal economy ever put on film, and also some of the first:

CHEMIST (analyzing drug shipment): Blast off: one-eight-oh. Two hundred: Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. Two ten: U.S. Government certified. Two twenty: lunar trajectory, junk of the month club, sirloin steak. Two thirty: Grade A poison. Absolute dynamite. Eighty-nine percent pure junk. Best I've ever seen. If the rest is like this, you'll be dealing on this load for two years.

JOEL WEINSTOCK: So you say it's worth half a million?

CHEMIST: How many kilos?

SALVATORE "SAL" BOCA: Sixty.

CHEMIST: Sixty kilos, eight big ones per kilo, right? This stuff will take a seven-to-one hit on the street.

SALVATORE "SAL" BOCA: And by the time it gets down to nickel bags, it will be worth at least thirty-two million.

JOEL WEINSTOCK: Thank you, Howard. Take what's left there with you and good night.

The movie won five Oscars, and then it disappeared like downtown development or the contract to keep the Boston Red Sox in town. Never, that is, until I made The French Connection again, the other day. God, I love that cafe, way down on Jackson and First Streets, deep in the heart of the dormant kingdom, which is something like Snow White's 100-years-of-sleep palace — all polished and pretty, with nobody home.

And you know why I love it? Because the food's good, they never forget you, they never cheat you, and they never, never, never give in (to paraphrase Winston Churchill).

Just like Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle, the cop in the movie.

They don't have Popeye Doyle on their asses, not this French Connection. But what they do have, and what's a lot meaner even than ol' Popeye, is a gut-bucket economy, a three-year evisceration of neighborhood streetscapes for the sake of infrastructure, and the last days of summer.

So the dialogue should change some.

THE DELIVERY MAN: Blast off: we got zero-six ounces of the leanest roast beef. One-zero ounces: Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. Twenty ounces: U.S. Government certified big-boy fare, you're lovin' it. Thirty ounces, three-zero: that's a cow-jumped-over-the-moon lunar trajectory of the best beef, that's meat-of-the-month club, that's almost sirloin steak, and you can do five or six sandwiches on this, Sweet Mamma. Two times thirty, a big six-zero, CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? That's Grade A happy day. Absolute dynamite. Ninety-eight percent pure lean. Best I've ever seen. If the rest is like this, you'll be dealing these sandwiches for another 20 minutes.

TIFFANY "IRISH EYES" SMITH: Don't

trust that sucker, Pammy.

PAM "SWEET MAMMA" DeGEER (CO-OWNER, FRENCH CONNECTION): You say it's worth half a million?

LARRY "FLY-ROD" WILKERSON (CO-OWNER): And it's only 60 ounces of meat?

DELIVERY MAN: Well Christ, Larry, the cows had to eat grain that cost six times as much to produce, it was 10 times more expensive to deliver them to market, and then we gotta process the meat and drive it here, which is 20 times more expensive than it used to be. And when we get here, we gotta drive around downtown for about an hour 'cause the streets are still dug up, which costs \$4,500 in gas for the truck."

PAM "SWEET MAMMA" DeGEER: So, we sell the best roast beef sandwich south of Philly for \$7, and the whole 60 ounces will give us a profit of about...

LARRY "FLY-ROD" WILKERSON: ... About \$499,251.95, in the red, Pammy. That's a NEGATIVE \$499,251.95...

PAM "SWEET MAMMA" DeGEER: I know what it is, Fly-Rod. What are we gonna do?

I had my youngest boys with me when I went in for lunch, D.P. and Nash. Tiffany, black Irish and beautiful, came out from behind the bar to give us food — I had a roast beef sandwich which probably cost the café a couple of bucks, and she gave me a hug. I remember the night 13 years ago Tiffany suddenly marched out of the place into the darkness, to return only minutes later bearing a large sign mounted on her shoulders that said, "Guinness," which she propped behind the bar.

Even Moses didn't come off the mountain with more pride. Of course, he wasn't as physiologically enlivened, either, and he didn't steal the tablets from a competing bar, but never mind.

"Dad, is she another wife of yours?" asked Nash, ever vigilant.

No, but she's a friend, I told him.

And so is the French Connection, where the light always splashes in from the high windows as if there really is a heavenly respite, and where the food is substantial and satisfying without being silly or excessive, and where the service is so pleasant, sometimes you feel like you should take the dishes to the kitchen yourself, and help wash them.

Before noon, the place was cool and sharp and quick, like the Interstate at 4 a.m. Then some women came in and plugged themselves in at the small tables in front. They looked like the sleek fighting ships of a once-proud navy given freight duty — sort of tired, hoping for a new assignment, but pleased to reach a quiet port.



A guy at one end of the bar clutched an iced tea, and his dark ponytail shifted like a ferret when he stood to walk away. He managed to avoid looking either at the women or at the bottles behind the bar, with their siren-song colors in blue or red or gold or clear, and their mysterious liquids rising to different levels, like organ pipes waiting to be played or drunk, either one.

Molloy walked in: Doug, a fed, prosecutor, puts away kidnapers of farm workers, makes life really miserable for snakes in the grass. An aging beefcake boy-lawyer followed him, both of them with white starched shirts buttoned to their successful necks, and ties.

Molloy had cut his hair, which still curled around his head like Spanish moss, and while he waited for lunch the beefcake couldn't quit talking about Santana and riffing on the air guitar. Molloy laughed tolerantly, then he came up fast like a counterpuncher, talking about football. He settled himself in the third quarter on a field that was already history, and used the first person plural, "We."

The economy's bad, the criminals are hopping, but we moved the ball 20 yards.




So let's go to the French. ■

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