

Breakfast at Buck's: Informality, Intimacy, and Innovation in Silicon Valley

by *Steven Shapin**

ABSTRACT

This is a study of some connections between eating-together and knowing-together. Silicon Valley technoscientific innovation typically involves a coming-together of entrepreneurs (having an idea) and venture capitalists (having private capital to turn the idea into commercial reality). Attention is directed here to a well-publicized type of face-to-face meeting that may occur early in relationships between VCs and entrepreneurs. The specific case treated here is a large number of breakfast meetings occurring over the past twenty-five years or so at a modest restaurant called Buck's in Woodside, California. Why is it *this* restaurant? What is it about Buck's that draws these people? What happens at these meals? And why is it breakfast (as opposed to other sorts of meals)? This article goes on to discuss historical changes in the patterns of daily meals and accompanying changes in the modes of interaction that happen at mealtimes. Breakfast at Buck's may be a small thing, but its consideration is a way of understanding some quotidian processes of late modern innovation, and it offers a possible model for further inquiries into eating and knowing.

I hate people who are not serious about meals.
It is so shallow of them.
— Oscar Wilde

EATING AND KNOWING

We take on so much as we take on food—culture as well as calories, knowledge as well as nutrients. Histories of the food sciences, or histories of the relationships between food and scientific knowledge, have typically been concerned with the constituents and powers of foods, with their fate in the body and their benefits and risks to the body. There are studies of the historical role of the sciences in managing the quality, quantity, and safety of food; in understanding the functions of food in the body; and in devising new foods. Yet there are other possible topics for historians (and social scientists) concerned with food and knowledge, and these include *eating*, and, more specifically, eating-together (*commensality*, in terms of sociological art) as a venue for

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making, maintaining, and modifying *knowledge*. And, while there are some fine, though largely programmatic, social scientific meditations on eating practices and on the structure and the meaning of meals, studies of eating-together remain largely disengaged from studies of knowing-together.¹

Commensality takes place in face-to-face modes of interaction which are, as is now said, high bandwidth. Taking food and drink with others makes social bonds, establishes (or aims to establish) social identities, generates (or may generate) obligations, and marks out and celebrates special moments in time and in social life. (Eating alone used to be deprecated as a sign of gluttony or misanthropy; now, while solitary feeding is moving fast toward the norm, eating alone may still occasionally be seen as a mark of social insufficiency or, alternatively, celebrated as a display of busyness.²) Different *sorts* of eatings-together mark out different sorts of social relationships, from the informal to the formal, from the intimate to the institutional, from the private to the public. Some eatings-together are instrumental—as occasions meant to have specific outcomes; others are just ways to “keep in touch” or maintain social ties. At most occasions of eating-together, no notice at all may be taken of aliment consumed, or it may be considered inappropriate to pay much attention to the identity of the food and drink; at others, less commonly, the nature, quality, and staging of food is the point.³

¹ The editorial introduction to this volume concisely reviews and summarizes some of the most worked-over historical frameworks for considering the relationships between food and science: E. C. Spary and Anya Zilberstein, “On the Virtues of Historical Entomophagy,” in this volume. A notable sociologist of food and eating observes: “The amount of research on eating within the socio-cultural sciences . . . is slight.” Eating, he writes, “has rarely been targeted as an object of research.” Social scientists, he adds, have been far more concerned with production than consumption: Alan Warde, *The Practice of Eating* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2015), on 15–16, also 24–8; see also Warde and Lydia Martens, *Eating Out: Social Differentiation, Consumption, and Pleasure* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000); Roy C. Wood, *The Sociology of the Meal* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1995); Anne Murcott, ed., *The Sociology of Food and Eating: Essays on the Sociological Significance of Food* (Aldershot, UK: Gower, 1983); and the classic note by Georg Simmel, “The Sociology of the Meal,” trans. Michael Symons, in Symons, “Simmel’s Gastronomic Sociology: An Overlooked Essay,” *Food and Foodways* 5 (1994): 333–51, on 345–50 (first published 1910). More empirically focused sociological studies of modern commercial and domestic meal taking include Joanne Finkelstein, *Dining Out: A Sociology of Modern Manners* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1989); Finkelstein, *Fashioning Appetite: Restaurants and the Making of Modern Identity* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 2014); and Jean-Pierre Poulain, *The Sociology of Food: Eating and the Place of Food in Society*, trans. Augusta Dörr (2002; repr., London: Bloomsbury, 2017). There is also a considerable anthropological literature on eating and meals in non-Western settings; for entry points; see Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), esp. 170–9; Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982); *Food Consumption in Global Perspective: Essays in the Anthropology of Food in Honour of Jack Goody*, ed. Jakob A. Klein and Anne Murcott (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Sidney Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois, “The Anthropology of Food and Eating,” *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 31 (2002): 99–119. However, eating-together has attracted scarcely any attention as an occasion of knowledge making, apart from the sorts of knowledge concerned with companions’ social identity.

² Claude Fischler, “Commensality, Society and Culture,” *Soc. Sci. Inform.* 50 (2011): 528–48, on 539–40.

³ For example, Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” in Douglas, ed., *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1975), 249–75; Douglas, “Food as a System of Communication,” chap. 4 in *In the Active Voice* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 82–124; Douglas, “Standard Social Uses of Food: Introduction,” in Douglas, ed., *Food and the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities* (New York, N.Y.: Russell Sage Foundation, 1973), 1–39; Paul Freedman, “Medieval and Modern Banquets: Commensality and Social Categorization,” in *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast*, ed. Susanne Kerner, Cynthia Chou, and Morten Warmind (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 99–108. Food consumption is not a major topic in Pierre Bourdieu’s hugely influential study of the fine structures of French social class: *Distinction: A Social*

Different kinds of social interaction are signaled by the presence of different foods, by different modes of presentation and consumption, by meals taken at different times of day, and by the presence of different kinds of people. Lunch “on the go” is as different from an Oxbridge college feast or a regimental dinner as is the meaning of “let’s meet for coffee” from “would you like to come up for a cup of coffee?” From the silent meal in a monastery to the mess group in the military, the bonds formed by eating-together have historically been acknowledged and actively managed. Eating-together is at the center of religious life and belief—with the *seder* (the Jewish Passover meal) historically transformed into the Last Supper and then into the mysteries of Christian sacraments—the transubstantiations of communion wine and wafer. So too are the ritual occasions of fasting, of intentional not eating, which may be found at the center of political action—the fasting of suffragettes, of Irish Republican prisoners, and of Indian resisters to British colonial rule. The manner of eating is an element in making social identity and social distinction, spectacularly so in Victorian and Edwardian Britain with specialized cutlery as weapons of class destruction, embarrassment attending imperfect knowledge of the proper use of the fork and the proper placement of wine and water glasses.⁴

Many of these aspects of eating have been appreciated by social and cultural historians at least since the 1930s writings of Norbert Elias, whose treatment of manners in the making of modernity inspired a number of later historians and social scientists.⁵ The history of food has recently been drawing much academic attention, while the history of *eating* and its significance remains marginal, treated in the main by social historians and historians of manners and etiquette. Such academic attention as has been given to these things has centered on the Renaissance and the early modern period, with arrangements of contemporary and the more recent past tending to escape notice or, more commonly, becoming the property of nutritionists and policy experts worried about bad eating and consequent poor health outcomes. Nor have scholars concerned with *knowledge* seen much point in considering occasions of eating, which have generally been taken as *time-out* from knowledge making. It’s what thinkers do to “fuel up” before going to thought-work. Comic writers make sport of the very idea of a Friedrich Nietzsche diet book, absurdly juxtaposing the intellectual and the corporeal, the High and the Low.⁶

Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (1979; repr., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), e.g., 79, 179–200, 278–80; this is a relative reticence that has surprised other sociologists—for example, Warde, *Practice of Eating* (cit. n. 1), 55.

⁴ See the delightful, and unobtrusively learned, Bee Wilson, *Consider the Fork: A History of How We Cook and Eat* (New York, N.Y.: Basic, 2012), esp. chaps. 2 (41–71) and 6 (181–210).

⁵ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1939; repr., Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), esp. 45–108; see also Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Origins of Table Manners*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (1968; repr., New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1978); Jean-Paul Aron, *The Art of Eating in France: Manners and Menus in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Nina Rootes (London: Owen, 1975); Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985); Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York, N.Y.: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).

⁶ Woody Allen, “Thus Ate Zarathustra,” in *Mere Anarchy* (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 2007), 141–6; see also Steven Shapin, “Lowering the Tone in the History of Science: A Noble Calling,” chap. 1 in *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if It Were Made by People with Bodies, Situated in Space, Time, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010), 1–14, on 1–2. At the risk of spoiling the joke, Nietzsche was, in fact, much concerned about diet.

It would be wrong to dismiss the sensibilities that have served to marginalize the links between eating and knowing; there are a number of famous stories about thinkers so “lost in thought” as to forget eating, and the ancient cultural *topos* that opposed the mind and the belly still retains some of its pertinence in late modernity. Both the jokiness and the cultural deflation accompanying the very idea of linking feeding to thinking belong to the *topos* of asceticism—as Nietzsche indeed pointed out.⁷ This article describes a specific occasion, and a specific site, of commensality, one in which eating-together is reflectively linked to knowing-together, and even to practical actions based on that knowledge. The unlikelihood of this focus can also be acknowledged; for all sorts of reasons, critics might say that the eating concerned is “not relevant,” that no knowledge (properly so called) is produced at these mealtimes, or that the knowledge generated is “not science.” Making knowledge is what happens when feeding the stomach is not happening or, at most, the knowledge that does attend eating-together is “social knowledge”—knowledge of one’s fellow diners’ characters and whatever mundane knowledge is conveyed by general conversation.

The unlikelihood of telling a story about eating and knowing attaches even more strongly to the particular materials addressed here. First, this article deals with very recent history, even with passages that persist in the present and that very likely will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. However, I suggest toward the end a genealogy connecting these sorts of eatings-together to deep history while I also point to patterns of historical change that make them an index of late modernity. Second, although some of what happens on the eating occasions described here certainly involves accounts and evaluations of science and technology, most of what is pertinent about them concerns the *conditions of possibility* for making science and technology and, specifically, for transforming technoscience into goods and services that figure in the marketplace. Knowledge is indeed being produced on such occasions, even if it’s not the kind of knowledge that is routinely embodied in science textbooks or that gets worked over by epistemologists.⁸ The knowledge that is made, maintained, and modified at these breakfasts is of different sorts: there is knowledge of commercializable science and technology, its potential and circumstances; knowledge of the persons speaking for the science and technology, their virtues, vices, and, indeed, their apparent expertise and skills; knowledge of these persons’ likely commitment and dedication to the pertinent projects; and, indeed, knowledge of their capacity for relevant sorts of social interaction, since the VC-entrepreneur interaction occurring here and now is thought to bear a family resemblance to the modes of interaction that will figure

⁷ Steven Shapin, “The Philosopher and the Chicken: On the Dietetics of Disembodied Knowledge,” in *Science Incarnate: Historical Embodiments of Natural Knowledge*, ed. Christopher Lawrence and Shapin (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 21–50.

⁸ Historians of science are now familiar with encouragement to widen the scope of what is routinely taken as “science.” First, many historians of science are no longer defensive about attending to “technology,” to so-called “applied science” and “commercial science,” or they are less confident than they once were in justifying such distinctions; second, historians are now less inclined to equate “science” solely with “what happens in the laboratory,” with what is inscribed in the textbooks, or with “disembodied ideas.” Bruno Latour and others have urged scholars to document the processes through which scientists secure support for their work, obtain credibility for its outcomes, and embed those outcomes in “black-boxed” artifacts and processes: Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987); see also Steven Shapin, “Invisible Science,” *Hedgehog Review* 18 (Fall 2016): 34–46 (on arguments about “embedded science” and for problems attending distinctions between “hard” and “soft” sciences), www.iasc-culture.org/THR/THR_article_2016_Fall_Shapin.php.

should the business come into being and grow. I make no claims here that there is anything special about occasions of eating-together that involve science and technology.⁹ Arguably, all forms of knowledge making have their moments of the face-to-face, and eatings-together are significant among these moments; science, technology, and the conditions for making more science and technology are not excluded.

PLACES OF EATING AND PLACES OF KNOWING

In recent decades, historians and sociologists of science have written about the *places* and *spaces* of science, but among these, only the early modern and Enlightenment coffeehouse has really represented a place of eating and drinking as a place of face-to-face knowledge making. (The Enlightenment *salon* has also engaged historians' attention, though its alimentary elements scarcely at all.)¹⁰ Why not consider the pertinence of a range of places, each with their characteristic modes of interaction and significances: the domestic or restaurant dinner table; the pub and tavern; the high-tech corporate cafeteria, salad and sushi bars; the Asian noodle houses lined up on Castro Street in Mountain View, California; the tea room of the University Library in Cambridge; the yet-to-be formally named rooms in modern "coworking spaces" and "incubators" where innovators share a pizza and a beer; and, of course, the late twentieth-century and contemporary coffee shop?¹¹ Architects and designers of modern research facilities (and even of furniture and décor) aim to build places that facilitate the exchange of ideas, often paying great attention to constructing spaces for taking food and drink that will serve as venues for "spontaneous" and "serendipitous" interaction—sometimes making explicit gestures to early modern coffeehouse culture—but it also happens that such spaces emerge without the assistance of professional design and become iconic magnets for further intellectual interaction.¹² In the late modern culture of innovation, reflective

⁹ That said, the arrangements and the alimentary contents of many late modern technoscientific feeding sites (the well-supplied cafeterias of Google and of high-energy physics installations, the provisioning of entrepreneurial networking events, and the catered lunches of academic departmental meetings) merit attention, as do the ascetic dietetics of heroic code-writing sessions and attitudes toward solitary "brown bagging": see references in nn. 11 and 12, below.

¹⁰ A fine exception is E. C. Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris, 1670-1760* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), though here too the focus is on the sciences of food innovation and the scientific understanding of the consequences of consuming certain foods and drinks.

¹¹ See, for example, Kerry Miller, "Where the Coffee Shop Meets the Cubicle," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 27 February 2007, www.nbcnews.com/id/17367175/ns/business-us_business/t/where-coffee-shop-meets-cubicle/#.WwyGgYpunIU. For focused attention on the foods judged to be proper for entrepreneurial consumption in contemporary coworking spaces and for their prescribed "relentless sociability," see Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "The Rise of the WeWorking Classes," *New York Times Magazine*, 27 February 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/02/21/magazine/wework-coworking-office-space.html>.

¹² See, for example, Kursty Groves Knight and Oliver Marlow, *Spaces for Innovation: The Design and Science of Inspiring Environments* (Amsterdam: Frame, 2016); Anahad O'Connor, "How the Hum of a Coffee Shop Can Boost Creativity," *New York Times*, 21 June 2013, <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/how-the-hum-of-a-coffee-shop-can-boost-creativity/>; Chloë Brown, Christos Efstratiou, Ilias Leontiadis, Daniele Quercia, Cecilia Mascolo, James Scott, and Peter Key, "The Architecture of Innovation: Tracking Face-to-Face Interaction with Ubicomp Technologies," www.arxiv.org/pdf/1406.6829.pdf; Julie Wagner and Dan Watch, *Innovation Spaces: The New Design of Work* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2017), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/cs_20170404_innovation_spaces_pdf.pdf. Designers are reflectively aware of conditions of visibility and audibility in different spaces of innovation: for examples, see Ali Morris, "Workplaces Must Include

attention to designed or spontaneous spaces of interaction coexists with the asocial asceticism now notably associated with the geek-designed, all-purpose drink Soylent, offered as a solution to time supposedly *wasted* in eating. Researchers in business schools and in organizational sociology now recognize relationships—long appreciated by non-academics—between commensality and the success of negotiations, and seemingly agree that deals over meals (or drinks) build trust and go better, though the academics are not agreed whether this effect is independent of the identities of the deal, the meal, the place, and the stage of discussions.¹³ Both foodstuffs consumed and the spaces in which they are taken have, and always have had, a bearing on conceptions of the consuming body and the modes of physical and intellectual interaction between bodies and minds. There are historians who now recognize *food for thought* as a historical topic.

The eating-together occasion treated here is breakfast, and, specifically, breakfast eaten out rather than taken at home; the period concerned is anytime over the last three decades or so; the particular place is a restaurant in California, south of San Francisco and several miles from the campus of Stanford University; the people involved are actors in and around the entrepreneurial high-tech culture of Silicon Valley; and the breakfasts are largely instrumental occasions, whose outcomes may be decisions—or elements in a decision-making process—about which scientific and technological ideas are to have a commercial future and which are destined for history's dustbin. So, this is a sketch of what happened at a specific time, place, and type of social, cultural, and economic life, while the general manner in which these specificities are interpreted might suggest ways of treating all sorts of other science-relevant commensalities at different times, different places, and at different moments in the making, maintaining, or modification of knowledge. This is, inescapably, a case study, partly meant to encourage future studies.

BUCK'S FIZZ: SILICON BREAKFAST

The restaurant concerned is an iconic site, celebrated by members of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century entrepreneurial culture. It is well known to many of those who write about technoscientific innovation and who seek to decipher the secrets of Silicon Valley as a global center of technoscientific and commercial innovation. The breakfasts described are a setting for the earliest stages of deals done between venture capitalists (VCs) and aspiring high-tech entrepreneurs, and are much talked

Spaces for Work and Rest to Foster Innovation," *Dezeen*, 7 December 2017, www.dezeen.com/2017/12/07/haworth-white-paper-research-workplaces-offices-foster-innovation-work-rest-spaces/; Ben Waber, Jennifer Magnolfi, and Greg Lindsay, "Workspaces That Move People," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2014, www.hbr.org/2014/10/workspaces-that-move-people. See John Bessant, "Creating the Physical Space for Innovation," *Hype Innovation Blog*, 7 September 2016, <https://blog.hypeinnovation.com/creating-spaces-for-innovation>, on awareness of seventeenth-century coffeehouses.

¹³ For Soylent, see, among many accounts, Arwa Mahdawi, "I Tried Soylent, Silicon Valley's Favourite Foodstuff," *Guardian*, 11 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/11/i-tried-soylent-silicon-valleys-favourite-foodstuff-its-everything-thats-wrong-with-modern-life>. For meals and deals, see Lakshmi Balachandra, "Should You Eat While You Negotiate?" *Harvard Business Review*, 29 January 2013, <https://hbr.org/2013/01/should-you-eat-while-you-negot>; Elizabeth MacBride, "Researchers: Does Breaking Bread Help Make a Negotiation a Success?" *Insights by Stanford Business*, 21 April 2014, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/researchers-does-breaking-bread-help-make-negotiation-success>; and Kaitlin Woolley and Ayelet Fishbach, "Shared Plates, Shared Minds: Consuming from a Shared Plate Promotes Cooperation," *Psychological Science* 30 (2019): 541–52.

about as “where things begin”—where the process of turning technical and commercial ideas into material and corporate realities commences, where technoscientific concepts meet potential sources of cash.¹⁴ The deals whose origins are traced to this particular place are said to have amounted to billions of dollars over the past several decades. Stories are told about this eating place, and tourists as well as aspiring entrepreneurs continue to go there in hopes of seeing some famous geek or VC, or, at least, of seeing the place where famous deals got done. Sites like these are, so to speak, *charismatic places*—sites endowed with power and surrounded by mystique because of the collective memory of things that happened there and that might, because of the energy still presumed to reside in them, work their effects on future events.

The restaurant is Buck’s in the small town of Woodside, California. In many respects, Buck’s is nothing special; one VC-customer wrote that the restaurant “looks as if it could be the anchor of any upscale retail strip in any small town west of the Rockies.” They added, “all that’s missing are some hitching posts and a watering trough or two.”¹⁵ (Founded in 1991, Buck’s is said to have been named after the town drunk, Leo Buckstaber, and not, as it’s sometimes assumed, after dollars.)¹⁶ Though Buck’s has got a number of favorable reviews by Bay Area foodies, its fame in certain circles has to do with the technoscientific and commercial events that happened in it—not with whatever it is that usually makes certain restaurants famous, like Michelin-starred cuisine or remarkable things to eat or spectacular views or spectacularly rude waiters. Buck’s is open seven days a week, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But what makes Buck’s famous is breakfast, or, less commonly, lunch—*never* dinner, and never any meal on the weekends, when it’s taken over by gangs of lycra-clad mountain bikers.

The breakfast menu is quite ordinary for local eateries. Breakfast offerings include the usual range of American fare; you can have pancakes, eggs—“any style,” or omelets (Californized by the avocado on top and made just of egg whites in case of cholesterol phobia)—or waffles, or just some fruit and toast or granola. Everyone has what they want, thereby avoiding the awkwardness of someone acting as host in their own home when someone has an allergy, or someone else doesn’t eat what’s offered for religious or moral reasons. The prices are also in the usual range for this sort of place—not as cheap as McDonald’s but nothing to put off even the most liquidity-constrained Valley geek. A similar sort of restaurant, well known for reasons similar to Buck’s, is one of the Hobe’s chain; there are establishments in Cupertino, Mountain View, and Palo Alto used by VCs and entrepreneurs. There’s also the Konditorei coffee and pastry shop in Portola Valley. There’s Chef Chu’s Chinese restaurant in Los Altos.¹⁷ And posher, but also well known for deal making, is Il Fornaio in Palo Alto, favored by Stanford

¹⁴ There are many sources—most journalistic, some scholarly, some disengaged, the majority celebratory—about the relations between VCs and entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley and other California clusters of high-tech and biotech. Several of the more star-struck popular sources are cited in notes below; see also Steven Shapin, “The Scientific Entrepreneur,” and “Visions of the Future,” chaps. 7 and 8 in *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁵ William H. Draper III, *The Startup Game: Inside the Partnership between Venture Capitalists and Entrepreneurs* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

¹⁶ Deborah Perry Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley: What Everyone Can Learn from the Innovation Capital of the World* (New York, N.Y.: St. Martin’s, 2013), 154.

¹⁷ John Boudreau, “Chef Chu’s Restaurant Has Served Tech Elite, from Steve Jobs to Jerry Yang,” *Mercury News* (San Jose), 14 August 2012, www.mercurynews.com/ci_21312105/chef-chu-restaurant-has-served-tech-elite-steve-jobs-los-altos.

University administrators as well as capitalists.¹⁸ Some recent commentators say that the still-thriving Buck's has now become too famous for its own good, while others show no awareness of this new alleged "unhipness."¹⁹

What makes Buck's famous, and especially breakfast at Buck's, are the meetings that have happened there since its opening—meetings between technoscientific entrepreneurs and VCs, meetings that became legendary because of the high-tech companies that are said to have been launched there.²⁰ Jamis MacNiven, the founder, patron, and owner, is happy to point out the tables where wonderful things happened, the events that make Buck's charismatic. There are photos of him proudly pointing to table 48 where John Doerr of the celebrated VC firm Kleiner Perkins met with Marc Andreessen, and the result was Netscape. Then there is the table where PayPal was brought into being; another is the Hotmail table; and yet another is the Tesla table. There is, however, no pointing with pride to the place where Jerry Wang of Yahoo! breakfasted with VCs Bill and Tim Draper (of Sutter Hill Ventures and Fisher, Draper, Jurvetson), after which Wang decided to go with another firm.²¹

Eventually, it became impossible for anyone in the business to have breakfast at Buck's without doing a quick scan of *who else* was then having breakfast at Buck's, and speculating what their meetings might mean. The VCs who come to breakfast at Buck's may not want to be overheard by other VCs, but encounters are inevitable and not necessarily unwelcome. There is a lot of table-hopping and handshaking. "It's like Facebook with real faces," the owner said.²² In Britain, *The Daily Telegraph* breathlessly announced that at Buck's "more deals are struck between those with money (cash-rich VCs) and those wanting it (cash-hungry entrepreneurs) than in all [of] America's other diners put together."²³ If you're an out-of-town, or out-of-country, journalist, Buck's tends to be where you go to "take the pulse" of the Valley innovation economy; if business at Buck's is good, the Valley is good.²⁴ Tourists come to take photos of Buck's and the famous tables, and aspiring entrepreneurs lurk in the parking lot armed "with

¹⁸ Eric S. Hintz, "Historic Silicon Valley Bar and Restaurant Review," Lemelson Center, Smithsonian Institution, 9 September 2013, www.invention.si.edu/historic-silicon-valley-bar-and-restaurant-review. This piece is one of a series on "Places of Invention" produced by the Smithsonian's Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation. The series is a web-based exhibition illustrating the importance of such informal sites in the processes of innovation, and it draws inspiration from the work of the urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg on what he called "the Third Place" (not home, not workplace): *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1999); see also Shachar M. Pinsker, *A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2018).

¹⁹ Alexander Haislip, *Essentials of Venture Capital* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley, 2011), 8.

²⁰ A cable TV show about "Millionaire Hangouts" confidently claimed about Buck's that "more than 90% of Internet venture deals were kicked around here": Alana Ross and Barry Ross, "S. F. Bay Area [. . .] Restaurants, Buck's," *Love to Eat and Travel Blog*, accessed 24 May 2018, <http://www.lovetoeatandtravel.com/site/sfbay/peninsula/Food/bucks.htm>.

²¹ For the photographs, see Boonsri Dickinson, "Billions of Dollars in Wealth Were Created at this Silicon Valley Cafe," *Business Insider*, 8 February 2012, www.businessinsider.com/inside-the-silicon-valley-cafe-where-paypal-tesla-and-netscape-did-deals-2012-2?op=1; John McChesney, "Checking a Tech Bellwether: Buck's Restaurant," *National Public Radio*, 2 August 2010, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128874569.

²² Conner Forest, "How Buck's of Woodside Became the 'Cheers' of Silicon Valley," *TechRepublic*, 4 July 2014, www.techrepublic.com/article/how-bucks-of-woodside-became-the-cheers-of-silicon-valley/.

²³ Amanda Hall, "Silicon Giants: The Valley of Dreams," *Telegraph* (London), 24 September 2000.

²⁴ McChesney, "Checking a Tech Bellwether" (cit. n. 21); Connie Guglielmo, "Silicon Valley Buzz, Served with Pancakes: Signs of Recovery at Diners and Cafes," *International Herald Tribune*, 6 April 2006, 20.

photographs of venture capitalists and leap on them as they” leave, hoping one day to join them for breakfast and pitch a start-up.²⁵ Buck’s is a pilgrims’ destination for politicians, celebrities, and hugely successful techies in no current need of VC funding—Al Gore, Shimon Peres, Mike Tyson, John Cleese, Gordon Moore, and Andy Grove are all proudly photographed with the equally proud owner (fig. 1). An online list of ten of the “World’s Best Millionaire Hangouts” includes Positano, St. Moritz, the Cannes Film Festival—and Buck’s Diner.²⁶ In 1999, there was an eBay auction for breakfast at Buck’s with VC Steve Jurvetson, and the winning bid, from a New York entrepreneur, was \$9,400. The underbidder arranged a separate breakfast with the VC, and the price was higher.²⁷ The cash value of “informal” breakfast face time was quantified, and the circumstance that it was breakfast at *Buck’s* must have contributed to its value. Buck’s has been called “the breakfast spot of champions”: it has “buzz.”²⁸ Venture capitalist Bill Draper said that Buck’s “is the distillation of much of what is so odd, special, and compelling about the Valley—a place where great ideas meet smart money.”²⁹

BUCK’S BREAKFASTS: THE MUNDANE AND THE MYTHIC

The mythic status of these meetings is beyond doubt. On the one hand, participants talk about Buck’s as “a place where myths were born”³⁰—in the sense that the high-tech companies resulting from deals made there are parts of Valley legend. On the other hand, to identify Buck’s breakfasts as these companies’ genuine and unique origins is problematic. In one form or another, the meetings did happen, though it’s impossible reliably to ascribe the existence of Netscape or PayPal, or, indeed, any company, to what happened at a single place and time. These should be understood as origin myths, though it isn’t an easy matter to make an absolute distinction between myth and interactional reality. Stories about seminal meetings, however burnished by legend makers, colonize the minds, and the expectations, of participants at subsequent documentable meetings. Like a lot of myths, these stories point to sacralized beginnings, some definable moment when everything changed for the better, when the stable order of things irrevocably changed, when the future was foreseen, and the first steps toward a new reality were taken.

Why was it *Buck’s*? What was special about it? In the beginning, in the early 1990s, there was probably only one pertinent reason why it was this place, and that was the location. The restaurant was conveniently off I-280, within a few miles of VCs’ offices on Sand Hill Road near the Stanford campus, and, for many VCs, it was on their way from homes in wealthy South Bay communities—Woodside itself, a bijou little community

²⁵ Jamis MacNiven, *Breakfast at Buck’s: Tales from the Pancake Guy* (Woodside, Calif.: Liverwurst, 2004), 9–10; Dickinson, “Billions of Dollars” (cit. n. 21).

²⁶ “World’s Best Millionaire Hangouts,” *Road and Travel Magazine*, accessed 29 January 2020, <https://www.roadandtravel.com/luxurytravel/2005/millionairehangouts.htm>.

²⁷ The \$9,400 figure is from MacNiven, *Breakfast at Buck’s* (cit. n. 25), 6–7. A lower figure for the winning bid is cited in “Ebay Auctions Off Breakfast Meeting with Venture Capitalist,” 3 February 1999, www.sfgate.com/business/article/EBay-Auctions-Off-Breakfast-Meeting-With-Venture-2949061.php; see also Cheryl Himmelstein, “Surfing on the Slippery Skin of a Bubble,” *New York Times Magazine*, 25 June 1999, www.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/19990620mag-tech-jurvetson.html.

²⁸ Janelle Brown, “Buck’s: The Breakfast Spot of Champions,” *Salon*, 25 June 1999, www.salon.com/1999/06/25/bucks/.

²⁹ Draper, *Startup Game* (cit. n. 15), 3.

³⁰ Wayne McVicker, *Starting Something: An Entrepreneur’s Tale of Control, Confrontation & Corporate Culture* (Los Altos, Calif.: Ravel Media, 2005), 193.



Figure 1. Owner Jamis MacNiven (standing) with Israeli President Shimon Peres (center) at Bucks's. Other figures unidentified. (Photo courtesy of Jamis MacNiven.)

whose residents included Larry Ellison of Oracle, John Doerr of Kleiner Perkins, Gordon Moore of Intel, and Jim Breyer of Accel Partners³¹—as well as Atherton, Los Altos Hills, and Portola Valley. If you are commuting from San Francisco on I-280, it's just a slight detour from the turning to Sand Hill Road. But, after a while, location was joined as a reason by the fact that it *was* Buck's, the place where all those deals happened. The entrepreneur Bob Metcalfe of 3COM and Ethernet probably had something to do with it when in 1992—shortly after Buck's founding—he “wrote in his weekly ‘Info World’ column that Buck's was the new power breakfast spot for Silicon Valley.”³² Then that's what it became. You had breakfast at Buck's because that was where VCs met entrepreneurs, and, if entrepreneurs got an invitation to breakfast at Buck's, they knew that it was, or might become, serious. (MacNiven says this of the VC-entrepreneur breakfasts: “Often, we're the first meeting on a deal. We're the first-date place.”)³³

³¹ Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley* (cit. n. 16), 153.

³² Seth Similof, “Lunch is Not for Wimps at Buck's of Woodside Restaurant,” *Haute Living*, 11 August 2012, www.hauteliving.com/2012/08/lunch-is-not-for-wimps-at-bucks-of-woodside-bucks-of-woodside/305999/.

³³ Quoted in Carolyn Jung, “Where the Tech Deals are Made,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 May 2014, www.sfgate.com/restaurants/article/Where-the-tech-deals-are-made-5483804.php; see also “Buck's of Woodside—Big Business Breakfast,” *jesswords.com* (blog), 20 February 2014, www.jesswords.com/bucks-of-woodside-big-business-breakfast/.

By the end of the 1990s, VCs and entrepreneurs breakfasted at Buck's because *that was what you did* when you were at the early stages of deal making. It became globally famous for these sorts of meetings. Journalists and camera crews came to record the place where the Modern Technoscientific World was brought into being. The breakfast that launched Hotmail had to be reenacted for CNN, and, when a Japanese television crew came to do the same story, MacNiven let them shoot the reenactment (fig. 2).³⁴ It's said, though I can't confirm it, that there is a restaurant in Hong Kong named after MacNiven that tried to replicate whatever was taken as Buck's model, hoping to attract local VCs; and that Chicago breakfast spots popular with deal makers have been explicitly likened to Buck's—"but you don't see cops at Buck's."³⁵ (It turns out, however, that charismatic originals are not so easy to replicate.)

MacNiven is what's called "good copy," one of the Valley's most interviewed personalities. He boasts, "Since 1995, we have had over 600 TV, radio, glossy-print, and fish wrapper press come to Buck's to speak with me and my customers."³⁶ It is as if he was part of the Valley secret and *in on* the secret, as if he could fix up a meeting for you with a major VC—neither of which was true, even if MacNiven says he was asked to sit in on a number of pitches and parlayed his proprietorship into TED-talk celebrity.³⁷ (Buck's menu comes folded into a two-page newsletter in which MacNiven offers his oddball opinions on technology, business, politics, and culture.) "I'm only the second-biggest press-whore in America," MacNiven said in 2004, ceding first place to Donald Trump (who was not then what he now is).³⁸ MacNiven has been variously called the mayor of Silicon Valley, its prime minister, and "the unofficial diplomat of the independent nation of Silicon Valley," in much the same way that you might say that Madame Geoffrin was in charge of the French Enlightenment, with Buck's as a late modern Silicon salon.³⁹

"We reinvented the modern world"; "we are where the modern world is emerging from"; we are "really the new Athens," MacNiven boasts,⁴⁰ and some entrepreneurs

³⁴ MacNiven, *Breakfast at Buck's* (cit. n. 25), 10.

³⁵ Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley* (cit. n. 16), 154 (for Hong Kong). For Chicago, see John Pletz, "The Breakfast Club: Captains of Tech Shun Steakhouses for Dealmaking Over Easy," *Crain's: Crain's Chicago Business*, 14 May 2012, www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20120512/ISSUE03/305129989/captains-of-tech-shun-steakhouses-for-dealmaking-over-easy.

³⁶ Quoted in Dietrich Walther, *Green Business—the Billion Dollar Deal* (Bozeman, Mont.: International Center for Education and Technology, 2012), 101; see also MacNiven, *Breakfast at Buck's* (cit. n. 25), 16.

³⁷ MacNiven, *Breakfast at Buck's* (cit. n. 25), 7 (on sitting in on pitches); for his first TED talk, see Jamis MacNiven, "What Up Silicon Valley," filmed 7 June 2011, Munich, TED video, 17:38, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nxx73qeZlQI.

³⁸ Andrea Gemmet, "All About Jamis," *Almanac*, 31 March 2004, www.almanacnews.com/morgue/2004/2004_03_31.jamis.shtml.

³⁹ Bill Goss, *There's a Flying Squirrel in My Coffee: Overcoming Cancer with the Help of My Pet* (New York, N.Y.: Atria, 2002), 204–5; Mark Zetter, "Silicon Valley Unofficial Mayor Talks Pancakes, Steve Jobs, Startups and Pouring Millions Into Ideas," *Venture Outsource*, n.d., ca. 2004, accessed 25 May 2018, www.ventureoutsource.com/contract-manufacturing/mayor-silicon-valley-jamis-macniven-pancakes-steve-jobs-startups-pouring-millions-ideas-videos.

⁴⁰ Various quoted in Guy Adams, "Steve Hilton's Social Network: The Policy Wonk Renowned for His Outlandish Ideas Has Left No. 10 for the Mecca of Tech, Palo Alto," *Independent* (London), 19 May 2012, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/steve-hiltons-social-network-7767061.html; and Patrick May, "Facebook Movie Strikes a Chord with Silicon Valley Tech Crowd," *Mercury News* (San Jose), 1 October 2010, www.mercurynews.com/2010/10/01/facebook-movie-strikes-a-chord-with-silicon-valley-tech-crowd/.



Figure 2. VC Steve Jurvetson (left) and entrepreneur Sabeer Bhatia (right) reenact for CNN the founding of Hotmail at a Buck's breakfast. (Photo courtesy of Jamis MacNiven.)

have happily agreed: at Buck's "rustic tables the information era was forged and here the next revolution [will happen], the transition to Green Valley or the birth of the clean tech revolution."⁴¹ Venture capitalist Bill Draper, said to be MacNiven's favorite customer, wrote a book about Silicon Valley start-ups, the first part of which was titled "Breakfast at Buck's." A German entrepreneur was enchanted by it all, driven to contrast Buck's fluidity and informality with the rigidity and traditionalism of German restaurants: "The open atmosphere of Silicon Valley makes the difference." No need for fanciness and formality, he says. If you go to Buck's website, you can see references to clean-tech. What German restaurant would have that? If you want to explain the Valley and its innovatory culture to a German, you couldn't do much better than to take her to Buck's.⁴² And MacNiven himself put together a self-published book celebrating himself, his restaurant, his quirky lifestyle, and Silicon Valley utopianism in general. He's what's called a character, in a Valley world that's full of characters.⁴³

A STAGE-SET FOR FUTURE MAKING

Venture capitalists and other commentators say that Buck's is "an unlikely venue for serious business."⁴⁴ But when you go inside, you see right away that it's even more

⁴¹ Walther, *Green Business* (cit. n. 36), 101.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100–1; for a similar lament that Britain also has no iconic Buck's-like eating places for VCs and entrepreneurs, see Mike Butcher, "Where is Your Bucks of Woodside?," *TechCrunch*, 26 February 2008, www.techcrunch.com/2008/02/26/where-is-your-bucks-of-woodside/.

⁴³ MacNiven, *Breakfast at Buck's* (cit. n. 25).

⁴⁴ McChesney, "Checking a Tech Bellwether" (cit. n. 21).

bizarre than the VCs say, or—and this is arguably the right story—that’s it’s a *very* likely place for what counts as serious business in the Valley, which is technoscientific future making, visionary, often utopian stuff, business-without-a-template but surrounded by an aura of mythic self-consciousness. Buck’s is designed (partly intentionally, partly accidentally) to be just the right setting for capital-meets-technoscientific-entrepreneurship. It’s an artfully crafted stage-set for the business of future making.

Buck’s décor, or what counts as its décor, is a mash-up of whatever has taken MacNiven’s fancy over about thirty years of haphazard collecting. Some call it “Western kitsch”; MacNiven describes it as “American whacky” and a collection of “life’s ironic magic”; others call it a “phantasmagoria” of toys for boys; and VC Bill Draper said that it “resembles what the Smithsonian warehouse might look like in the wake of a tornado as straightened up by the Mad Hatter”—which was his way of saying that he really liked it.⁴⁵ The only remarkable thing outside in the car park is a twenty-foot long wooden fish called Woody, but much more is inside. There’s an enormous ketchup bottle, a Statue of Liberty with an ice-cream sundae for a torch, a Google personalized car number plate, the world’s biggest Swiss Army knife, huge model airplanes and blimps, and a long-unknown photograph of Steve Jobs in an atypically goofy mood—wearing a Groucho Marx mustache and glasses (figs. 3, 4, 5).⁴⁶ There’s a Russian cosmonaut space suit, together with MacNiven’s (implausible) account of how it got there, one which involves a visiting Russian general who was breakfasting with the US Secretary of Defense, and left behind a business card saying that MacNiven should look him up if he was ever in Russia. Which he did—but the general was then on more pressing business in Chechnya. Undeterred, MacNiven went to the place where the space suits were made, armed with the general’s card, and, amazingly, secured the Yuri Gagarin model (fig. 3).⁴⁷

That was nothing compared to the chutzpah involved in an attempt to obtain still another Russian tchotchke in 1993. It was an endeavor that failed, but the failure itself has become a Buck’s design feature. MacNiven had the idea that maybe the post-Soviet government would be looking to turn a profit on Lenin’s now surplus-to-requirements embalmed body. So, he wrote to a Russian official, offering a sum “in the high six figures” for Lenin. MacNiven got a reply, explaining that the Russian government was not looking to sell Lenin “as of today,” but wanting more precise details about the sum offered.⁴⁸ Everything about Buck’s décor screams eccentricity, the vision of a unique individual, the rejection of aesthetic convention, the going-together of things that don’t go

⁴⁵ Zetter, “Silicon Valley Unofficial Mayor” (cit. n. 39); Gemmet, “All about Jamis” (cit. n. 38); Draper, *Startup Game* (cit. n. 15), 2.

⁴⁶ McChesney, “Checking a Tech Bellwether” (cit. n. 21); Alexis C. Madrigal, “How Steve Jobs Ended Up Sitting in Front of a Rosetta Stone Replica with Groucho Marx Glasses On,” *Atlantic*, 25 January 2013, www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/01/how-steve-jobs-ended-up-sitting-in-front-of-a-rosetta-stone-replica-with-groucho-marx-glasses-on/272530/.

⁴⁷ MacNiven, *Breakfast at Buck’s* (cit. n. 25), 215–19.

⁴⁸ Letters about buying Lenin’s body allegedly exchanged between MacNiven and the Kremlin hang framed on the restaurant walls; they are reproduced in Zetter, “Silicon Valley Unofficial Mayor” (cit. n. 39). MacNiven recounts this story in his *Breakfast at Buck’s* (cit. n. 25), 215–16. The whole tale, or at least the reply from the Russians, is probably either a joke or a fake; a well-informed Russian friend of mine sees many clear mistakes in the alleged reply, from the address and name of the responding ministry to a typographical error in its title. He speculates that “somebody has made [the letter] up in haste, perhaps using a[n] old dispatch of the ministry of foreign affairs of the USSR as a model.”



Figure 3. Jamis MacNiven with a stack of pancakes and a selection of Buck's eccentric tchotchkes, including the supposed Yuri Gagarin space suit (center, top). (Photo courtesy of Jamis MacNiven.)

together. It's wacky, but it's wackiness of a certain kind—a kind that appeals to the self-image of know-no-rules Valley entrepreneurs and those with the vision to fund them.

THE PATRON AS STAGE MANAGER

The owner himself is part of the show, part of the stage-set for the theater of Valley innovation, and that's certainly how MacNiven sees himself. He revels in being the



Figure 4. View of Buck's interior. (Photo courtesy of Jamis MacNiven.)



Figure 5. Another view of Buck's interior. (Photo courtesy of Jamis MacNiven.)

restaurateur for the future, and he has furnished Buck's with the props for the role. "Buck's is the Earthlinked mother ship for the New Jerusalem," the restaurant website announces.⁴⁹ MacNiven says he hasn't profited from overheard investment tips, but he's an entrepreneur himself—that status presumably is not meant to include the clutch of Bay Area restaurants he now presides over, or a desultory 2006 flutter on a travel website company.⁵⁰ Recently, he told the BBC that he had been offered a "piece" of Netscape when it started and, over time, had invested in six start-up firms, including a robotics company.⁵¹ "I'm always coupled [in articles] with Alan Greenspan as America's pundits," he confides.⁵² Bill Draper called MacNiven "the World's Most Creative Entrepreneur," recognizing the restaurateur as someone very like himself and his clients, a freebooting, can-do, out-of-the-box visionary thinker.⁵³ The patron-configured-as-an-entrepreneur was, so to speak, part of the restaurant's furniture, helping make VCs and their supplicants feel that this was their sort of place. In June 2013, MacNiven was one of 130 Silicon Valley visionaries invited on a twelve-hour British Airways flight from San Francisco to London, during which they were charged with the mission to come up with ideas "to change the world."⁵⁴ He's a hippie entrepreneur of a specifically California sort—the sort that loves technology rather than hates it and that is drawn to technological utopianism. A self-described "student activist" and "leftist radical" at Berkeley in the 60s—"the 60s were cool," he reminds those who need reminding—MacNiven trained as an artist and tried to make it in the New York art world. Drawn to California from the East Coast by Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, MacNiven (before he became a restaurateur) lived "off the grid" on forty acres in the hills near the Stanford campus.⁵⁵ That was when he worked as a builder in the Bay Area for about fifteen years. The reason Steve Jobs—exceptionally among Valley entrepreneurs—never went to Buck's was, supposedly, because of a falling-out over work that MacNiven did on Jobs's house, but he apparently got into the restaurant business through building a number of well-known area eateries.⁵⁶ Buck's is the owner's place, but it's an innovatory place, signaling welcome to the Valley's tech innovators. In Erving Goffman's vocabulary, Buck's provides the "scenery and stage props" for the theater of late modern innovation.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Jamis MacNiven, "Restaurant History," Buck's of Woodside (website), accessed 25 May 2018, <http://buckswoodside.com/restaurant-history/>.

⁵⁰ Matt Marshall, "Jamis MacNiven, of Buck's Restaurant Fame, Enters Web 2.0 Travel Fray with 'LandFrog,'" *VentureBeat*, 10 March 2006, www.venturebeat.com/2006/03/10/jamis-mcniven-of-bucks-restaurant-fame-enters-web-20-travel-fray-with-landfrog.

⁵¹ "Inside Silicon Valley," In Business, BBC Radio 4, broadcast 17 August 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04d4v76.

⁵² Linda Leung, "VC Feeding Frenzy Over, Buck's Keeps Cookin,'" *NetworkWorld*, IDG Communications, 31 May 2004, www.networkworld.com/article/2333511/wireless/vc-feeding-frenzy-over-buck-s-keeps-cookin-.html.

⁵³ Draper, *Startup Game* (cit. n. 15), 2.

⁵⁴ Peter Delevett, "UnGrounded: Silicon Valley Stars Embark on Flight 'To Change the World,'" 12 June 2013, *Mercury News* (San Jose), 12 June 2013, www.mercurynews.com/2013/06/12/ungrounded-silicon-valley-stars-embark-on-flight-to-change-the-world/.

⁵⁵ John Markoff, "Op-Ed: The Invention of Google before Google—a Radical Mail-Order 'Catalog,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 28 March 2018, www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-markoff-stewart-brand-whole-earth-catalog-20180328-story.html.

⁵⁶ MacNiven, *Breakfast at Buck's* (cit. n. 25), 68–70.

⁵⁷ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), 22. Goffman has been the premier sociological student of face-to-face encounters, and a central role is played in *Presentation* (116–19) by an account of passages between backstage kitchen and frontstage dining room in a Shetland hotel, but his work devoted little attention to the significance of meals as face-to-face occasions.

BREAKFAST AND BANDWIDTH

What happens at Buck's? The breakfasts are *informal*. A reporter observes that "the dress code is dress-down; a suit and tie stands out like a sore thumb."⁵⁸ The suit and tie reference is both diffusely conventional and specifically substantive. For all the talk of the Valley's openness to merit, the worlds of venture capital and high-tech entrepreneurship remain notoriously masculine; 89 percent of VCs and 96 percent of senior partners in VC firms are male. East and South Asian males are significant Valley presences in both venture capital and high-tech business; Hispanics and African Americans are scarcely represented at all.⁵⁹ None of the encounters that I have seen documented of these kinds of Buck's breakfasts seem to have involved women, except perhaps as servers. So, shared cultures and systems of social recognition are bound to be core elements of the informality of the breakfast encounters; it is easier to be informal with people-of-your-own-kind than with unfamiliar others, and, as the British say, the "laddishness," as well as the geekiness, of Silicon culture lubricates that informality for males.

What actually takes place at these meetings is mostly a matter of inference and speculation; they're not, of course, minuted—and that's rather the point. The historian or sociologist learns about them through anecdote, and many of the anecdotes seem to be heavily mythologized. Most, probably the overwhelming majority, don't have any instrumental outcome at all, and the stories are all about the few that do come to something. The breakfasts are usually one on one or maybe two on one, where the two are entrepreneurs and the one is a VC. They're not supposed to be "pitches"—that is, prepared presentations that function as bids for funding—though supplicant entrepreneurs are well coached always to have at the ready the one-minute "elevator pitch," and it's hard to imagine that entrepreneurs securing a breakfast meeting come without the PowerPoint slides on their mobile digital devices or a business plan, paper or digital.⁶⁰ It's informal, but it's *formally* informal; if you're an entrepreneur, you understand that this *is* a pitch (or a pre-pitch), only with maximum deniability for the VC. A commentator who pretends to know about Buck's breakfast encounters writes that "the conversations sound disjointed," normless, conventionless: "Speakers hop from one topic to the next, interrupting each other, while the entrepreneur sketches on a napkin and the VC makes notes on a ketchup-stained placemat, to be taken back to his

⁵⁸ McChesney, "Checking a Tech Bellwether" (cit. n. 21).

⁵⁹ Hollie Slade, "'We Need More Women in Venture Capital' Say Female Midas Listers," *Forbes*, 26 March 2014, www.forbes.com/sites/hollieslade/2014/03/26/we-need-more-women-in-venture-capital-say-female-midas-listers/; see also Mike Peña, "Room at the Top for More Women in Venture Capital," *STVP* (Stanford Technology Ventures Program), 12 May 2014, <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/articles/room-at-the-top-for-more-women-in-venture-capital/>; Maria Cirino, "Lack of Women in VC Reflects Broader Bias," *Boston Globe*, 13 July 2014, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2014/07/12/lack-women-reflects-broader-bias/O9xjb7qGNo4toyW8dEp4TJ/story.html>; Julie Carrie Wong, "Segregated Valley: The Ugly Truth about Google and Diversity in Tech," *Guardian*, 7 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/aug/07/silicon-valley-google-diversity-black-women-workers>; Devin Thorpe, "Successful African-American Silicon Valley Entrepreneur Feels 'Like a Black Unicorn,'" *Forbes Magazine*, 15 January 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/devinthorpe/2018/01/15/successful-african-american-silicon-valley-entrepreneur-feels-like-a-black-unicorn/#618f339d29ab>; and Sam Levin, "Black and Latino Representation in Silicon Valley Has Declined," *Guardian*, 3 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/03/silicon-valley-diversity-black-latino-women-decline-study>.

⁶⁰ For the institutions and practices of "pitching" as a face-to-face mode, see Shapin, *Scientific Life* (cit. n. 14), 276–82.

office. Slowly, a pattern emerges.” The VCs are probing and probing again; what appears aimless and patternless takes shape as inquiry: “What is the science? What is its status as IP (intellectual property)? What is the competition? What is the intended product? Who is the customer? How much will it cost?”⁶¹ Success for the entrepreneur—on this sort of occasion—would mean a promise of a further meeting, maybe for coffee and bran muffins, one on one in the VC firm’s offices, maybe, and further down the road, a formal pitch to the general partners.

The breakfast meetings may be instrumental, but they are also informal and *intimate*—in the sense that supplicant and patron are just a few feet away from each other; they are constantly in face-to-face contact for an hour or so; and they are sharing a meal together—even though it’s just breakfast. Venture capitalists like to say that in making an investment decision they “bet on the jockey, not on the horse”—that is, the entrepreneur and not the technology or the scientific IP. To the extent that is so, the face-to-face mode of a meal, however informal, offers the potential of rich information about the virtues, vices, capabilities, and commitments of the investable person.⁶² If a visionary technoscientific future is being pitched, the high bandwidth of the occasion offers a mode of monitoring that may never be repeated over the future course of the interaction, assuming that there is a future. The VC is literally, for that hour or so, looking a future in the face. MacNiven, who has had a ringside seat for almost thirty years, was asked what advice he had for entrepreneurs hoping for access to venture funding. He said: “This is where the action is, and a lot of the action is had by face-to-face. That’s what Buck’s is all about.”⁶³ What about the food? A British journalist sought the owner’s views on what money eats for breakfast. Don’t look at the French toast munchers, MacNiven said. “The bigger the deal, the less they eat, because you don’t want your mouth full at a critical moment.” The serious venture capitalists eat muffins, he says.⁶⁴ The high bandwidth of the face-to-face has for many years been supplemented by digital high bandwidth; Buck’s was one of the originals of a type of Foucault’s *heterotopic* spaces of late modernity,⁶⁵ claiming to be the first place in the country—and presumably the world—to offer a public Wi-Fi hotspot. This was before ubiquitous cell phones, so Buck’s helped pioneer a mode of interaction that many of us now take for granted: the VC can be in an analog face-to-face relationship with the entrepreneur and in digital contact with the universe. That’s a normal mode of interaction now, but Buck’s was possibly one of the first to facilitate it in a public place.⁶⁶

BREAKFAST: A QUICK BITE AND A LONG HISTORY

Breakfast at Buck’s is a meal in a restaurant. We take it as obvious now that there are such places as restaurants, as we take as self-evident the conventions that obtain there

⁶¹ Elton B. Sherwin Jr., *The Silicon Valley Way: Discover 45 Secrets for Successful Start-Ups*, 2nd ed. (1998; repr., Rocklin, Calif.: Energy House, 2010), 3; Walther, *Green Business* (cit. n. 36), 100 (for ketchup stain).

⁶² For familiarity and the face-to-face mode in the VC-entrepreneur relationship, see Shapin, *Scientific Life* (cit. n. 14), 282–303.

⁶³ Zetter, “Silicon Valley Unofficial Mayor” (cit. n. 39).

⁶⁴ Hall, “Silicon Giants” (cit. n. 23).

⁶⁵ “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”: Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22–7, on 25.

⁶⁶ Courtney Price, “A Visual Tour of Silicon Valley,” *HuffPost*, 6 December 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/courtney-price/a-visual-tour-of-silicon-valley_b_5638584.html.

and the mode of being-together that is routine when eating in restaurants. But recent scholarship draws attention to the historical origins of the restaurant in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France and its significance as a mode of modernity.⁶⁷ There are several points to bear in mind here: the first is the *carte*, ordering off the *menu (à la carte)*—and therefore having just what you want—rather than the *table d'hôte* where all guests sat at a common table and took from common dishes what the host offered that day. The menu therefore represented a form of individualism, a manifestation of the power of the individual consumer. The second, and related, point is the form of social interaction conventional in the restaurant. It was one of the places where one could be, arguably for the first time, *alone together*. Each individual in a party is in intimate, face-to-face contact with that party's members, while disengaged from others, even those sitting at adjacent tables and perhaps even eating the same things. Eyeshot is, for the most part, irrelevant, while earshot may be problematic (as it often is for Buck's customers sitting where they can overhear other capitalists and entrepreneurs).⁶⁸ Consider the difference from, say, the cinema or theater or concert—some of which are premodern venues—where one may also be alone together, but taking in the same spectacle and reacting in a way that is sensed by, and relevant to, unfamiliar others; for example, you're all watching the same play and you hear, and may participate in, the audience's collective laughter or audible expressions of shock and horror. However, unlike those other venues, the restaurant is more likely to make individuals' specific choices and body practices consequentially visible to others. Individuals in the restaurant can be part of the show in a way that they are not in the theater.

Again, Buck's is a restaurant, but there are many other restaurants, and, indeed, VCs and entrepreneurs also meet at other establishments—often for breakfast. It has already been pointed out that Buck's is conveniently located, so that consideration, added (over time) to its celebrity, helps to answer the specific question, “Why Buck's?” But related, interesting, and more general questions are: “Why a restaurant?” and “Why breakfast?” One of the virtues of meeting at Buck's is, it's sometimes said, that it's “neutral territory”; it is near VCs' offices, but it *isn't* their office, and so that adds to “deniability”; you could say business isn't really happening if you decide that it isn't.⁶⁹ And as Buck's is a restaurant, neither the VC nor the entrepreneur, of course, owns it. But the neutrality comes with qualifications; the VC will be known to the owner and staff, will be familiar with the place (its menu and its décor), and will have chosen it as a meeting place. Also, the VC will be responsible for when the meeting begins and when it ends (as in “I have to go to the office now”), and will certainly—though I have seen no direct testimony on this—pick up the tab, which is what you do when you're the host. It's a neutral place that the VC is in charge of and that contains the capitalist's stage props.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Rebecca L. Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000); see also Amy B. Trubek, “The Emergence of the Restaurant,” chap. 2 in *Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Paul Freedman, “Restaurants,” in *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, ed. Freedman, Joyce E. Chaplin, and Ken Albala (Oakland: Univ. of California Press, 2014), 253–75.

⁶⁸ Hall, “Silicon Giants” (cit. n. 23), on overhearing; see also Goffman, *Presentation of Self* (cit. n. 57), e.g., 130, 138, 151, 170, 179, 213; Rachel Rich, *Bourgeois Consumption: Food, Space and Identity in London and Paris, 1850–1914* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2011), 137–8 (on separate tables at restaurants).

⁶⁹ Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley* (cit. n. 16), 154.

⁷⁰ Goffman, *Presentation of Self* (cit. n. 57), e.g., 22, 94, 96, 99, 112.

The identity of all daily European and American meals has been historically unstable—with respect to what's eaten, when the meals are taken, where and with whom, and what they signify. Dinner, for example, understood as the main meal of the day, migrated from around midday in the seventeenth century to evening by the late nineteenth century. Supper traditionally was a little something—maybe soup, maybe bread and cheese—that you took before going to bed. Even now, what's called dinner, what's supper, and, in Britain, what's "tea" varies in timing, content, mode of service, and social identity among classes and regional cultures. But the shifting identities and circumstances of dinner and supper are as nothing compared to breakfast.

For most of European history, breakfast as a routine morning meal scarcely existed—the English word was not evidently used until the middle of the fifteenth century—and a morning meal of solid food was not invariably taken, or, if it was taken, it was restricted to the very young, the very old, the invalid, and the laboring classes. They were reckoned to need proper sustenance before (in the last case) going off to hard manual work. The Romans were sometimes cited as a model of dietary discipline; they usually took nothing until supper, and even those who did eat breakfast—at eight or ten in the morning, or as late as noon—tended otherwise toward a light diet.⁷¹ One historian describes the breakfast of the later Middle Ages as “an optional extra.”⁷² There were dietary writers who cautioned against the taking of breakfast for anyone not in the best health, which, in England, was said to include “the generality of People.”⁷³ There was no standard stuff that constituted a breakfast meal, and some physicians counseled on medical grounds against eating breakfast or at least taking anything substantial.⁷⁴ And at the end of the seventeenth century, John Locke warned against accustoming young gentlemen to breakfast.⁷⁵ “Dinner” was itself a contraction of the Latin word for breaking the fast (*disjejunere*); hence, both the English “breakfast” and the French *petit déjeuner* etymologically duplicated the idea of breaking the night's fast, so encoding the anomaly of an early morning *meal*.⁷⁶

In the Jacobean play *The Spanish Curate*, the clergyman Lopez has offended the lawyer Bartolus, but the latter offers to forgive him, marking the reconciliation by

⁷¹ John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1690; repr., London: J. and R. Tonson, 1779), 17.

⁷² Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1976), 22–5, on 23; see also Mark Dawson, *Plenti and Grase: Food and Drink in a Sixteenth-Century Household* (Totnes, UK: Prospect, 2009), 205–6 (on breakfast not recommended save for invalids and manual laborers). But see the classic Victorian account in Thomas Wright, *A History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments in England during the Middle Ages* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1862), 425, 455.

⁷³ Humphrey Brooke, *Ugieine or A Conservatory of Health* (London: R. W. for G. Whittington, 1650), 123.

⁷⁴ See, for example, William Bullein, *The Government of Health* (London: Valentine Sims, 1595), 26v: “use some light things at breakfast of perfite digestion.”

⁷⁵ Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (cit. n. 71), 17.

⁷⁶ Ken Albala, “Hunting for Breakfast in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” in *The Meal: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2001*, ed. Harlan W. Walker (Totnes, UK: Prospect, 2002), 20–30, on 21; Heather Arndt Anderson, “History and Social Context,” chap. 1 in *Breakfast: A History* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); J. C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, *The Englishman's Food: A History of Five Centuries of English Diet*, rev. ed. (London: J. Cape, 1958), 55; Kaori O'Connor, *The English Breakfast: The Biography of a National Meal* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

inviting him “to a Breakfast [which] I make but seldome, But now we will be merry.”⁷⁷ This was a play that Samuel Pepys saw in 1661, and he too did not take breakfast regularly. His diary mentioned the meal just five times over ten years—and his breakfast fare showed very little stability—sometimes a bit of mackerel, sometimes a collar of brawn, certainly not eggs and bacon or porridge. Much more often—and an index of the growing importance of eating out—Pepys said that he “gave” someone their “morning draught”—wine, small beer, coffee, or chocolate. The morning draught served a social function: it was taken at a commercial establishment, someone *treated* someone else to it, news or gossip was exchanged, and deals were done or begun.⁷⁸ The far less sociable and more abstemious Isaac Newton told the physician William Stukeley that his solitary breakfast consisted only of bread and butter and boiled orange peel made into a sort of sweetened tea, which he took to dissolve phlegm.⁷⁹

Breakfast became a more common meal during the nineteenth century, but even then, both its makeup and the social forms attending it remained unstable, varying radically between national cultures and among social classes. In nineteenth-century Boston, boardinghouse breakfasts were the chosen setting for the agreeable, varied, and informal conversations recorded in Oliver Wendell Holmes’s *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*: “The talks are like the breakfasts,—sometimes dipped toast, and sometimes dry. You must take them as they come.”⁸⁰ American boardinghouse breakfasts attracted the scorn of European visitors and the condemnation of US health reformers; the fare was too abundant, too rich, too rapidly consumed, thereby feeding an epidemic of dyspepsia and prompting the emergence of such lighter fare as the branded breakfast cereal.⁸¹ Mrs. Beeton’s ubiquitous rule book for domestic management noted the great variety of foods making up the Victorian breakfast. She gently scolded her compatriots for neglecting due care in its preparation and consumption: “Amongst English people as a rule, breakfast, as a meal, does not hold a sufficiently important place; and with some it means, in reality, no meal at all, unless we reckon the proverbial ‘cup of tea’ to form one. . . . Housekeepers should make more of breakfast.”⁸²

While by the twentieth century breakfast became a common feature of European and American life, its identity remains far more problematic than any other daily meal. Many people don’t eat breakfast at all, while others have it on the run, in the car, or pick it up on the way to the office. Breakfast was once celebrated by nutritionists and advertisers as the “Most Important Meal of the Day”;⁸³ then, for some, it became the

⁷⁷ John Fletcher and Philip Massinger, *The Spanish Curate*, in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, ed. Fredson Bowers, vol. 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 377 (play originally performed 1622).

⁷⁸ “Food,” in *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert C. Latham and William Matthews, 10 vols. (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 10:143–9, on 144.

⁷⁹ Quoted in David Brewster, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1855), 2:89n.

⁸⁰ Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table: Every Man His Own Boswell* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1858), 78. The talks were first published in serial form in the early 1830s and resumed in the late 1850s.

⁸¹ For the “reinvention of breakfast” in nineteenth-century America, see Abigail Carroll, *Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal* (New York, N.Y.: Basic, 2013), 133–58.

⁸² [Isabella Mary Beeton], *Mrs. Beeton’s Cookery Book and Household Guide*, new ed. (1861; London: Ward, Lock, 1898), 240. (These remarks don’t appear in earlier editions.)

⁸³ Charles Spence, “Breakfast: The Most Important Meal of the Day?” *Intl. J. Gastronomy and Food Sci.* 8 (2017): 1–6; Alex Mayyasi and Priceonomics, “Why Cereal Has Such Aggressive Marketing,” *Atlantic*, 16 June 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/06/how-marketers-invented-the-modern-version-of-breakfast/487130/>.

“Most Productive Meal of the Day.”⁸⁴ The modern American institution called the “power breakfast” feeds self-esteem as much as it fuels the body.⁸⁵ What you have for breakfast is also problematic, though maybe not quite as problematic as that newer American invention (now well migrated abroad), the weekend “brunch.”⁸⁶ At Buck’s, one person at a table may be having coffee and toast while another opts for the South Bay equivalent of the “Full English.” For some people who do have breakfast, it’s a social occasion—though, unless it’s an institutional “power” or “prayer breakfast,” a nonsolitary breakfast is usually one on one. Online dating apps explore the propriety of different sorts of meals for different stages of a relationship, different stations on the way to “getting to know” the other. For example, “It’s Just Lunch” advertises itself by noting that “a lunch date or drink after work is the ideal first date . . . It’s a no pressure, relaxed setting where you can actually talk face-to-face.”⁸⁷ But the understood meaning of lunch is more stable than that of breakfast. On the one hand, breakfast is casual—in the positive sense that it signals the possibility of appropriate disengagement, and in the negative sense that proposing a breakfast date might be taken to mean a lack of proper interest: “Nobody wants to date someone who can only squeeze them in before 9 a.m.” On the other hand, the informality of breakfast might signal, or be taken to signal, intimacy—the shared meal after the shared evening meal.⁸⁸ The norms of breakfast are uncertain, oscillating more between intimacy and informality than those of other meals.

Then there’s the fact that it’s a morning meal, and not just a morning meal, but a meal taken outside of, and prior to, a working day. On weekdays, Buck’s opens at 7 a.m.—plenty of time to get to Sand Hill Road by 9—so, unlike lunch, it doesn’t take time out from work, but precedes it. Anyway, this is a world in which people compete in “up with the lark” early starts to the day. By the time VCs meet entrepreneurs for breakfast, they may have been up for three hours, having already sent their texts and tweeted their tweets, gone through their emails, had a workout with their personal trainer, spent some quality time with their kids, and done a bit of tai chi or transcendental meditation. As a VC, you may take *lunch* with other VCs—at your firm or another—or with the “limited partners” who actually provide the capital you

⁸⁴ Nancy Trejos, “Power Breakfast, the Most Productive Meal of the Day,” *USA Today*, 12 October 2015, www.usatoday.com/story/travel/hotels/2015/10/12/hotels-power-breakfasts-loews-knickerbocker/73660834/.

⁸⁵ Julia La Roche and Lisa Du, “We Experienced New York’s Most Famous Power Breakfast,” *Business Insider*, 23 May 2012, <https://www.businessinsider.com/power-breakfast-2012-5>; Alina Dizik, “Breakfast is the Real Power Hour for Success,” *BBC Capital*, 28 October 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20161027-breakfast-is-the-real-power-hour-for-success>.

⁸⁶ A prominent sociologist, writing about how eating occasions give form to quotidian social life, does offer some remarks about breakfast, but omits it from the primary list of meals that structure social life: see Warde, *Practice of Eating* (cit. n. 1), 61. That’s an indication of how the modern breakfast remains something of an anomaly to sociologists of food and eating.

⁸⁷ It’s Just Lunch (website), accessed 16 April 2019, <https://www.itsjustlunch.com/the-ijl-story>.

⁸⁸ For quotation, see Jason Kessler, “Breakfast: The Crucial Date Meal,” *Food Republic*, 3 November 2011, <https://www.foodrepublic.com/2011/11/03/breakfast-the-crucial-date-meal/>; “Go On Your Breakfast Dates Instead of Coffee Dates,” *The New Savvy*, 5 June 2017, <https://thenewsavvy.com/life/food-health/go-breakfast-dates-instead-coffee-dates/>; “5 Reasons Why Breakfast First Dates Are Brilliant,” *Date My Pet*, (updated) 3 February 2010, <https://www.datemypet.com/5-reasons-why-breakfast-first-dates-are-brilliant/>; Michelle, “6 Reasons to Take Your Date to Breakfast,” *#staymarried* (blog), accessed 16 April 2019, <https://staymarriedblog.com/6-reasons-to-take-your-date-to-breakfast/>.

manage; you may “brown-bag” it at your desk. But breakfast is *your business*, or, if you prefer, it’s not business at all unless you otherwise define it. If you’re a novice entrepreneur, and you’re lucky enough to be offered breakfast at Buck’s with a VC, you understand that you may be a long way from a pitch in their offices, a long way from lunch with the VC and the partners, and a very long way from dinner—which, if you ever get it, is likely to be a celebration of a consummated relationship. It’s apparently very rare at VC-entrepreneur breakfasts for “the lawyers” to be present, or, indeed, the other “general partners” of the VC firm. Those absences signal both the early-stage nature and the informality of the occasion. Legend picks out successful interactions, yet it’s likely that very few of these breakfasts lead to an investment.

There is also the local circumstance that breakfast, and, to a lesser extent lunch, has few alternatives as an occasion for the sort of interaction that’s represented by the famous Buck’s scenes—intimacy with informality, out of the workday, interacting one on one but in a public place, in a neutral territory; but a place in which one party can act as host, with earshot problematic but usually manageable. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the coffeehouse (celebrated by Jürgen Habermas as a site responsible for creating the modern “public sphere”) was a place where you would go to hear news and to make news—even (in the celebrated case of the Royal Society) scientific news—but it was *not* the sort of place where you could be *alone together*, since the whole point of the early modern coffeehouse was its common table and common conversation.⁸⁹ At the same time, taverns, inns, or alehouses were typically places where you might engage yourself with others in common, or, if you wanted seclusion for sexual or confidential business purposes, you could secure a private room, where only the owners and their staff knew that you were there and with whom.⁹⁰

Modern America is short of places for the sort of interactions that make breakfast at Buck’s famous. It doesn’t have the British pub; it does have coffeehouses, but increasingly as places where you are connected to the world but not to anyone sitting *with* you. When, years ago, Starbucks threatened to become something like a Viennese coffeehouse, where people read the news, meet with colleagues and friends, and spend the day nursing *Kaffee mit Schlag*, the national ownership took steps to move on the “loitering laptop hobos.” Customers were not to confuse a business with a public space. Law enforcement was called in to make that clearly understood, and only very recent disastrous publicity about police removals of nonbuying ethnic minority customers has instigated a corporate policy change.⁹¹ So, breakfast is that usually unremarked-on remarkable thing: an occasion that combines informality with intimacy, that isn’t business

⁸⁹ Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Phoenix, 2004); Steve Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create’: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” *J. Mod. Hist.* 67 (1995): 807–34; Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2005); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (1962; repr., Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

⁹⁰ Samuel Pepys, “Taverns, Inns and Eating Houses,” in *Diary of Samuel Pepys* (cit. n. 78), 10:416–18.

⁹¹ Hamilton Nolan, “Starbucks Now Calling the Cops on Laptop Hobos,” *Gawker*, 4 October 2011, www.gawker.com/5846448/starbucks-now-calling-the-cops-on-laptop-hobos; Jacey Fortin, “A New Policy at Starbucks: People Can Sit without Buying Anything,” *New York Times*, 20 May 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/20/business/starbucks-customers-policy-restrooms.html. MacNiven says that he makes a point of allowing his A-list clientele to stay as long as they like.

but isn't not-business, that touches the concerns of the working day but that's usually set outside it, that's anything you want it to be or nothing at all. Its cultural and social instability and, in the case of Buck's, its relative normlessness makes it the perfect stage-setting for innovation to happen. You might well be skeptical of the stories about the breakfasts that Made the Modern World, but the breakfasts themselves are a mode of that Made Modernity.

POSTSCRIPT

As this piece entered its final editing, and as the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 struck hard at the hospitality industry, Buck's of Woodside—like so many other American eating establishments—was closed. Rumors circulate in the Valley that it will never reopen, although, on the restaurant website, the owner says that he didn't start them. No one knows the future—for Buck's or for many other commercial eating places. Nevertheless, this treatment of the face-to-face mode of feeding and knowing now has a historical specificity that I could never have imagined when I wrote it.