



Organic
Connections

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THE AWARD-WINNING MAGAZINE OF NATURAL VITALITY

PLINY FISK III
**THE APPROPRIATE
TECHNOLOGIST**

IRON CHEF JOSE GARCES
**THE RICH FLAVORS
OF CULTURE**

WADE DAVIS
**MODERN VOICE
OF ANCIENT WISDOM**

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Are We Really Able to Multitask?



The majority of states have, in their wisdom, determined that texting while driving isn't in anybody's best interests, and an increasing number also don't allow drivers to use hand-held cell phones. But I'm not writing about iPhones or traffic accidents—I'm writing about attention.

The term *multitasking* was introduced by IBM back in 1965. In the computer world, if you have more than one task to do on a computer with a single microprocessor, you end up *time-sharing*. The processor takes turns addressing each job until they're all done. If you have what's called a *multi-core* computer with two or more central processing units, then each CPU can perform separate tasks simultaneously. That's true multitasking.

Nature has given us amazing brains, but we were only allotted one per person. This means we can't really multitask. Instead, we have to time-share if we're trying to do more than one thing concurrently.

Texting and driving doesn't work out well, but what about other things? I started noticing how much "multitasking" I was attempting in my life: reading e-mails while talking on the phone, eating dinner while watching television, thinking about things while doing something else; and embarrassingly, the list goes on.

When you get down to it, attention has its limits. If you were to give 100 percent of your attention to what you're doing—your work, cooking a meal, gardening or having a conversation with a friend, for example—it stands to reason that you should do a better job or have a more fulfilling experience.

It really hit me when I started to try and give my full attention to whatever I was doing. That means if you're thinking, *think*. But if you're listening, don't think, *listen*. If you're doing something, don't listen or think, *do*. It wasn't easy, but I was amazed at the depth and subtlety of experience when I became a unitasker. I realized that I have been dividing my own attention in the belief that I could get more done. But what I gained in quantity, I actually lost in quality. And isn't *quality of life* what we want?

You might try experimenting with this yourself. I'm trying to integrate more of one-thing-at-a-time into my life, and I'm finding it both less stressful and more fulfilling.

If you try it, I'd be interested to know what *you* think.

Ken Whitman PUBLISHER

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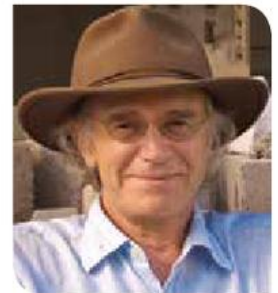
In this issue



Organic Connections magazine is an award-winning publication brought to you by Natural Vitality—a purpose-driven human nutrition company. Our core belief is that you can't be fully healthy in an unhealthy environment. We publish *Organic Connections* to help inspire and educate readers with profiles of people working to make our world healthier and more sustainable. To learn about Natural Vitality's broader mission and our Natural Revitalization environmental action initiative, visit www.naturalvitality.com.

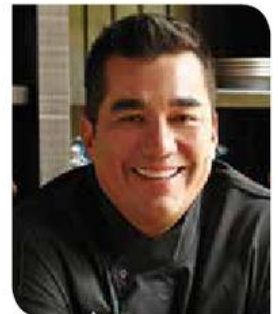
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Noted anthropologist, explorer, author and photographer Wade Davis shares some of the ancient wisdom and richness of the cultures he has studied, and explains his conviction that every culture has something to teach our modern world.



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Pliny Fisk III

The Appropriate Technologist

by Bruce E. Boyers

It was 1975 and Pliny Fisk III, armed only with a considerable knowledge of renewable resources, was on his way to a place called Crystal City, Texas, to help save a group of farmworkers. These farmworkers were some of the first to organize in protest of their living conditions—and not so coincidentally, the local gas supplier had decided to shut off gas to their homes, leaving them without the ability to cook food or heat their living spaces. Fisk had just stepped out of a university teaching position to found his nonprofit Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems, and it was the beginning of a remarkably innovative career that, nearly 40 years later, is still going strong.

Mesquite Stoves That Saved a Town

“The farmworkers in South Texas had a core political arm called La Raza Unida Party,” Fisk explained to *Organic Connections*. “That town was the first Mexican-American town to politically organize itself and to say, ‘Our gas rate is too much.’ Two hundred other towns had allowed rate increases, but Crystal City basically said no. The gas supplying company threatened to cut them off because they weren’t paying their bills on time, and they went and said, ‘Shut us off.’

“It created a great deal of national commotion. It hit the *New York Times*, and it was aired by NPR. It was noticed by many others including the federal government, because the entire town of over 8,000 people was shut off. We got right smack in the middle of

it, since we were one of the few groups in Texas that actually could conceive of redirecting a whole town at regional scale to develop a fast-acting renewable-energy program.

“With the ecological land planning and mapping background that I had, I’d begun to do mapping of area resources. We realized that down there renewable sources of plants such as mesquite were rampant, and in fact mesquite was taking over a lot of ranch land. If you cut it down and use it as a fuel, the fuel is far better than our coal in Texas from the standpoint of BTUs per pound—and the most important part was that it was renewable. It was a major turnaround of getting energy sources being applied at a whole-town scale. It was a fairly simple solution: putting in about 2,000 mesquite stoves over roughly a six-week period. Collecting thousands of cords of wood was the challenge, and we accomplished that by combing the river bottoms for already dead wood and avoiding the large private landholders.”

These stoves, of course, meant that the farmworkers no longer had to rely on the gas company for heating, cooking, bathing and other needs.

Additionally, Fisk and his team engineered a small factory that produced solar water heaters. The production model was duplicated in six other border towns, and overall, 200 water heaters were installed. And so the Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems was off and running.

A Cutting-Edge Demonstration Farm

“Working with the farmworkers and getting that connection going really triggered a whole series of other things,” Fisk continued. “One of them was a state demonstration farm that we were requested to build by Jim Hightower, who was Ag Commissioner for the state of Texas at the time. We are not farmers—we’re basically appropriate technologists, which includes a wide range of

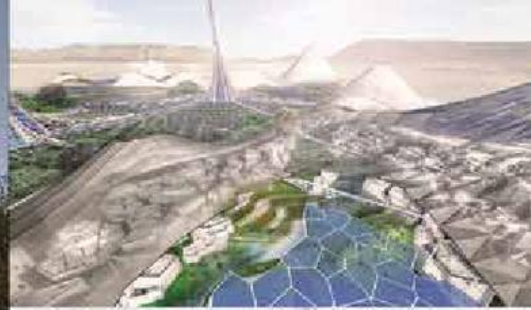
things that embrace farming—but we had the wherewithal to really make a model farm using a combination of integrated farming techniques.

“The farm, which we built in Laredo, Texas, was based on the concept of establishing a vastly flexible way of producing farm products, which means don’t get a single crop going—get multiple integrated crops going. It was based in methods through which you integrate your systems so that you’re getting a maximum-plus return coming out, including treating the polluted Rio Grande water and using wind for the river water pumping requirements. With this farm we showed a wide range of ways that farmers could survive droughts and many other threats while producing crops, and doing it all with renewable energy.

“As part of this, we incorporated a major shading project so you could extend the growing season in the very hot climates of South Texas. We looked at shade research going on all over the world and began to realize a lot of interesting things. The height of shade became important. We observed that the amount of light coming through holes would create a flickering effect almost mimicking forests, and how leaves and wind work to enable young plants at the ground level to come to life quicker.”

Fisk’s implementation of research into shade came back to him in an unexpected manner some years later. “We had an open house a couple of years ago,” Fisk related. “This guy comes in and says, ‘You’re the folks that did that!’ And I said, ‘What are you talking about?’ and he replied, ‘You’re the guys that did all that shade stuff down in Laredo! It created my business!’ So I asked, ‘What’s your business?’ and he said, ‘I create all those shade structures on airports throughout the southwestern United States.’”

Fisk laughed. “I wish I were a little more of an entrepreneur and took advantage of some of these things. You come into an airport and



you have all these blue shades and yellow shades and this shade and that. You see it in Phoenix, in Tucson, and it goes on in city after city over parking. It's not exactly what I was planning—shading the cars—and I wish it were all agriculture; but our attitude is, if you can create something through which you're connecting into a need that is so fundamental that it takes off itself, that's a highly rewarding situation."

Inspiration from the Beginning

Inspiration for such careers often begins in childhood—and for Pliny Fisk this was certainly true. "I grew up with an artist and an inventor," Fisk said. "My father was the inventor, doing high-rate composting to treat organics at an urban scale, and he had 64 patent claims on such. Our house and

The Magic Stone of the Indians

Following the work he did in Crystal City, Fisk and his team found themselves helping wherever it was needed. In one instance, it was with Native Americans—and it led to a remarkable discovery.

"We were involved with the Sioux," Fisk recalled. "I began to realize that in their sweat lodges they were using a certain stone that had sort of magical properties. It was able to absorb a lot of moisture and then release the moisture very gradually into the sweat lodge. Then they'd put more water on; it would absorb more water and gradually release it. I said, 'That's cool! I wonder what it is.' They said, 'Well, we get it from that mountain over there. It's a very embarrassing thing; it's a sacred mountain, but you white guys, you go and mine the mountain,

"On a global level, a lot of people don't realize that the two most used commodities by humans here on Earth are water and concrete," Fisk said. "And concrete, of course, uses a tremendous amount of water and creates a global warming problem in its production. So we're working with others on the fact that as you process water, especially seawater, you can actually bring out particular elements, and from them you can create a very significant cement that is extremely plentiful—there's a great quantity of this material that is extractable. Once you have done so, you in fact have an almost carbon-balanced cement that is far superior to Portland cement, which is the common cement in use today. But here, you are employing water that is unusable, treating the water, coming out with a pure water, and ending up with this material whereby, between the

On a global level, a lot of people don't realize that the **two most used commodities** by humans here on Earth are **water and concrete**. And concrete, of course, uses a tremendous amount of water and creates a global warming problem in its production.

nearby business actually had a four-story vertical high-rate composting unit. I sort of like to say that I grew up in one huge compost pile. That affects anybody's mind!

"Then I had a very creative mom as an artist, and I was raised in a building that was constantly being finished, called home. I began to understand every facet of construction and every facet of how you rebuild Earth, all around me at all times."

From there, Fisk had a rather fortuitous university education. "There's luck in the world," he said. "The undergraduate and graduate programs I went through at the University of Pennsylvania ended up also being the origins of a number of major projects I have been doing over the years. One is ecological land planning. The landscape and regional science program, which was run by Ian McHarg, was the original overlay mapping process used by practically every ecological planning endeavor nationwide."

In addition to founding the Department of Landscape Architecture at the university, McHarg in 1969 published his book *Design with Nature*, which actually pioneered the concept of ecological planning. It continues to be one of the most widely referenced books on landscape architecture and land-use planning.

and believe it or not, what you're using it for is kitty litter."

"In other words, what we're buying in our stores across the country is a stone that has a high absorption capacity, and what it's used for now is kitty litter rather than being a key part of an entire cultural tradition. So I said, 'Instead of the kitty litter, why don't we create a very simple solar absorption refrigerator?' I knew of this technology due to my involvement with the American Solar Energy Society, and we're still working on it to this day. It's elementary solar refrigeration: it absorbs moisture, and that moisture is heated during the day, then trapped by the mineral during the night and cooled. The following day the sun heats the mineral again; the water evaporates and is collected down the opposite end of a long pipe. It is a basic passive, no-moving-parts solar refrigeration unit.

"So we're always conscious of a wide range of very simple technologies that, mixed together, could do a variety of things under different circumstances."

Concrete from Seawater

Another such technology leads to what may well transform desert landscapes all over the world.

two situations of potable water and concrete, you're actually able to hit some very major issues facing humans on the planet."

While research is ongoing into cost-effective extraction that is low in energy to obtain the needed elements from seawater, Fisk and his team are utilizing this same concrete—now obtained by mining—in prototypes at his center so that its efficacy can be readily seen.

The Renewable City in the Desert

A television interview with Fisk regarding concrete from seawater led to another groundbreaking vision. "I was on CNN International talking about this issue, and that triggered the country of Morocco to think about using some of our skills," said Fisk. "So we have proposed a fairly outrageous whole city in the desert. In many of the deserts in the world, the groundwater has become totally saline. Therefore the way of operating is to manufacture fresh water by treating it, and to actually have this cement base in order to go and create a whole city. We have some really beautiful renderings of what that city is about and what it could be.

"Interestingly enough, some of the minerals

and trace elements that remain as we process the water are ones that are significant as trace elements for agriculture.” Hence Fisk has connected with hydroponic agriculture companies to make them part of the vision as well.

Due to its geographic location, Morocco has another underutilized natural resource that Fisk has proposed be tapped. “This is prime territory to begin to really make very efficient solar systems,” he said. “In the country’s plan are five of these huge heliostat systems in which mirrors reflect the sun to a central point, and you have one of the most efficient solar systems known at the moment. We proposed this city be built around the fact that you could put mirrors on the roofs of buildings, and have the center of the city under a large shade tent with a mast, acting as structure, that is topped with the high-temperature solar receiver. With the whole city and neighborhoods producing energy, it could be exported. And with the process of producing energy, along with the treating of their water and their production of cement and fertilizer, you begin to get really integrated systems going on.”

Right Here at Home

But many of Fisk’s innovations have been felt in America. In fact, one of his projects led to something that now touches anyone associated with green building in any capacity.

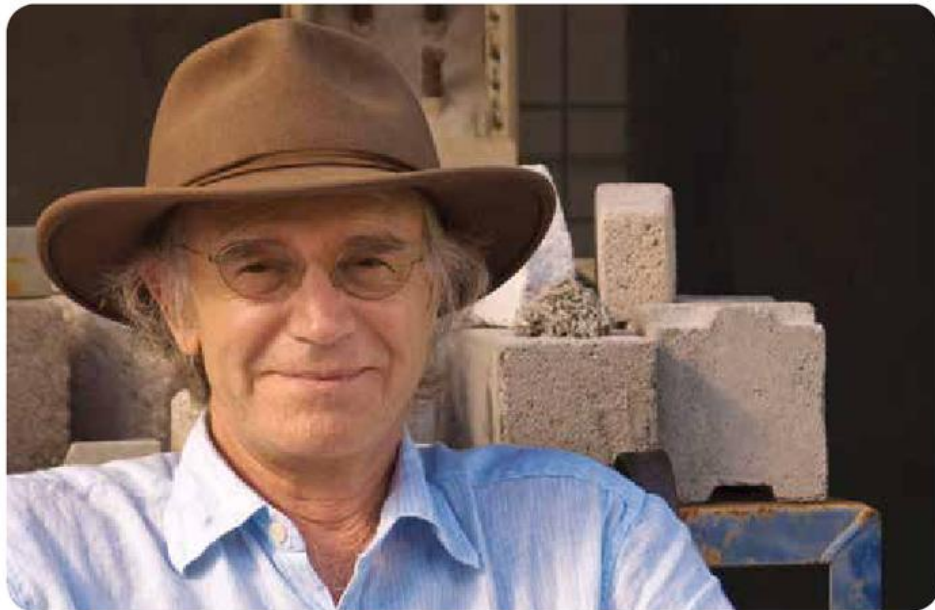
“After we got started, we began getting a lot of press,” Fisk recounted. “We realized we’d better respond to a variety of different things that were building related, as examples of a maximum potential future. That means, what is the next step of what you’re trying to do?”

“The whole idea of what’s the next step of the evolutionary process began to be very usable in many different instances. We started getting involved with small towns in Indiana and Florida. Right here at home, we looked at the city of Austin and began to create a sustainable model for our own city. It ended up receiving the only Earth Summit Award given to the United States, for what became the Green Building Program for the city of Austin.”

There are now over 10,000 homes and many commercial buildings in Austin that have passed through this rating system. But like a stone dropped in a pond, this program has had rather far-reaching effects. “That whole program triggered a lot of other towns, so that cities around the country

began to pick up on it,” Fisk said. “That developed into 20 or 30 more cities, some of which we have consulted over the years, such as the city of Seattle.

“But then the state became a little bit jealous because of the notoriety that Austin



was getting in winning the Earth Summit Award. And that jealousy turned into real things: Texas became the first state to redo the architectural and engineering guidelines to be more sustainable. Then that prompted about 10 other states to do the same thing. Ultimately, it set in motion a national direction that eventually evolved into what is now called the US Green Building Council. The US Green Building Council, of course, has a complete set of standards by which tens of thousands of buildings all over the country are now rated.”

Breaking the Boundaries

As one might guess, there is much more to tell. There is Fisk’s participation in the development of a model sustainable village for farmers in Guanghan city, Sichuan province, China. There is the master plan and building design he provided for the School for Field Studies in the freshwater-poor Baja California peninsula of Mexico. There is the materials specification that he and his wife, Gail Vittori, made for a landmark 200,000-square-foot example of green building, constructed at the University of Texas. Then there is the holographic community-wide interactive game, currently in its early discussion stage, designed to bring Austin to the next level of

understanding itself as a green city; it uses the ecology of business connections as the “fuel” for a next generation of green.

As co-director of the Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems, Gail Vittori—once an informal student of Fisk’s, and now

his partner in both life and business—has become a national force of the green movement in her own right.

Whatever Fisk and Vittori do, wherever they go, it will be crossing boundaries that are normally quite fixed—and this is where they are most comfortable. “I think being a nonprofit enables you to work on the edge,” Fisk concluded. “That’s because it’s very multidisciplinary; a lot of what we do is right between disciplines. I’ve been equally involved with landscape, plants, ecological planning and system sciences; and as all those came together, they became the roots of what we call maximum potential building systems.

“All I really care about is that I’m helping things move along. It might have been best if I had become an architect—especially a landscape architect, or especially this or especially that. But I’m purposely not aligning myself with *any* profession. I’m trying to get people to begin thinking about *all* these professions and where they should be leading us.” ■

*To find out more,
please visit www.cmpbs.org.*

Iron Chef Jose Garces
The Rich Flavors of Culture



RENOWNED CHEF JOSE GARCES imparts a passion for regional cuisine that has catapulted him into the realm of celebrity. He opened his first restaurant in 2005, and today he owns and operates 15 highly successful restaurants in five cities. Garces is a 2009 winner of the James Beard Foundation's prestigious Best Chef, Mid-Atlantic award and one of few chefs in the country to hold the title of Iron Chef, appearing regularly on the Food Network's *Iron Chef America*. He has been featured prominently on top TV shows and in major media, including *The Today Show*, *Dr. Oz*, the *New York Times*, *Esquire*, *Bon Appétit*, *Food & Wine* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

The Flavors of Region

If you happen to dine at one of Chef Garces' restaurants, you'll find specialties in some unique cuisines—among them Catalan, Andalusian, Peruvian, and of course his familial Ecuadorian. If you ask Garces why he specializes in these types of cuisines, his answer is simple. "You can find out so much about people and places by eating with them," he tells *Organic Connections*. "All of the places you mention are locales where I've made it a point to try and eat like a local, soaking up the culture and the cuisine."

Garces highlights venues that share vibrant, proud and deep identities. For example, Catalonia and Andalusia—now autonomous communities of Spain—have made their own vital cultural contributions to the world. Both have produced legendary artists; Catalonia was the birthplace of luminary painter Salvador Dalí and legendary cellist Pablo Casals, while Andalusia gave us Pablo Picasso. Andalusia has also contributed cultural elements most usually associated with Spain itself, such as flamenco music and dancing, bullfighting, and the famous Andalusian (also known as "pure Spanish") horse. It would only make sense that the cuisine of such places would be as singularly rich.

The eclectic restaurants opened by Chef Garces span the globe in terms of palate. In Philadelphia, the city he now makes his home, Amada is an authentic Andalusian tapas bar and restaurant, where Garces goes beyond tradition, interpreting centuries-old tapas recipes. His Tinto wine bar is inspired by the Basque region of northern Spain and southern France. Distrito

brings the culture and cuisine of Mexico City, and Chifa is a Latin-Asian restaurant named after the Chino-Peruvian eateries that serve this unique fusion of foods. In his native Chicago, he helms a renowned Catalan restaurant called Mercat a la Planxa. There are also examples of these and other culture cuisines in Atlantic City, New Jersey; Scottsdale, Arizona; and Palm Springs, California.

From His Childhood Kitchen

Garces was born and raised in Chicago, to Ecuadorian parents. He graduated from Chicago's Kendall College School of Culinary Arts and then spent several years studying different cuisines in top-rated professional kitchens, from Spain to New York City.

The warmth Chef Garces expresses through his cuisine and the atmosphere of his restaurants has roots in his childhood. "I loved being in the kitchen from a young age, mostly as a supporting role to my *Mamita Amada* (paternal grandmother) and my mother, who were the culinary stars in our house," Garces recalls. "Cooking alongside them, I saw firsthand how food can bring people together as a family—literally and figuratively—and that stuck with me. When I started considering a career, it took me some time to return to that idea, but ultimately I enrolled in culinary school and I haven't looked back since."

Local, Sustainable—and Flavorful

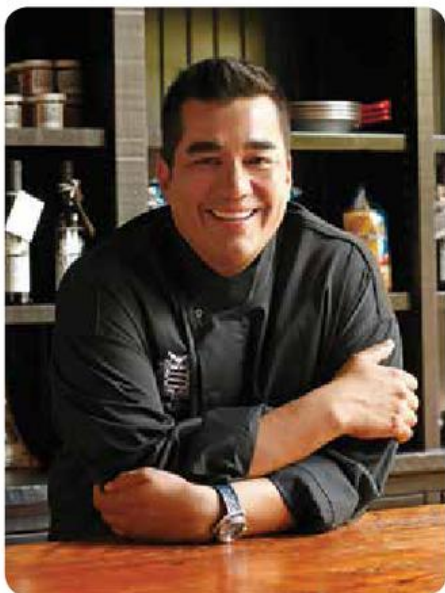
Being a top chef, Garces knows that ingredient flavor is of paramount importance to a culinary creation. For him, this has meant utilizing ingredients grown locally

and sustainably, whenever possible. "My cooking has always been about using the best available ingredients, which is another legacy from *Mamita Amada*," Garces continues. "To this day, she insists that there is no American equal for some of the cheeses she cooks with in Ecuador—and I'm certain she'd smuggle them into the country if she thought she could! So using local, seasonal and sustainably produced ingredients, which tend to be raised and sold with greater care than mass-produced equivalents, is a natural for me."

"I'm of the opinion that using the best possible components will yield the best possible results. And it's been proven true again and again, every time I bite into a salad with local vegetables or cut into a butter-tender humanely raised steak."

In an effort to bring an increasing number of local and sustainable ingredients to his restaurants, several years ago Chef Garces bought Luna Farm in Ottsville, Pennsylvania. He had it converted so that anything produced there would be organic and sustainable. "When I acquired Luna Farm, it was in disrepair; so our 'conversion' was less about adapting the old pieces to new technology than starting from scratch to create a 'green' farm," he relates. "We built greenhouses that utilize solar energy for heat and light, built a rainwater irrigation system, and set up the conversion of used fryer oil from the restaurants into biodiesel. We also raise honeybees, for natural pollination and to preserve an endangered local species."

The 40-acre farm provides organic vegetables, fruits, eggs and honey year-round to several of Garces' East Coast restaurants. The crops grown include sweet



corn, squash, beans, sweet potatoes, beets, turnips, carrots, radishes, arugula, spinach and lettuces, and there are many varieties of tomatoes, peppers, eggplants and melons as well.

“Operating the farm in conjunction with the restaurants actually presents several opportunities to ‘green’ our entire enterprise,” Garces points out. “We compost waste from the restaurants and use it to fertilize the farm. We power the tractor with biodiesel that we convert from used fryer oil from the local restaurants. And obviously, whenever possible, we serve the vegetables, herbs, fruits, nuts and mushrooms that we grow.”

The farm also serves another purpose in Garces’ considerably busy life. “Luna Farm’s role in my life is twofold: it’s both a rural escape for me and my family and a source of exceptional produce for my restaurants,” he says. “And in both those purposes, it has exceeded my expectations. I can’t imagine a more beautiful, restful place to spend time with my wife and our children, and I can’t fathom finding fresher produce to serve to my guests.”

Exporting His Joy of Cooking

In an effort to share the joys of culture and cooking with others, Chef Garces has just published his second book, *The Latin Road Home: Savoring the Foods of Ecuador, Spain, Cuba, Mexico, and Peru*. This book chronologically tells the story of Garces’ food journey, with each chapter dedicated to a place that influenced his style, beginning in Ecuador with traditional recipes of his

childhood. For each country, Garces writes four dinner menus highlighting his favorite dishes and cultural “essentials.” The book includes more than 100 recipes accompanied by beautiful food and travel photos, along with his personal memories.

“*The Latin Road Home* is a record of my life as a chef so far: where I came from, how I got here, and where I think I might be going,” Garces explains. “I hope that people will enjoy it as much for the journey as for the recipes.”

“Learning to cook was, for me, a formative experience, one that bonded me with my family and helped me to find my life’s calling. It may not be that for everyone, but it’s a skill that will never not be in demand and is a worthwhile one to examine, if not to master.”

Expansive and Intimate

While Chef Garces has played a public role in changing our food landscape, he maintains humility and an authenticity born of dedication and hard work. “I tend not to really look that far into things,” he says. “I’m a chef, which means that I prepare and serve food for a living. If I can also manage to introduce people to something new or help them celebrate a milestone occasion, that’s about all I ask. I will say that working in restaurants has given me a deep insight into the challenges faced by immigrants in this country, and I founded my Garces Family Foundation to help provide critical financial and practical support to those who need it in order to contribute to the rich fabric of our national landscape.”

“My mission is to prepare the best food that I can in the most welcoming environment that I can create, and to give back to those who help me to do so in any way that I can,” Garces concludes. “Food brings people together in the most literal of ways: we gather around the table to eat; we cook for each other; we raise our glasses in a toast. There is perhaps no more social act than cooking and eating together.” ■

For more information, check out www.garcesgroup.com.

Chef Jose Garces’ book *The Latin Road Home* is available from the Organic Connections bookstore.

We **compost** waste from the restaurants and use it to **fertilize** the farm. We power the tractor with **biodiesel** that we convert from used fryer oil from the local restaurants. And obviously, whenever possible, we **serve** the vegetables, herbs, fruits, nuts and mushrooms that we **grow**.



Wade Davis

Modern Voice of Ancient Wisdom

by Bruce E. Boyers

W

Wade Davis could probably be best described as a “voice of cultures”—and this would be no light statement. His highly praised work as an anthropologist, explorer, filmmaker and author has taken him into the deepest reaches of the Amazon rainforest, to the African desert, the seas throughout the Polynesian islands, the highlands of Tibet, the Australian Outback and the Arctic, to name but a few of the many places he has traveled. He is an Explorer-in-Residence at the National Geographic Society, and a Fellow and honorary member of the prestigious Explorers Club. He holds chair positions at both Cambridge and Oxford. Yet Davis himself would be the first to point out that underlying his degrees (three, all from Harvard) and his many impressive works, awards and accolades, his primary mission is the preservation of magnificent cultures that might otherwise be lost and forgotten.

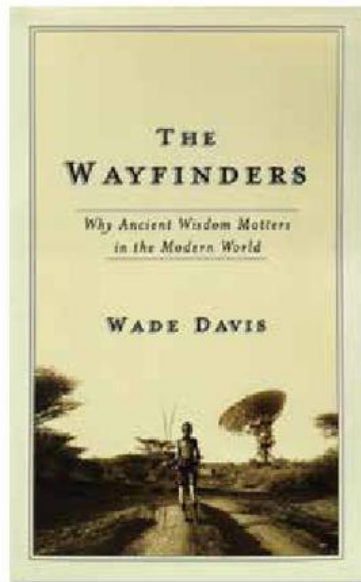
“Of the 7,000 languages spoken today, fully half are not being taught to children,” Davis recently remarked. “Effectively, unless something changes, they will disappear within our lifetimes.”

The Wayfinders

A selection of Davis’s cultural explorations is detailed in his book *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*. In it Davis details five specific regions of the world that he has explored through the years, along with an in-depth look at the indigenous peoples of those

areas. It is also an insightful examination of wisdom and technology that, due largely to the arrogance of early conquering explorers, have either been totally lost or are in danger of being lost. “I would say absolutely that *The Wayfinders* expresses my primary mission as an explorer and anthropologist,” Davis told *Organic Connections*.

“When I was recruited to the National Geographic as an Explorer-in-Residence, my mission as a social anthropologist was to deal



with the crisis of language loss and the erosion of cultural diversity,” Davis explained. “I realized that could best be done through storytelling. Just prior to that I had written a book called *Light at the Edge of the World*, and for the next ten years I went all over the world for the Geographic making films, writing articles, but mostly researching.

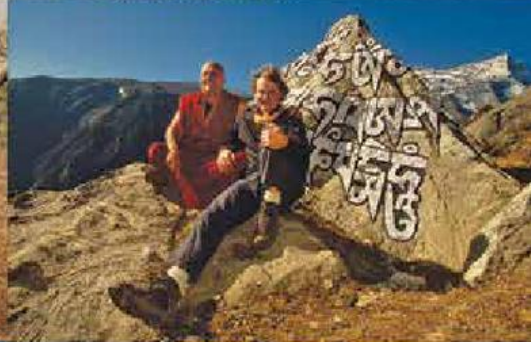
“We couldn’t just go out to celebrate the ‘exotic other’; we had to take our huge audience to places where the belief systems and practices were so amazing you couldn’t help but come away with a new appreciation of the wonder of culture. In many ways *The Wayfinders* sums up those journeys.”

The Journeys

In *The Wayfinders*, we travel with Davis on his voyage aboard the *Hokule’a*, a replica of the great seafaring canoes of ancient Polynesia. The early European explorers’ dismissal of the Polynesian people as “primitive”—a label they took back home and which stuck for hundreds of years—caused them to overlook one of the most uniquely civilized and wise cultures on Earth, from whom they could have taken quite a few lessons in navigation. Armed only with a deep sense of waves, clouds, sea life, wind and the stars, traditional Polynesian navigators (called *wayfinders*) guided such vessels over tens of thousands of miles of ocean, making their way from island to island, creating trade, contact and the spread of tradition that lasted thousands of years. Very fortunately, this skill survives today, and readers are lucky enough to be witness to it through Davis.

There were also sophisticated cultures that never had contact with the Spanish explorers, and had little to no contact with the outside world well into the twentieth century. Davis himself spent time with many of these. For example, the Waorani hunters of the Amazon, with whom Davis lived, could smell animal urine at forty paces in the forest and identify the species. They had learned through generations to ingeniously manipulate plants, and the poisons extracted from these allowed them to fish and hunt. They had also discovered methods of growing plentiful food despite nutrient-poor soils of the rainforest.

Another culture with which Davis has spent considerable time is the Penan, a group of nomadic hunter-gatherers in Borneo. The traditional territory of the Penan is the forest of the upper Baram River, the largest river in the northwest Sarawak region of Borneo; and the Penan cycle through this territory, committing to knowledge every point along a trail, every



boulder and cave, and every one of some 2,000 streams.

The social structure of the Penan stands in stark contrast to the individual specialization that typifies Western culture. Each member of the Penan group is fully capable of performing every necessary task. They can fabricate everything needed from raw materials found around them. Since solidarity is of utmost importance to their survival, confrontation is quite rare. Sharing is not only part of their ethnic, it is of the highest priority. In fact, Davis describes a visit by a group of Penan to Canada in which they were astounded at the existence of homelessness in such an affluent society. The greatest transgression in their culture is known as *sihum*—which is essentially a failure to share.

Why Were They Overlooked?

Davis points out that the former dismissal of such cultures had its roots in older Western thinking, which skewed scientific observation. “In the early days of anthropology, culture was seen as a sort of evolutionary set of progressions, whereby individual societies move from the so-called savage to the barbarian to the civilized,” he said. “Each of those stages was seen to be marked by certain technological innovations. It created this whole notion that there was this ladder of success that invariably placed Victorian England at the apex.

“Anthropology’s mission of deciphering another culture so that we might learn more about our own human nature—and humanity as a whole—got hijacked by the age. For example, the term *survival of the fittest* was coined by Herbert Spencer, who was in fact an anthropologist. They were borrowing from Darwin to try to create a kind of social Darwinian model of advancement.”

It wasn’t until the late nineteenth century that this started to change, with the innovations of Franz Boas, considered the “father of American anthropology.” “Boas became concerned that research was plagued by problems of perception, and that came to fascinate him,” Davis continued. “He began to ask, ‘What is the nature of knowing? Who decides what is to be known? What is this thing that we call culture?’ He really believed that every social community, every kind of cluster of people distinguished by language or adapted inclination, was a unique facet of the human legacy.”

Davis has followed in Boas’s footsteps in many ways—not the least of which being

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that Boas began as a physicist and changed disciplines, to anthropology, in following his study. “I began my academic career in a very serendipitous way, stumbling into anthropology just because it seemed like an interesting thing to study,” said Davis. “I then slipped away from anthropology for about eight years and became a botanist—my PhD is actually in biology as a botanist and ethnobotanist; I found plants a wonderful conduit to culture.”

After a time, however, Davis began to tire of simply collecting plant specimens and yearned for a deeper examination of cultures. A professor of his—the renowned Richard Evans Schultes—gave Davis an assignment that changed his life: go to Haiti and study the phenomenon of zombie rituals, which had been steeped in sensationalist mystery for centuries. “It focused a kind of ethnobotanical lens upon a phenomenon that had been really dismissed in an explicitly racist way, that of the Haitian zombie,” Davis said. “I was sent down to Haiti to find the quote-unquote ‘drugs’ or the poison used to make zombies—but no drug can make a social phenomenon. I ended up exploring the social, political, psychological and spiritual dimensions. That really flung me back into the realm of a

culture, and then I wrote my first two books on voodoo and the Haitian society.”

One of those books, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, became an international bestseller and was ultimately made into a film. Davis has remained on his true path ever since.

From Childhood

Davis’s lifelong exploration of cultures began in his youth in Canada. “I grew up in Quebec at a time when the English and the French didn’t speak to each other,” he related. “It was a small suburb of Montreal that had been sort of plunked like a carbuncle on the back of a very old and traditional French village. There was actually a road that divided the two communities. I used to go down to the corner to a little mom-and-pop grocery there and pick up things for my mother. I would look across that boulevard and think, ‘Wow, across that road is another language, another religion, another way of being,’ and it intrigued me. I was also intrigued by the subtle prohibition—not from my family as much as from society—against crossing that line. Then I had an older stepsister who sort of shattered that division by falling in love with a francophone boy, and in the wake of her passing through, I sort of floated in like flotsam and began to hang out in the village. I think that created a certain sense about the meaning of culture: how could it be that those people right across the road could be so different?”

“Then when I was 14 my parents, who were very open to the world, sent me to Colombia with a teacher and a group of students on what was probably an exchange program. We went down and were billeted out with families, and I was fortunate to be billeted with a family that lived not in the affluent neighborhoods of the city of Cali but up in the mountains in more modest circumstances. I never saw the other Canadians for the eight weeks that I was in Colombia, which is a long time when you are just 14 years old. It turns out that some of the other fellows, several of whom were two years older than I was, got rather homesick. By contrast, I felt like I had finally found home in Latin America.”

Sacred Headwaters

But it isn’t just far-off places and peoples that Davis befriends, or discusses in *The Wayfinders*. He himself owns and lives part time in a lodge in British Columbia’s Spatsizi Wilderness, the closest private holding to

what is known as the Sacred Headwaters, a confluence of the sources of three majestic rivers. Ten years ago the native peoples of the area—with whom Davis had made great friends—had their sacred and pristine lands threatened by oil and mineral exploration. Over the years Davis has provided plentiful assistance to them in campaigning to save their lands, through lectures, articles and a magnificent book entitled *The Sacred Headwaters: The Fight to Save the Stikine, Skeena, and Nass*, which lovingly documented with breathtaking photographs and descriptions this unspoiled wilderness destined to be completely destroyed.

Shell Canada had secured permission from the Canadian government to explore and exploit the area for oil and natural gas. “I think that when Shell came into the area, they were completely unaware that there was this rich cultural history,” Davis said. “Nobody even knew how much that country was revered by the First Nation people there, the Tahltan. This, after all, is a quarter of British Columbia, the size of Oregon, which, at the time Shell obtained these rights, had a single road and very little development. The Tahltan stood up for their country on a series of blockades that limited access to the heart of the Sacred Headwaters. This generated a tremendous amount of interest, and when Shell went to negotiate with the Tahltan people, Shell’s representatives were asked to leave.”

As a result of the cooperative efforts of Davis, the Tahltan and other groups, Shell completely withdrew from the area. “It came about through a wonderful combination of local people—certainly the Tahltan and nonnative local people—and then my own ability to take the story beyond British Columbia: to have articles in *National Geographic*, and to raise the profile of the place, beginning in 2003. I was also able to go down to the TED conference and make a presentation in front of the senior person for Shell in all of the Americas, in an audience which was made up of some of the most extraordinary and successful people in the country—from Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, to Al Gore, and stars such as Cameron Diaz and Paul Simon. So I think being able to put this issue onto a global stage like that became very helpful.”

River Notes

Another example of Davis’s deep research into place and culture is his recently published

River Notes, designed to be a companion to exploring the Colorado River.

“I was invited by a good friend of mine, Greg MacGillivray, to make an IMAX movie in the Grand Canyon,” Davis recounted. “I’m a professional whitewater guide from British Columbia, so I jumped at the opportunity to do the iconic river of the American Southwest.



As I was going down the river, I became aware of curiously how little literature there is on the river. There are lots of photo books and there are plenty of great guide books, and there are a number of personal reflections of going down the river.

“But there are a surprisingly small number of books that take up the whole subject of the canyon, its history, its geology, its ethnography and the water crisis. So I decided to write a little book. I deliberately wanted it to be a short book, which is why I called it *River Notes*; I wanted it to be something that you carried in your dry bag or your backpack as you either hiked the canyon trails or went down the river.

“It’s just one book that can tell you who the ancient Anasazi were, why these dams got built, what the geology is that you’re looking at. It can tell you about the native peoples—the Havasupai, the Hualapai, the Paiute, the Ute—who Powell was and what he represented in American history. It explains that the whole settling of the American West was based upon a kind of Mormon ideology and transformation, and how that differed from what the Hopi were thinking.

What is it that is causing the river to go dry before it reaches the sea? What could we possibly do to bring that river back to life?”

Natural Lessons

Davis’s unique exposure to a vast panorama of cultural heritage has given him a respect

for diverse approaches to living. As our Western attempts to conquer nature have resulted in environmental crises, there may be much to gain from exploring cultures based on natural harmony.

“Other peoples of the world are not failed attempts at being you, or failed attempts at being modern,” Davis concluded. “Each is a unique answer to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be human and alive? When the peoples of the world answer that question, they do so in 7,000 different voices, and those voices collectively—and the content of what they are saying—become our repertoire for dealing with the challenges that will confront us as a species in the coming centuries. Every culture deserves a place at the council of human knowledge and wisdom, and every culture has something to teach the world.” ■

Wade Davis’s books *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World* and *River Notes* are available at the *Organic Connections bookstore*.

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