

START UP

Let Them Eat Cake

Long before Dun Gifford and his son, Dun Jr., started trafficking in caviars and gourmet spices back in October, the elder Gifford had learned a thing or two about dealing in delicacies of another sort.

What could be a more delicate undertaking, after all, than managing a presidential campaign? In 1968 Gifford was a key figure in Robert Kennedy's White House run. On the day of Kennedy's California primary win, Gifford was the man at his side who tackled Kennedy's assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, to the ground.

A year later, Gifford had picked himself up from the tragedy and moved on to work for Ted Kennedy's staff. On the morning after Teddy's fateful night at Chappaquiddick, Gifford was one of the first called to the scene. Talk about delicate situations.

By that time, seeing history in the making was nothing new to Gifford. In 1956 he and his family had survived the sinking of the Andrea Doria. By the time he was 32, Gifford might well have considered himself worthy of historical footnoting. He had lived through shipwreck, murder and tragedy—all on a grand scale. And he had seen enough.

Disaffected with politics and all its uncertainties, Gifford decided to turn away from public life and try to construct a more stable career. He tried his hand at a seemingly desultory array of efforts, from political consulting to real estate (10 years with Cabot, Cabot & Forbes) to retail (in 1980 he and a partner bought out and resuscitated the then-ailing London Harness Co.) to starting his own private investment-banking business.

Gifford is one of these chaps who seems to bear the markings of a born winner—oh yes, he was a member of the crew that won the America's Cup in 1964—and at every station stop in the private sector he seemed to succeed. With success, he developed an increasingly evolved taste for the finer things in life—especially for things epicurean.

"I've always liked the way food brings people together," he explains. "I think that's tremendously important. There's a certain connectiveness that comes into play when you share a meal, something nurturing and vital. . . . I decided I'd like to be a part of that."

In 1981 Gifford put his gourmet sensibilities to work, joining longtime friend Julia Child in organizing the American Institute of Wine and Food. The national

nonprofit association sponsors seminars and get-togethers on cooking, eating and wine-tasting: a kind of high-concept support group for the gourmet set. Of course, this left Gifford with one of the finest Rolodexes in the world of haute cuisine, a host of connections upon which he and Dun Jr. incorporated their mail-order outfit, called Giffords, last October.

In the mail-order food heap—a market already deluged with some 200 competing catalogs—Gifford and son are setting themselves apart by their sheer, unbridled culinary snobbery. "Quality is everything to us,"

says Dun Jr. "We sell what we think is the best food you can buy."

The claim has a ring of hype to it, to be sure. But it is not unfounded. Where else would you go, after all, to find sausages made of red snapper and spinach? How about truffle peelings? Porcini? Icelandic gravlax salmon? Delicacies all. But however diverse the products may sound, they all have at least one thing in common: off-the-chart prices. You can't buy more expensive food, anywhere; Giffords has its sights set on the high end.

Take the angus beef, the company's flagship food-

stuff. In culinary circles, angus is practically a controlled substance, available almost exclusively to gourmet restaurants. Giffords managed to acquire one of the few retail licenses to sell the pricey cuts. "The stuff is like gold," trumpets Dun Jr. "You can't get it anywhere else." The stuff is priced like gold, too. A five-pound order of sirloin carries the meaty price tag of \$93.93.

The elder Gifford has fashioned himself as a man of wealth and taste, after all: a self-made patrician of the prandial. Consumption at its most hedonistic is what Giffords is all about. Hmm. What would Bobby say?

Gifford has anticipated that question. In Kennedyesque fashion, he has arranged to donate one percent of the company's eventual profits to charities that work to eliminate hunger.

The gesture is a well-intentioned one, of course, all very noblesse oblige. But isn't there a pinch of irony in there somewhere—just a smidgen of contradiction in the notion of feeding the hungry with a percentage of the proceeds from a \$65 venison pate?

Perhaps so. The world is full of delicate contradictions, as Gifford knows full well.

—Alexander Wright



Where's the beef? Dun Gifford Sr. 's got it—for \$18.79 a pound.