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## Tyler Cowen's appetite for ethnic food -- and answers about his life

By [Michael S. Rosenwald](#)  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, May 13, 2010

Tyler Cowen -- economist of daily life, reader of five books a day, polymath blogger, food explorer -- was zipping through his inbox one day when an e-mail confused him.



Behavioral economist Tyler Cowen eats dinner at Eyo restaurant in Falls Church. (Evy Mages - For The Washington Post)

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Cowen recognized the sender's name: Kathleen Fasanella, a devoted reader of Cowen's blog, Marginal Revolution, which features a daily discussion of head-scratchers such as "Why isn't there marketing for broccoli?" Fasanella had one quick question for the blogger: Did you ever consider whether you might be autistic?

Fasanella, a clothing patternmaker who once took a two-week vacation to read at the Library of Congress and is herself autistic, was responding to a Cowen post that mentioned autism. She thought, "Geez, Tyler, um, have you ever looked in a mirror?"

Cowen, an economics professor at George Mason University, can rattle off an astonishing amount of information on nearly any topic. He holds in his mind deep reservoirs of arcane details, "Rain Man" stuff: on economics, literature, classical music, cuisine. He maintains long lists. He has specific rules and rituals -- for everything.

"He had to be autistic," Fasanella said. "It made total sense."

It did not make total sense to Cowen. Looking back at the moment, Cowen writes that he was an "upper-middle-class white male who all his life felt like he belonged to the dominant group in American society. Suddenly I was faced with the suggestion that I could be part of a minority, and a very beleaguered minority at that."

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He was insulted. No, not autistic, he told Fasanella.

So then, what was he?

### Man on a quest

Cowen has catalogued too many rules to tally about how the world works, but one is this: Nobody is ever exactly on time. You choose early. You choose late. On time? Impossible, a fool's game. When a cab dropped him off recently for a talk to a student libertarian group at George Washington University, Cowen was 17

minutes early. In Cowen's canon, early is preferred: E-books and iPads have lowered the cost of waiting, offering time to read.

But there would be no reading here. The room was already packed, with members of the group as well as non-students who learned of Cowen's appearance on [Marginal Revolution](#).

The instant Cowen walked in, a young man cornered him and said, "Where did you go for dinner?"

To those who don't follow Cowen, the question might seem peculiar, but his reputation in economics is matched by his stature in the food world -- the second hit on Google for "Tyler Cowen" after Marginal Revolution is Tyler Cowen's Ethnic Dining Guide, a long list of the best hidden gems in the region.

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"We had a great dinner," Cowen said. "Thai X-ing," a 2 1/2 -table restaurant in the basement of the chef's home near Howard University. "Best Asian food in D.C.," Cowen once wrote. "Nothing nearby comes close."



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(Like his not-on-time edict, Cowen also has rules about stories: He distrusts them, particularly ones like this profile. The writer is arranging facts to keep readers reading. "The more inspired the story makes me feel, very often the more nervous I get," he once said. He believes that nearly all stories follow seven templates: "monster, rags to riches, quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy and rebirth." Asked during a dinner of Ethiopian raw beef what form this story would likely take, Cowen said: "Man on a quest." He was early. The reporter was late.)

The man on a quest -- for information, for understanding, for dogma, to find out what he is if he's not autistic -- is frumpy and bearded. At GW, he was dressed, typically, in black Dockers, gray shirt, rumpled sport coat. His tone usually makes him sound as if he is excitedly lecturing young children. And no matter how distrustful he is of them, he uses stories to make points.

In the lecture hall, Cowen stood before the audience -- no mike, no lectern -- and told a story about a recent speech that bored him (all authors' talks annoy him). So he wanted to try something fresh: Instead of people standing up to ask questions and signal how smart they are, he directed his audience to write their questions and pass them forward. "Writing out the questions should improve the quality and precision," he said. There were giggles, but people did as they were told. The first question was tricky:

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*"Is existence preferable to nonexistence?"*

(Cowen, based on his reading of thousands of books, thinks stories trick readers because they are filtered: Writers "take a lot of information and they leave some of it out," he says. His answer to the existence question meandered across philosophy and the reasons one might commit suicide, but in this profile, that response will be filtered out and replaced with a simpler set of facts about Cowen's own existence. As Cowen noted about the media in a recent book, "The tendency is to fit all facts into the

format of a story, usually with a memorable protagonist, even when the reality is more complex.")

### Not a total nerd

Cowen is 48. He grew up in Hillsdale, N.J., an hour's drive from New York. His mother stayed home, and his father was president of the chamber of commerce. He has a younger brother (a cook) and an older sister (a grocery store manager). Holly Cowen recalls her brother acquiring vast quantities of information before he was 4. He read constantly, even at dinner, though not to the exclusion of playing sports. "He wasn't a total nerd," she says. "He was balanced."

Tyler Cowen recalls, "For a nerd, I was a good athlete." At 13, he began reading economics and philosophy books. "Both subjects at least pretended to be a way of making sense of the world," he says. He began to fashion his tenets about the world.

He is a libertarian and a fan of globalization: "A typical American yuppie drinks French wine, listens to Beethoven on a Japanese audio system, uses the Internet to buy Persian textiles from a dealer in London, watches Hollywood movies funded by foreign capital and filmed by European directors, and vacations in Bali; an upper-middle-class Japanese may do much the same."

He has systematic solutions for suburban problems, such as getting kids to do dishes: "If you tell your daughter she is obliged to do the dishes, that story will stick in her mind. She may not always heed her duty, but she will feel some need to cooperate. . . . When we pay our children, the tale changes. She says to herself, 'Doing the dishes is a job for money,' and she feels less obligation. The parent becomes a boss rather than an object of deserved loyalty."

The girl for whom love was a more powerful incentive than cash is Cowen's now-college-age stepdaughter, Yana. She grew up with Cowen and her mother in Fairfax, in a home decorated with Mexican and Haitian art. Cowen's wife, who was born in Moscow, is a Russian literature scholar turned Securities and Exchange Commission lawyer. They are a playful, funny couple, and more than slightly nerdy.

Yana calls Cowen four times a day.

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Behavioral economist Tyler Cowen eats dinner at Eyo restaurant in Falls Church. (Evy Mages - For The Washington Post)

This is one of Cowen's favorite rules, as it relates to consumption of information. "People should be more willing to walk out of movies," he tells anyone who will listen. "Most movies -- they grab you or they don't, and if they don't, just leave. Just go. You have already lost money. Why lose the time?"

If a movie doesn't hook Cowen, he reads a book outside while his wife remains in her seat. Most recent movie they both left: "Greenberg," starring Ben Stiller.

With books, Cowen is even more brutal. If a book is bad, he often throws it away, so it doesn't waste anyone's time. "What if the next book they were going to read is 'Moby-Dick'?" But if a book is good, he might give it away -- to libraries, friends or, if he's on a plane, total strangers (he leaves them in the seat-back pocket for the next passenger to discover). "He drives the flight attendants crazy," his wife says.

*Why is ethnic food better in the suburbs?*

Cowen's next book is on the economics of eating out. He has studied the subject diligently since he was a student in Germany and tired of sausage; he explored Berlin for other ethnic cuisines. Cowen differs from many other libertarians in his support for expanding immigration, and other economists half-joke that his position is tied to his desire for, say, pig's blood for lunch in the suburbs. Cowen does not totally dispute these assertions.

As a junior faculty member at the University of California at Irvine in the days before the Internet, Cowen kept a list of phone numbers of excellent ethnic restaurants so he wouldn't have to look them up in the Yellow Pages. Word got out in the economics department about the list, so he began photocopying it for colleagues. When the Internet became popular, he moved the list [here](#). When he moved to George Mason, he continued charting his eating adventures. "It's really not written for anybody else," he says. "It's written for me. It's my guide."

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Most restaurants in Cowen's encyclopedic guide are in the suburbs. Cowen tells the GW crowd that the problem with city restaurants is that most people are there not to eat but to socialize. In the suburbs, people are more interested in eating. "If you see people in a restaurant who are happy, don't go there," he says, adding with a grin, "You want people to be grim or screaming at each other." In other words, you want diners to be there for the food, not to signal their sophistication.

*What did you order at Thai X-ing?*

Cowen: "Salmon and red curry, drunken noodles, and chicken larb."

*How should we deal with autistic people in society?*

Cowen explained in his recent book, "[Creating Your Own Economy](#)," that his view has changed since Fasanella first asked him whether he might be autistic. "I have since become comfortable with my affiliation with autism, and indeed proud of it, but it's not a thought I was ready for at the time," Cowen wrote.

In the few years since he got Fasanella's e-mail, Cowen said, the world has transformed into an infinite ocean of information, overwhelming most of us -- but not autistics. "One strong feature of autism is the tendency of autistics to impose additional structure on information by the acts of arranging, organizing, classifying, collecting, memorizing, categorizing, and listing," he wrote. "Autistics are the true infovores, as I will call them."

Cowen may be not autistic but rather a new type of human who organizes today's avalanche of information into rules about how the world should work. The more information the infovore consumes, the more order he brings to his world.

Finally, questions from this reporter to the infovore: *Doesn't breaking down stories and information so finely ruin your ability to enjoy them? Don't your rules get in the way of life? Will you enjoy this story?*

Answer: "Sure. I can fall into the trap as quickly and as easy as anyone else. There's no alternative to stories. You can be self-aware about stories, but I don't think there's any way out, so you might as well enjoy them if you are spending the time reading them."

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