

Subject: Cookies and information economics (fwd)

Any bakers out there?

----- Forwarded message -----

Begin forwarded message:

Originator: femecon-l@bucknell.edu

From: Susan Dobscha <DOBSCHA@VTVM1.CC.VT.EDU>

-----Original message-----

This has nothing to do with women being better cookie bakers, I just thought we could help get even with at least one "institution"! Have fun!

Susan Dobscha

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My daughter & I had just finished a salad at Neiman-Marcus Cafe in Dallas & decided to have a small dessert. Because our family are such cookie lovers, we decided to try the "Neiman-Marcus Cookie". It was so excellent that I asked if they would give me the recipe and they said with a small frown, "I'm afraid not. "Well, I said, would you let me buy the recipe? With a cute smile, she said, "Yes." I asked how much, and she responded, "Two fifty." I said with approval, just add it to my tab.

Thirty days later, I received my VISA statement from Neiman-Marcus and it was \$285.00. I looked again and I remembered I had only spent \$9.95 for two salads and about \$20.00 for a scarf. As I glanced at the bottom of the statement, it said, "Cookie Recipe - \$250.00." Boy, was I upset!! I called Neiman's Accounting Dept. and told them the waitress said it was "two fifty," and I did not realize she meant \$250.00 for a cookie recipe. I asked them to take back the recipe and reduce my bill and they said they were sorry, but because all the recipes were this expensive so not just everyone could duplicate any of our bakery recipes....the bill would stand. I waited, thinking of how I could get even or even try and get any of my money back.

I just said, "Okay, you folks got my \$250.00 and now I'm going to have \$250.00 worth of fun." I told her that I was going to see to it that every cookie lover will have a \$250.00 cookie recipe from Neiman-Marcus for nothing. She replied, "I wish you wouldn't do this." I said, "I'm sorry but this is the only way I feel I could get even," and I will.

So, here it is, and please pass it to someone else or run a few copies....I paid for it; now you can have it for free. (Recipe may be halved.):

2 cups butter	4 cups flower
2 tsp. soda	2 cups sugar
5 cups blended oatmeal*	24 oz. chocolate chips
2 cups brown sugar	1 tsp. salt
1 8 oz. Hershey Bar (grated)	4 eggs
2 tsp. baking powder	3 cups chopped nuts (your choice)
2 tsp. vanilla	

Cream the butter and both sugars. Add eggs and vanilla; mix together with flour, oatmeal, salt, baking powder, and soda. Add chocolate chips, Hershey Bar and nuts. Roll into balls and place two inches apart on a cookie sheet.

Bake for 10 minutes at 375 degrees. Makes 112 cookies.

\*measure oatmeal and blend in a blender to a fine powder.

Have fun!!! This is not a joke --- this is a true story..

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That's it. Please, pass it along to everyone you know, single people, mailing lists, etc.....

From mcafee@undo.eco.utexas.edu Fri Apr 15 00:35:39 1994  
Date: Wed, 23 Mar 1994 08:59:02 -0600 (CST)  
From: R Preston McAfee <mcafee@undo.eco.utexas.edu>  
To: Joke Recipients

Subject: Half-baked cookies

## THE COOKIE CAPER

by R. Preston McAfee

Acting on information provided by alert recipient Michael Williams, this reporter phoned Neiman-Marcus in Dallas, which claims to have never sold a cookie recipe, much less sold a recipe for \$250.00.

The tale is as sleazy as expert testimony. Dobscha's story is as accurate as Arthur Laffer's vita. The story of how this fraud was brought to light, by a reporter as unbiased as a Tobacco Institute study and as serious as the Western Economic Association, is a fascinating drama, signifying as much as an advertisement for a new edition of a principles text.

Williams, hoping to get to try a \$250 cookie, brought the recipe home to his wife, Sheila. Sheila said that the \$250 Neiman-Marcus cookie recipe is an urban myth, like the alligators in the New York sewers, cats dried in the microwave, and good microeconomics papers in the *JPE*.

Williams, knowing that my interest in empirical research is as profound as an Economics Letters paper, promptly phoned me. I called information and received the number of the downtown Dallas Neiman-Marcus store, which is (214) 741-6911. I called N-M. This is what I heard [I'm not making this up]:

This is Francie. I'll be out of the office until March 28, so please leave a message on my voice mail. Thank you.

Francie spoke in a drawl as thick as an experimental economist's manuscript, but much more comprehensible.

I contacted Southwestern Bell's Dallas operator, who verified that I had the main number for the downtown Neiman-Marcus. I called again, to insure that I hadn't misdialed, and got Francie again. I didn't leave a message. The number was as phony as a trade theory proof.

I again called Southwestern Bell, and established that N-M has a store in a Dallas suburb named Prestonwood. This sounded as promising as a *REStud* revise and resubmit, but I called them anyway.

Surprisingly, the phone was answered by an operator saying "Neiman-Marcus," in a voice so husky, it could have pulled a dogsled. I could tell my luck had turned. I explained the situation. "I've heard about that," the operator barked, "but I don't think we sell recipes. Let me transfer you to Epicure." She put me on hold for a while. Godot arrived, got bored, and left again. The Roman Empire was built, then fell. I received a response from the *QJE*.

The name Epicure was as obscure to me as a Prescott seminar. But I spoke with a pleasant woman, one Amy Lerks, who assured me that Neiman-Marcus was as likely to sell cookie recipes as *J Math Ec* is to publish intuitive ideas. "We do sell cookbooks, is that what you're after?" she inquired. I asked what the most expensive cookbook they sell costs. "About \$45," she informed me, "but it's of coffee-table quality."

I had no idea they made cookbooks that large. At \$45, it's a steal, but kind of unwieldy in the kitchen.

Amy promised to check with the suppliers to find out if N-M has ever sold recipes, and to call me Wednesday.

Meanwhile, I re-examined the original email. The originator of the story, a Susan Dobscha, had no identified address. However, it appeared that her message came from Bucknell University, which turns out to be in Lewisburg, PA, area code 717. A call to the phone company revealed that no Susan Dobscha lives within a Burke neighborhood of Lewisburg.

[editor's note: a Burke neighborhood is named after a now infamous incident in which UT Professor Jon Burke was invited to a conference in Spain. He combined the trip with a vacation for his family, so arrived in Spain with his wife and three children, only to find out he had arrived on the correct day one year early. Ever since, a Burke neighborhood has represented an area larger than Sandy Grossman's ego.]

I sent Susan Dobscha an email, asking her to fax a copy of her credit card receipt, and insinuating that I was Mike Wallace from 60 minutes. I was as convincing as a psychological explanation.

Meanwhile, I logged into the Michigan gopher, hoping to track down the email address vtvm1.cc.vt.edu, where Susan Dobscha allegedly resided. The gopher system is as simple as an *IER* paper. After several hours, I decided the gopher was as useful as an existence theorem.

Meanwhile, emails to a colleague and to Hal Varian, the person who sent me the Dobscha recipe, produced the result that vt was Virginia Tech. This makes as much sense as the statistics in a medical study. Since the name of the university is Virginia Polytechnical Institute and State University and Exceedingly Boring Place to Reside, one might have hoped for a more sensible appellation like VPI, but that's like expecting lawyers to write in english.

It turns out that email addresses are available from the gopher for VPI, so I asked for a listing on Dobscha. The list came up as empty as a MBA's head.

Feeling that I'd accomplished as much as a federal bureaucrat, I called it a night.

I woke up as optimistic as an entering graduate student. The phone company had numbers for a Susan M. Dobscha in Blacksburg and for the economics department at VPI. My call to the econ department was as useful as a referee's report: no Susan Dobscha was in the department.

However, a Susan Dobscha is a graduate student in the marketing department. Hmm. As they say at Caltech, the Plott thickens. I left a message.

Soon after, I received an email from Dobscha. "I was not the originator of the by a long shot" this missive asserted, as free of errors as a *JET* galley, "and since I mailed it out have found out that this scenario is exactly as you said - contemporary urban legend. So, no need to worry - I wasn't duped."

Dobscha may not have been duped, but what about the millions of internet users, baking away? Displaying all the morals of an attorney, Dobscha felt no obligation to correct the error she propagated, which shows that a marketing education has some effect. She has a promising future as a spokeswoman for Philip Morris.

So the recipe, alas, joins the ranks of the spider eggs in BubbleYum, the worms in McDonald's hamburgers, and the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* as one of the greatest frauds perpetrated on an unsuspecting audience.