



GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

The rise, fall, and recovery
of America's favorite
cartoon primate *

Michael Fritsche

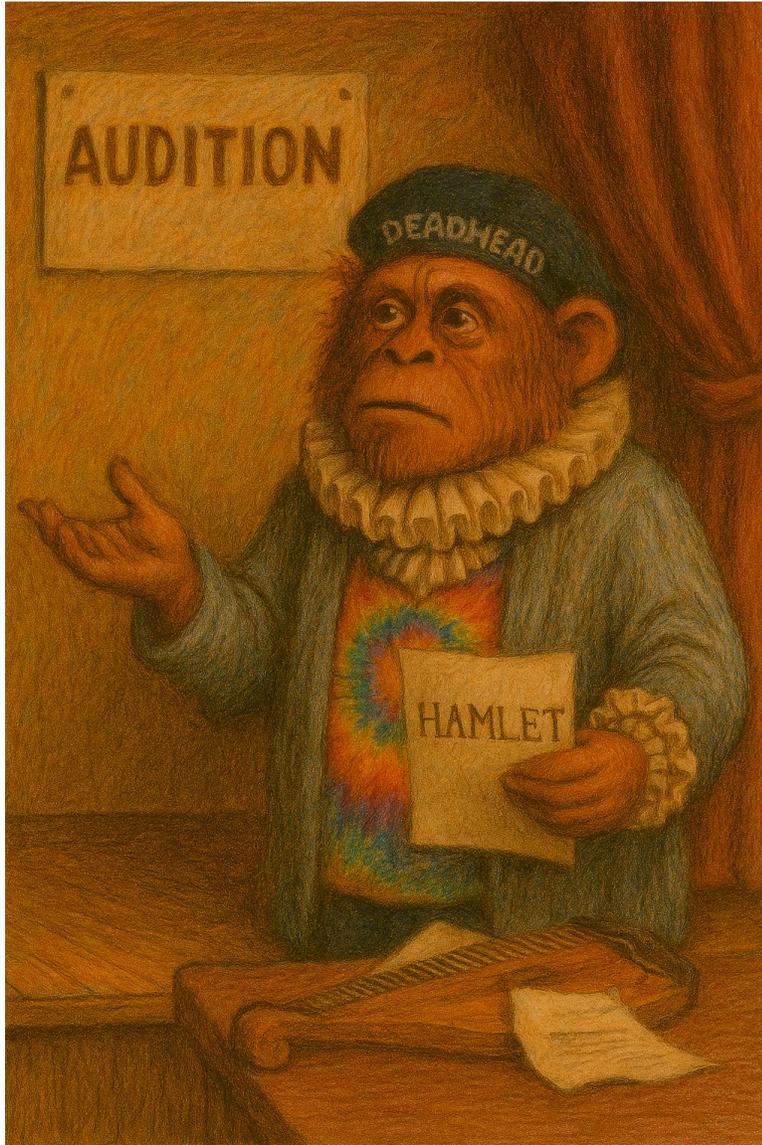
** With apologies to the estate of Magilla Gorilla*

The Grape Ape got his big break in TV, scoring the lead in a cartoon series with Hanna-Barbara after being discovered at a Hootenanny in Reseda in the early 70s. No role could have been more suited to his size and his acting prowess than the Great Grape Ape Show. Those were good days, as Grape was a perfect fit for the character, even adding his own dialog to accentuate drama and heighten tension ("Grape Ape, Grape Ape!").

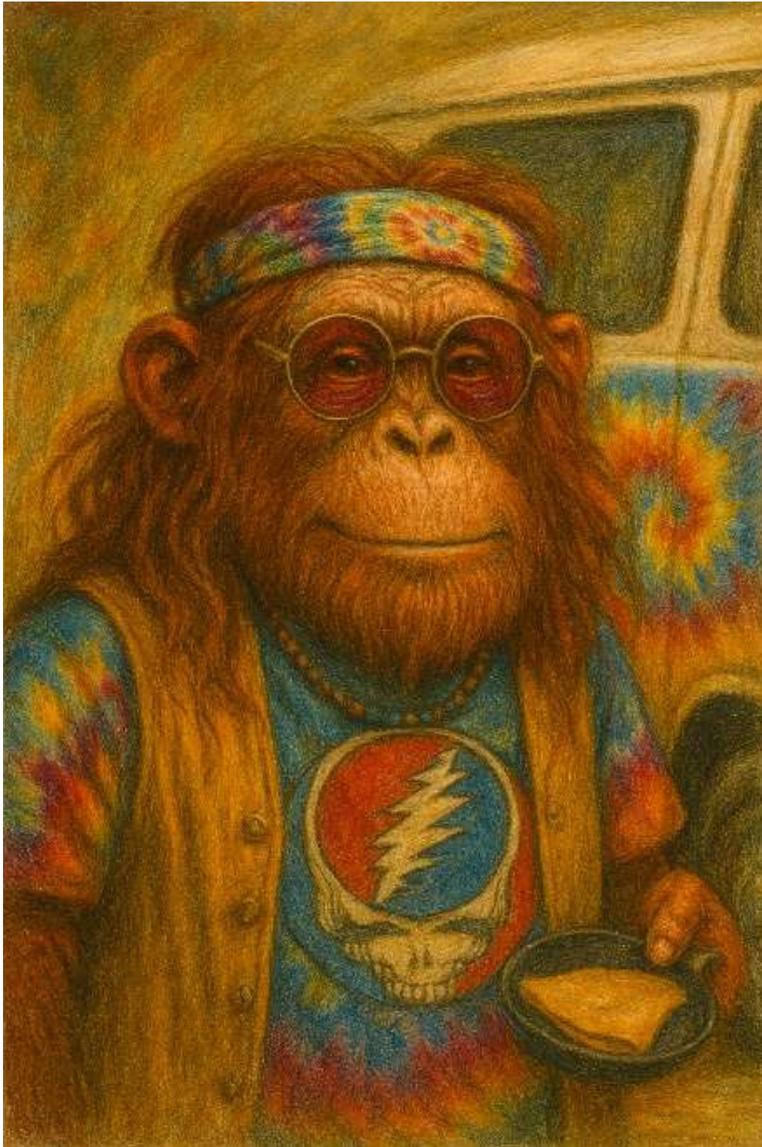


But, like most things, success was fleeting, and the show was cancelled in Dec 1975.

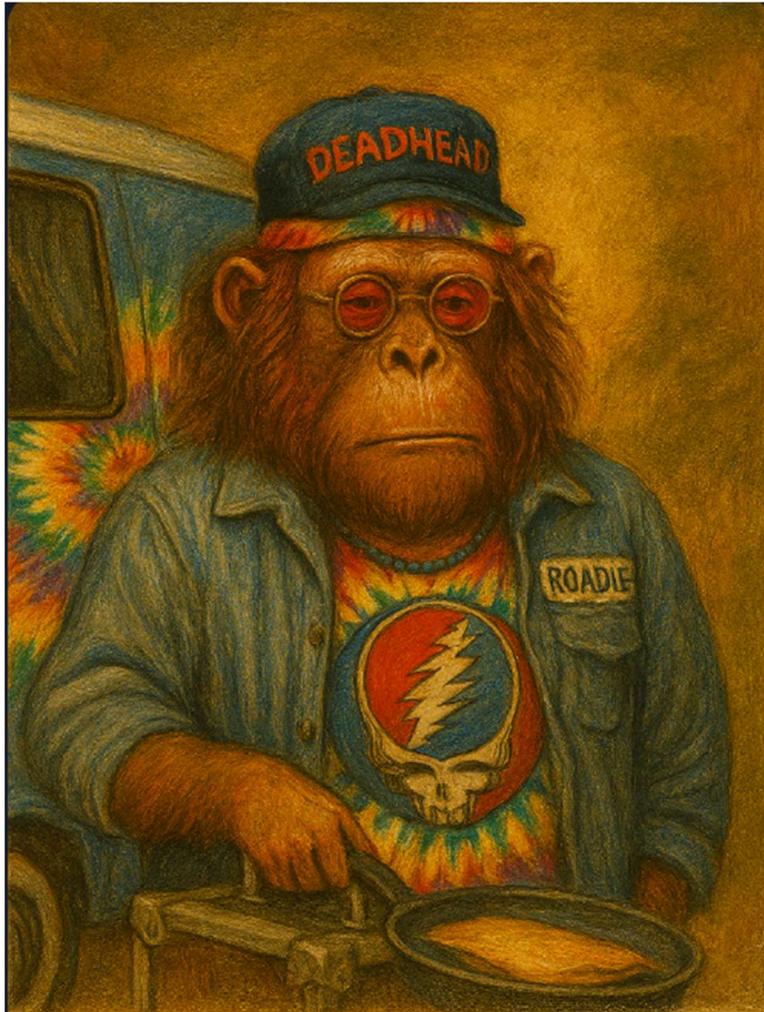
Suddenly finding himself with a lot of spare time, Grape auditioned for other roles in movies and TV and even on stage. He contemplated a move to New York or London for the theater scene but was finally talked out of it by his girlfriend at the time, Pebbles Flintstone, who was having career issues of her own.



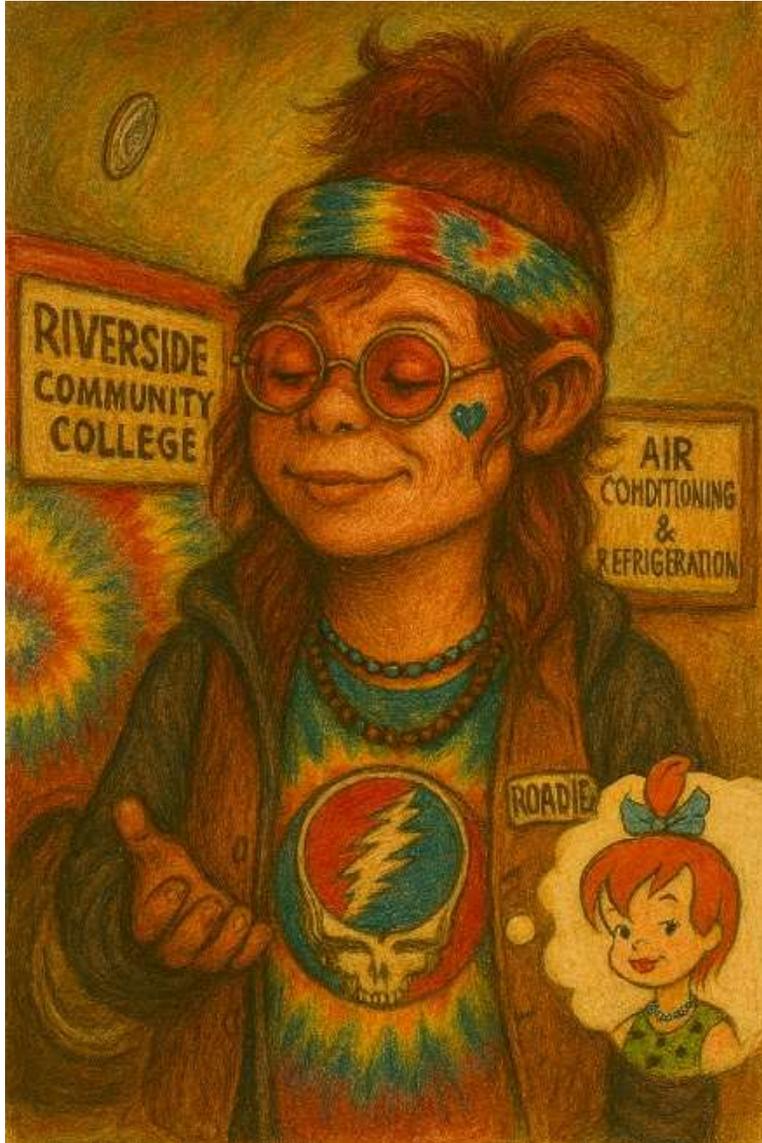
For a while, Grape was a Deadhead and followed the band from city to city as they toured the US. He even became a roadie for one of the many Dead tribute bands (think "Phish", but without the following, the talent, or the success), but in the end, he was at a crossroads.



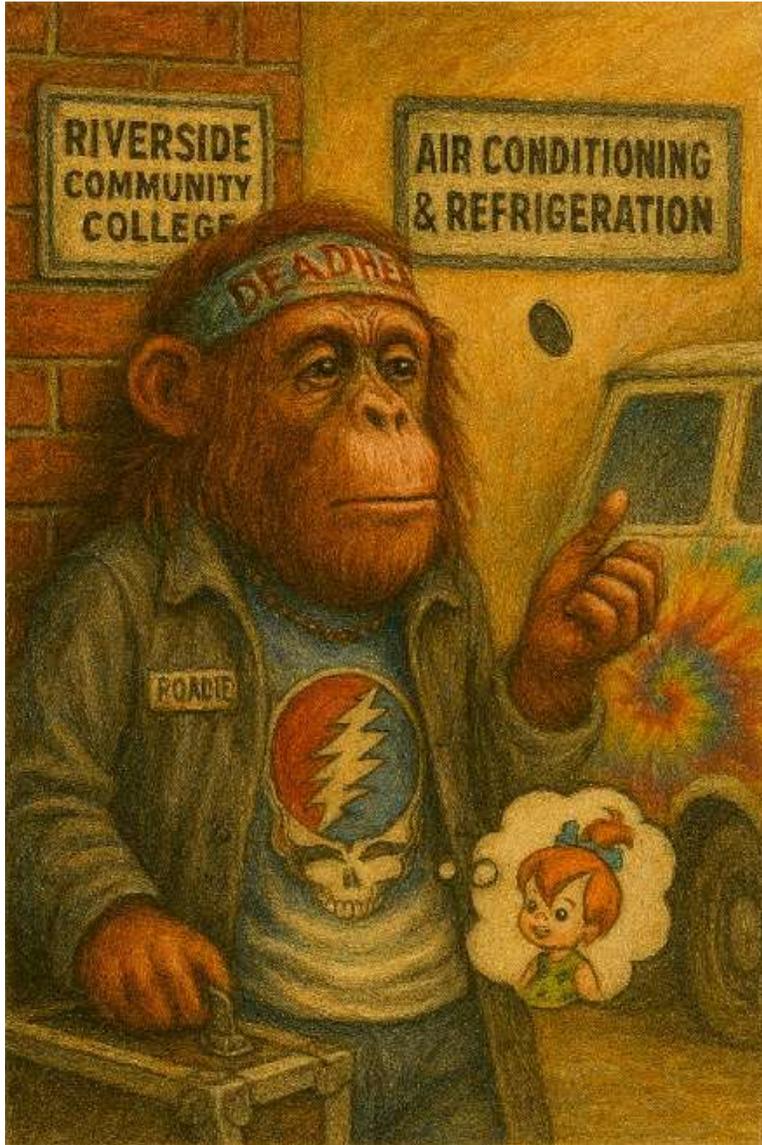
It was during one of the many soul-crushing bus rides through one of the flyover states that caused Grape to consider another road in life. He remembered his time with his now-ex Pebbles and the time she spent talking about her years at Riverside Community College and how one day she would return to finish her associate's degree in Theater Arts.



Driven by his nostalgic love for the Pebbles he once knew and thinking this might be a new direction, he got the next bus out of Waterloo IA for San Bernardino with connecting service to Riverside to pursue his next chapter.

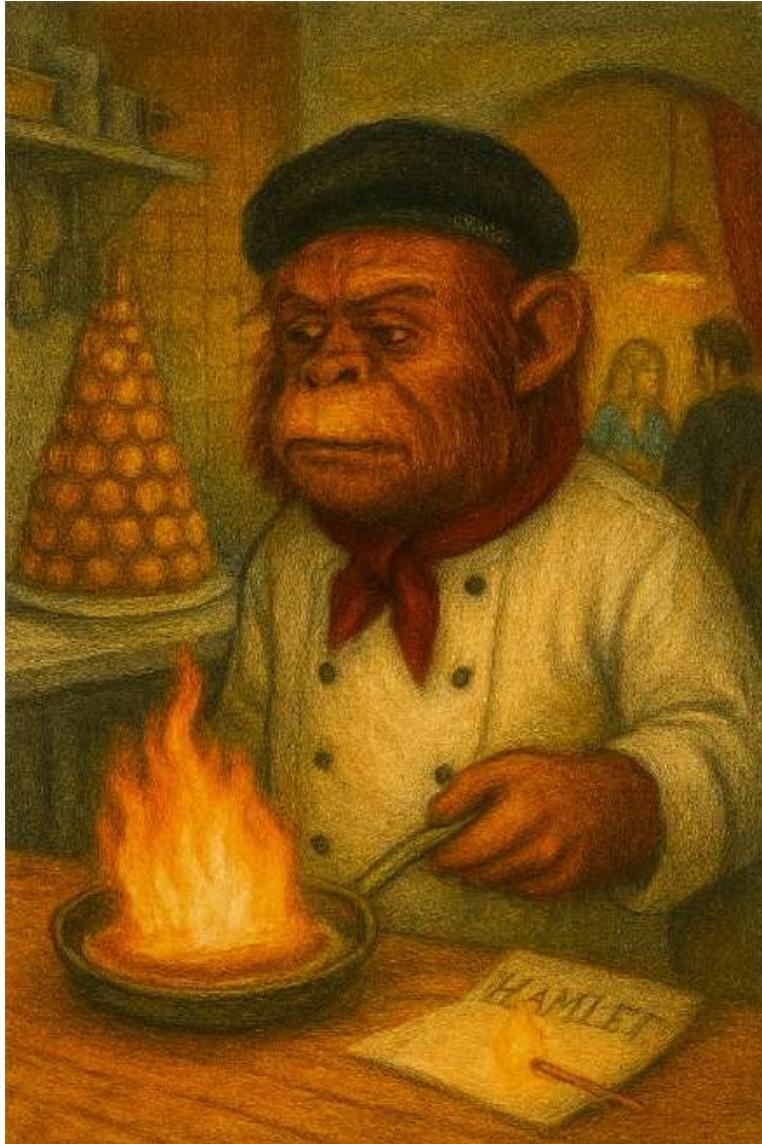


When he got to RCC, the Theater Arts curriculum was full and, considering the commitment he had already made, he was determined to choose another way forward. With Air Conditioning and Refrigeration running a close second, his dream of culinary school was finally made by the simple toss of a coin.

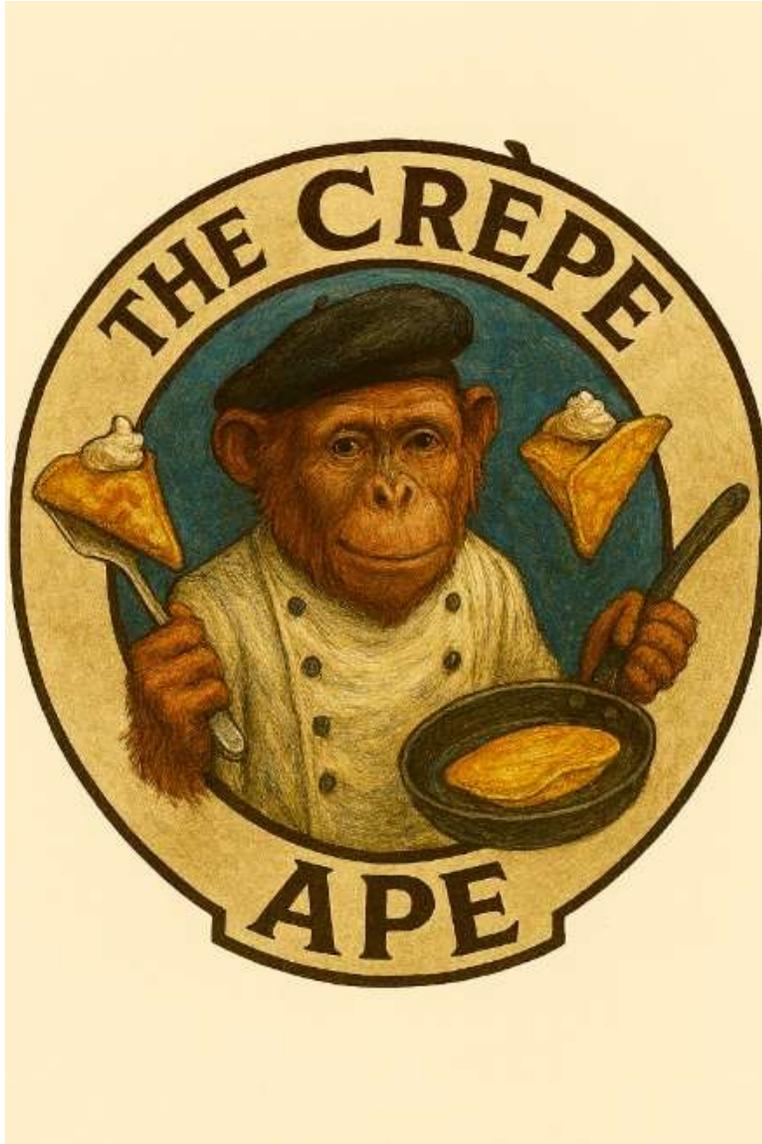


He never looked back, and following his arduous studies at RCC, he started his life as a chef's assistant.

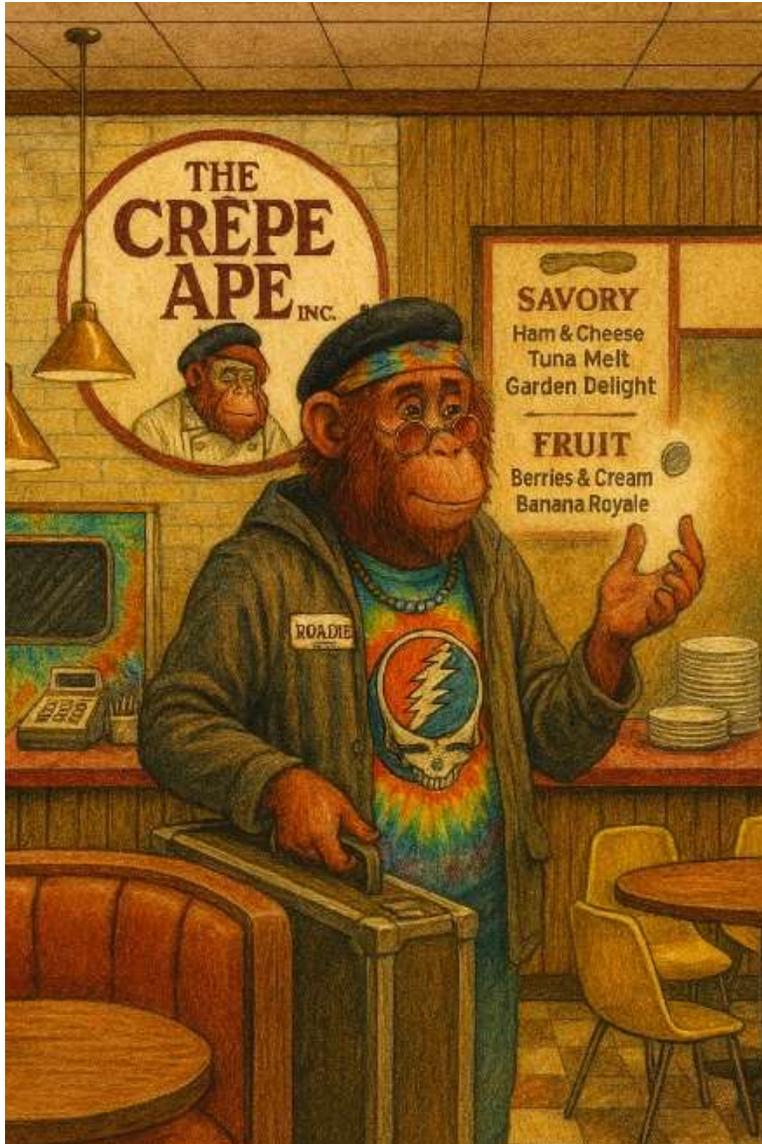
After many years of bouncing around the culinary landscape of southern California, he began to carve a niche for himself in desserts. Specifically, he began to specialize in crepes, a dish he perfected and grew to love or at least tolerate during the lean years at RCC due to its low-cost ingredients. After making a name for himself (sadly, it was still "Grape Ape", but you know what I mean), he began to consider the prospect of opening his own restaurant, one that catered to his specialty, crepes.



By then, it was the 80s and money and cocaine were plentiful, so a business pitch for a crepe restaurant in the crowded LA culinary scene to be entirely owned and operated by a Great Ape sounded like a solid plan. He gathered investors and by early 1983 had opened his first creperie. Because of his work in the theater and his facility with language, he landed on the name "The Crepe Ape", as a clever play on words and a backhanded attempt to monetize whatever residual value there was in the "Grape Ape" franchise.

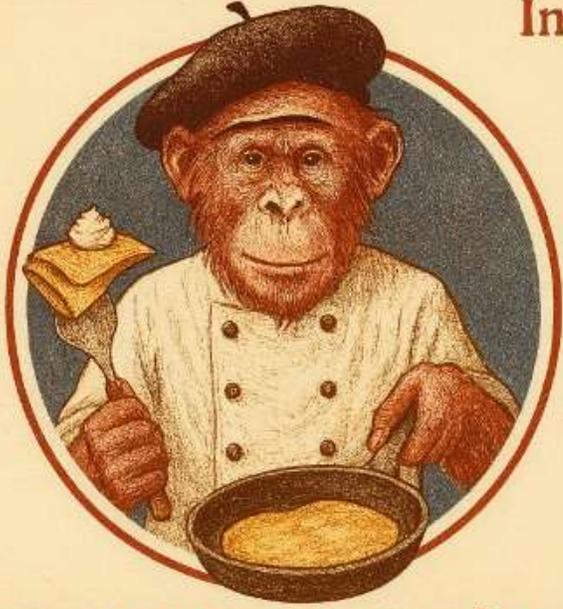


Here is proud Grape with the lucky coin that chose his path in his first restaurant, 8401 Santa Monica Blvd in West Hollywood. These were heady times.



The 90s saw an explosion of the Crepe Ape name, and soon Grape began franchising as fast as he legally could.

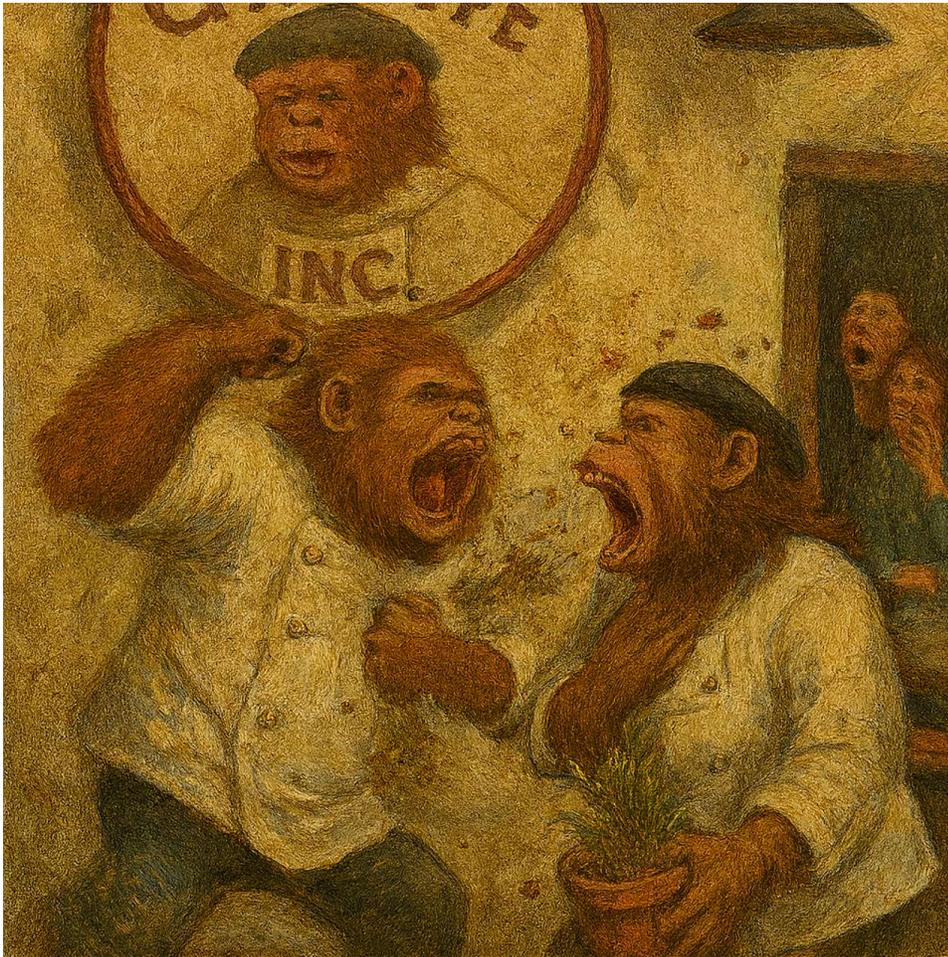
The
CRÊPE APE
Inc.



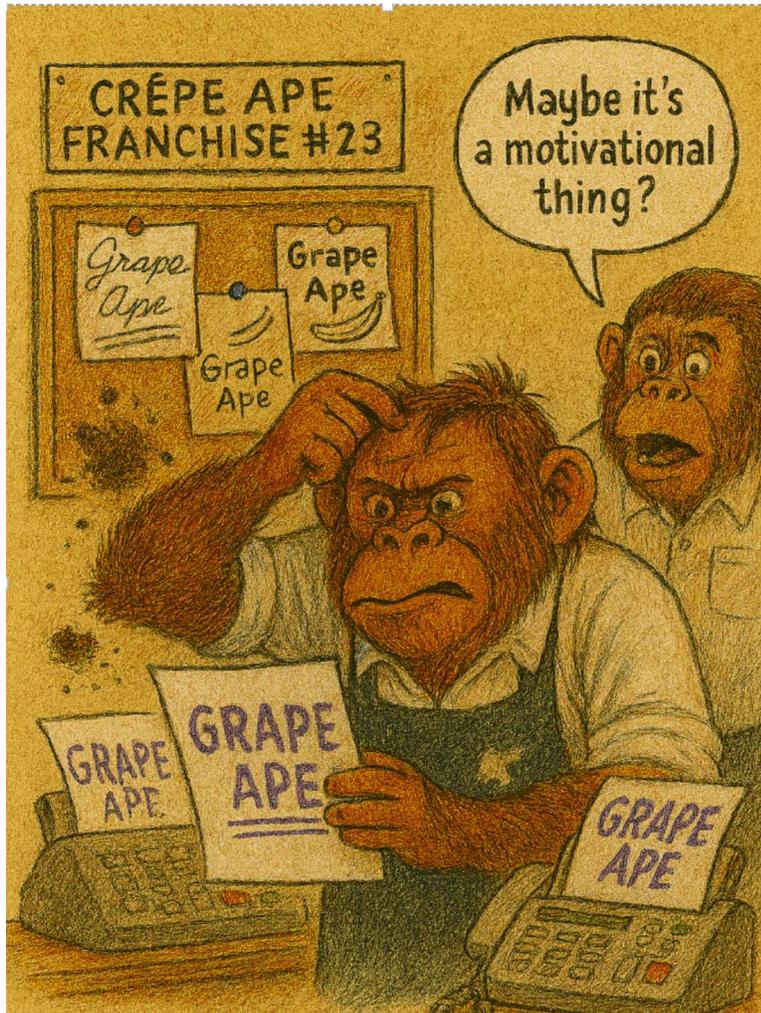
FRANCHISE '76!

**BRINGING EUROPEAN CHARM
TO SHOPPING MALLS ACROSS AMERICA.**

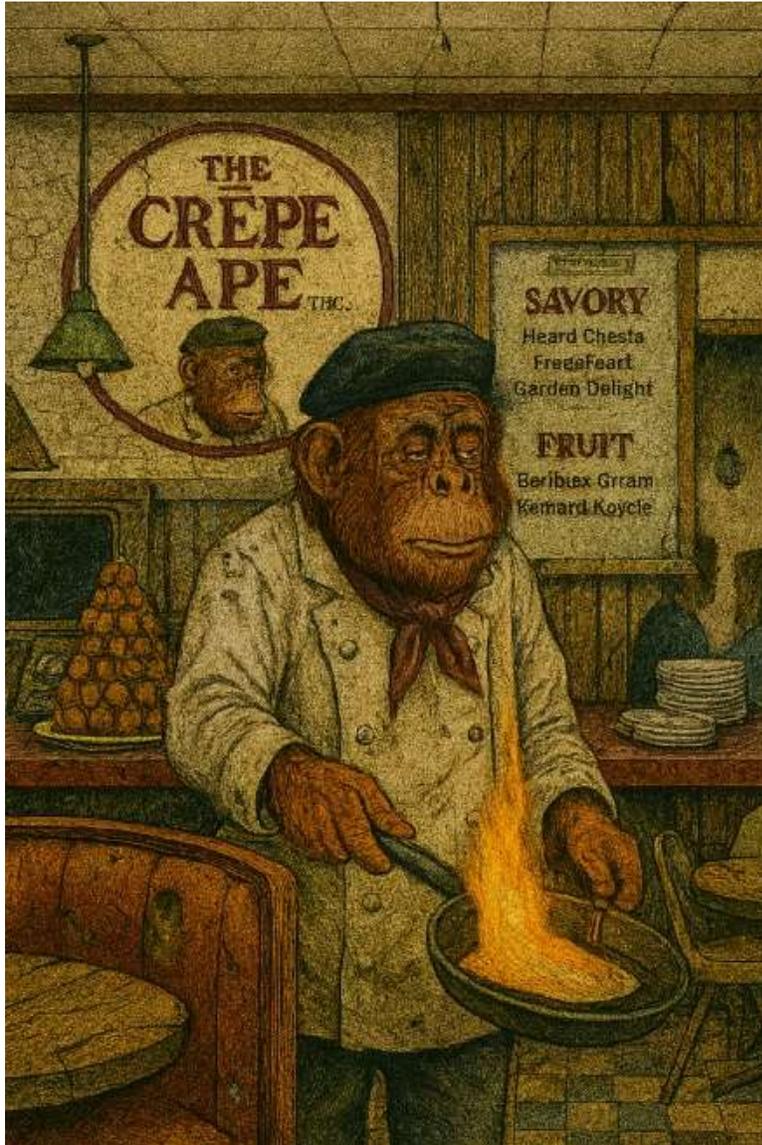
But, like many things that seemed like good ideas in the 80s, the Crepe Ape suffered under the greater scrutiny of the late 90s. In addition, cracks were beginning to show in the CA franchise, like the banana-forward menu, the difficulty in finding staff who would consider working for a primate (a top-shelf primate, but a primate nonetheless), and the gradual de-prioritization of health and safety, as in-house disagreements were frequently resolved with vocalizing, chest-pounding, and sand-throwing, which a growing number of patrons found off-putting.



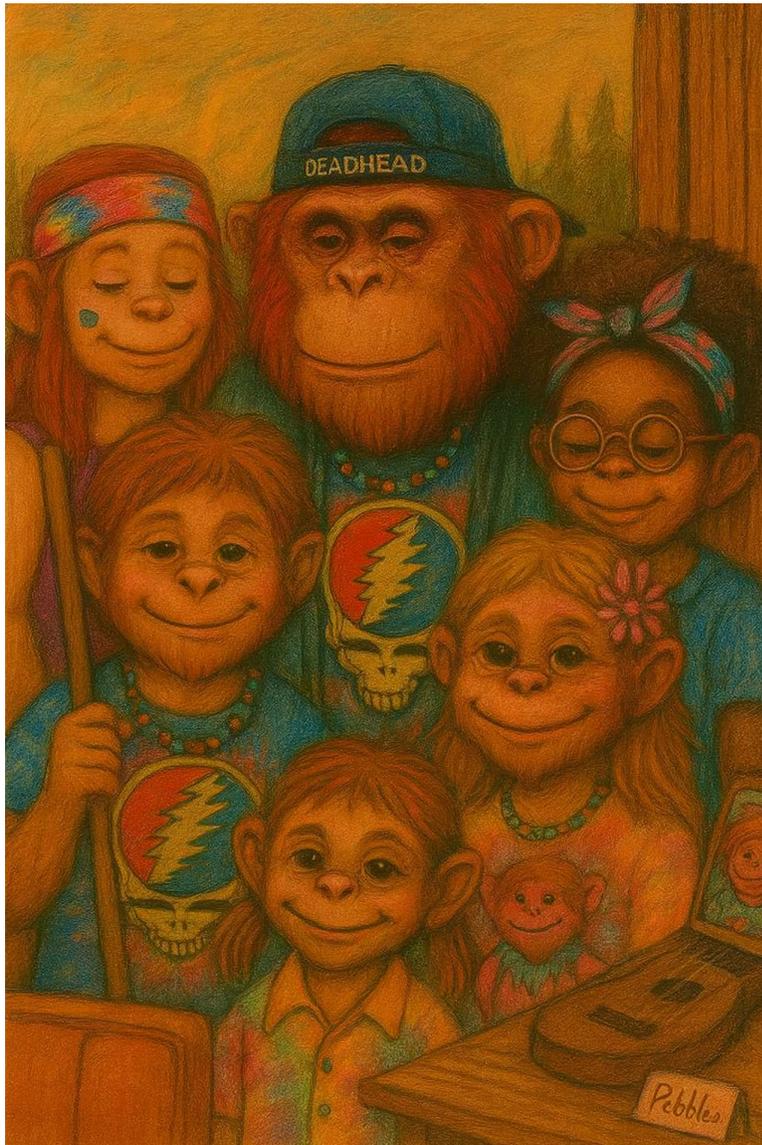
Also, as the franchise grew, Grape started to take a more active role in company communications which, while undertaken with the best intentions and done with sincerity and enthusiasm, tended to focus on common messaging ("Grape Ape, Grape Ape!"), leading to a number of unfortunate consequences as missives were routinely misunderstood.



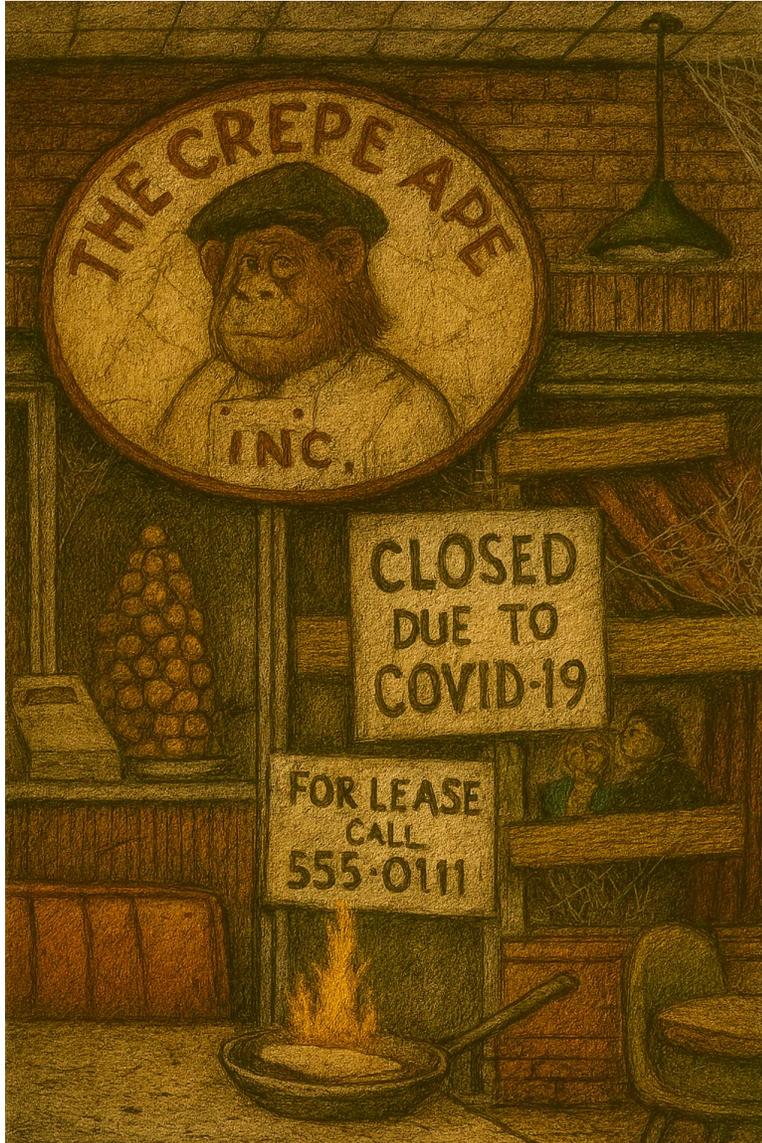
As a result, franchisees were leaving in droves, selling their businesses to investment groups with little or no interest in making the Crepe Ape a going concern. Quality began to slip and the luster of the Crepe Ape franchise began to wane. Grape himself began his search for the exit.



By the middle 2000s, he had passed on his stake to his children, whose nameless Deadhead mothers were scattered across the country. With the investment potential of the franchise declining and the new investor groups general disinclination for running a restaurant, Grape managed to get out just in time, wringing one last bit of capital from his declining empire.



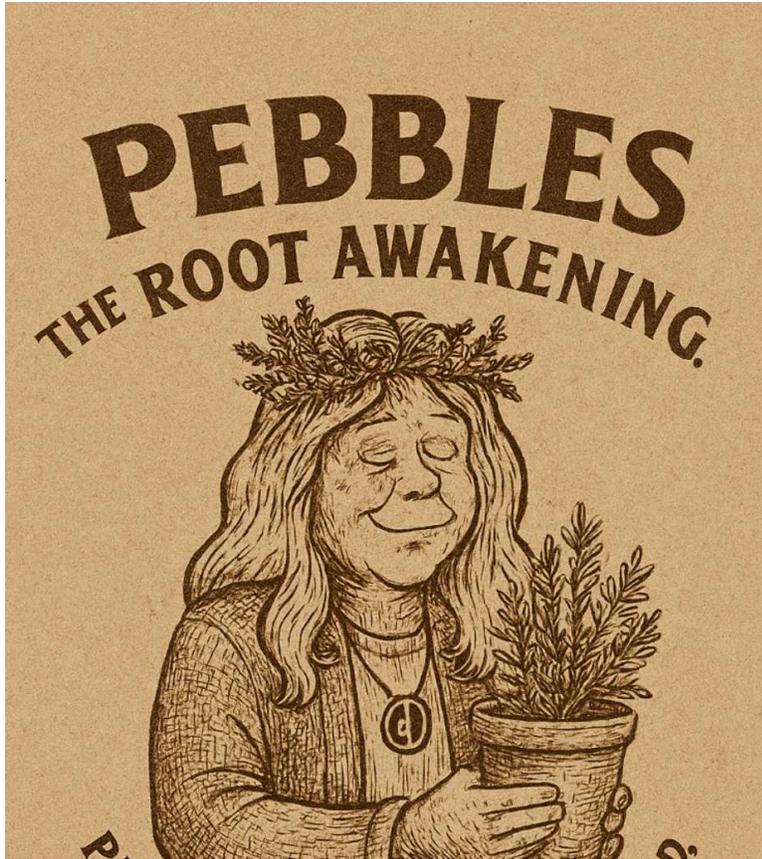
A sad epilogue to this story is the fate of the franchise. After years of declining sales and profits, COVID-19 drove the final nail into the coffin, and by 2022, the Crepe Ape was no more.



Today, Grape lives in semi-seclusion in the Santa Cruz mountains in a log cabin lined with aluminum foil ("... shhh ... the Government...") and learning to play the zither.



He still keeps in contact with Pebbles, who is a mobile herbalist ("Pebbles: The Root Awakening – Planting Peace, One Backyard at a Time").



And when he's not appearing at memorabilia events to sign autographs, he enjoys collecting sticks and awkwardly grooming unsuspecting strangers.

