

# Voices in the Kitchen: Making the Human Connection Through Food

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I wasn't always so concerned with or enraptured by food. In fact, I distinctly remember taking a bowl of one of my mother's dishes, a frightening concoction of rice and cheese that would make even the dog think twice before consuming it—Though I actually remember liking it, I gave in to the peer pressure of my brothers and loathed it—and flushing it down the toilet. Perhaps that was some form of 6-year-old protest. I'll probably never know.

This wasn't particularly surprising, seeing as how my mother, regardless of her best efforts and good intentions, had a tendency to churn out near-abominable meals. One particularly devastating failure, that, to my regret as an adult, nobody in my family ever let her forget, was a meatball and rice dish swimming in some red sauce. Who knew that it was possible to overcook meatballs and undercook rice while simultaneously thinning a tomato sauce to the point of watered-down V8 juice. But then again, after working, raising three children, and putting up with my father, it's amazing she was able feed us a hot meal at all.

That isn't to say that she had no talent in the kitchen, just that she was limited in what she could execute successfully. Indeed when she made a casserole, or any dish that appeared to be casserole-like, it was usually fantastic, bursting with flavors that would make even the fussiest chef need to re-evaluate the gastronomic quality of this generally looked-down-upon melange. Notable here is what she called enchilada pie; layers of flour tortillas, ground beef, enchilada sauce (usually red), cheese and olives, were cooked to a pie-like consistency; not too chewy, not too crunchy; not too salty, not too greasy. Fantastic, and easy, though somehow I never put in the effort to make it myself. I suppose there's a fussy part of me as well that thinks somehow that casseroles are culinarily inferior; something down inside that says, "If you're going to take the time to cook, it might as well be something more presentable than *that*."

So as not to deny my mother credit where it is due, her tuna casserole was by far my favorite, a dish that I've since remade countless times and one that is always pleasing. Again, this dish was nothing of five-star credentials, but I'd take a heaping bowl of it doused, as I like it, in Tony Chachere's Original Creole Seasoning (imitations are not acceptable) over some highfalutin, \$50-a-plate entrée (proceeds going directly to the ambiance of the owner's apartment) any day. And her chili was the work of the gods, though certainly there is much room for argument there. Chili is, after all, like meatloaf: if you mother made it, she did it

better than anyone else. (Oh, by the way, my mother's meatloaf really *is* the best.)

My father, on the other hand, was actually a very good cook, when you could get him in the kitchen. I distinctly remember two specialties. The first was his red beans and rice, made with spicy sausage and mixed with a sauce of near-paste thickness that added no moisture but coated each fluffy little grain with an intense, creole flavor. I've since then begged him for a recipe, or at the very least a guideline, so that I might possibly recreate the flavor and, perhaps more important, the aroma. It wouldn't take long for my tiny New York apartment to drown in that wonderful spicy sausage scent (Glade should really make it into a candle), and soon after my neighbors would be knocking down the door trying to either eat it up or make it stop. It'll be a good day when I leave my house with every article of clothing smelling strongly of a smoky, salty Cajun kitchen.

Unfortunately, my dad isn't a recipe kind of cook; he relies entirely on the acuteness of nose and tongue. The next time I go for a visit, I plan on prodding him until I get at least a morsel of his methods, something at least to get me started. In the end, it'll be a good way for me to make sure his legacy lives on.

And the other dish, which has now achieved a legendary status to at least everyone I'm in contact with during the season, is corned beef and cabbage. While I've never actually gotten anything resembling a recipe for this one either, I have developed a stand-in version of my own. The tribute, in this case, is more in theory than in practice.

The recipe came from an old boss at a local butcher shop in Littleton, Colorado, called Tony's. Even though I, like my father before me, only make it once a year (yes, the same time as everyone else, St. Patrick's Day), I look forward to it for months, incessantly telling everyone within earshot of me of how I'm going to do it, what I'm going to do differently, how much I'm going to make; saying things like, "Man I wish I had time to brine my own brisket" and "Hey, do you want me to bring you a little 'cause I'll never be able to eat all that?"

This is an odd combination of dishes, I know, especially when you consider that my father was only slightly creole at best and as far as I know not Irish at all. Of course, by those guidelines my mother would be related to Betty Crocker or the Hamburger Helper character.

I suppose I wasn't that different than most children, eating what I liked without giving it much thought, and raising hell when I went face to face with my arch-nemesis, onions. It seems more that I was never prompted to think of food as anything more than sustenance, and my parents had neither the time nor inclination to push me in that direction. In contrast, though, we did have a proposed time for at-the-table family dinner when I was young, a time that I believe contributed largely to the creation of my idea of manners both at and away from the table.

Everything is different now. The axis of my food world has shifted in a way that I could never have seen coming. I was literally swept off my feet. It all started with my now ex-partner, Mo.

It may be true that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. If so, I was an easy target for Mo, who had an already well developed passion for good,

simple food – not so much of the culinary arts fashion, but the kind of food that’s pleasing to the soul simply because it tastes, smells, and looks good; it was the kind of food you feed your children, and that makes their friends want to come over repeatedly for dinner.

The first time I met him, he sent me home with a goodie-bag of frozen entrees that he prepared the night before. These two unassuming dishes, enchiladas and stuffed bell peppers, changed my life.

Sound a little overly dramatic? Perhaps, but no single event has been more instrumental in shaping who I am today. Before then, I never knew that eating could be a spiritual experience, one in which the act is as satisfying to your soul as it is to your stomach.

Mo’s enchiladas were a hand-me-down recipe from his mother, Betty Jean. We took a stew of meat, chiles, onions, garlic, and cumin, and simmered until it was so thick a spoon could disappear into the pot. Then we gently fried corn tortillas in a shallow dish of oil just to soften them a bit before piling the mixture on one, topping it with cheese, onions, and another tortilla, followed by more cheese and onions. A quick sauna in a hot oven, to melt and brown the cheese, ensued while we prepared the final accoutrement, a fried egg complete with runny yoke draped over the top like a handmade quilt. To say the combination was divine would be a gross understatement. To say it was healthy would be a lie.

Aside from the incredible flavor, the experience is what hit me in the gut. I realized that food involved *preparation*, the act of actually putting it together, and when I contributed to the final product, it tasted all that much better. It wasn’t long before we began shopping for food and entire worlds of possibilities became apparent.

It was at that point I knew I’d fallen in love. Still to this day, the thought of trying a new dish or exploring a new culture through their food systems is enough to keep me awake at night with anxious excitement. It was as if someone had opened the door to the universe, and a limitless buffet sat before me, one that encompassed history, culture, innovation, inspiration, expression, emotion, and, most important, people.

Little did I know at that point that my father was actually quite the gastronomist. My mother and I had little difficulty, if any, in bonding. We were best friends, and we never needed anything to buffer our relationship. My father and I, however, were quite different, and escaping his grasp had long been one of my childhood goals. In retrospect, I know it was wrong to run from him. I never gave him a chance to get to know me, and I never attempted to get to know him. He was simply the voice of authority, something children often want to disobey.

But now the stage had been set for a proper reunion. After experiencing the joy of cooking firsthand, I had begun a new career as a food enthusiast. I got a job, much to my amazement and exuberance, at a local specialty foods store in Colorado. I was in the produce department, and I loved every minute of it. There is a certain atmosphere that food establishments foster that is just not found in other work settings. And I got to eat fresh vegetables all day long.

It wasn't long before I became enraptured with the meat department, fascinated with the process of going from whole cow or pig to that delicious looking steak on my plate. It sounds a bit cliché now, but before I'd ever heard the phrase, I wanted to know how my meat went from farm to table. So I worked my way that direction, starting out low and eventually ending up as an apprentice butcher. At this point I've had just about every kind of meat-related experience I can think of, but to be sure, just when I think I've seen it all, someone comes along and surprises me.

One Christmas, I decided I wanted to get my father something special. Food was my passion, and as I had learned through the much more open communication that comes with age, it was his as well. My plan was simple: I would pack a few good steaks and a whole lamb rib section in my car and drive it up to Wyoming where he lived, delivering the steak as a gift and cooking the lamb while I stayed there.

I still remember that windy, chilly afternoon in Wyoming. After slathering a light garlic and chive yogurt sauce on the meat, I cooked it on a smoker outside that could have doubled as a grill. It was no easy task, considering that the most important variable, the temperature, was in constant danger of wild fluctuation. Remarkably, the lamb came out magnificently. (I generally think of the lamb as having done the *real* work.) It was the first time I'd taken care to actually prepare, produce, and serve a main course in my entire life, and my father's joy was unrestrained. To counter, he roasted a butternut squash with pecans and brown sugar. My father, his new wife, and I ate the meal amidst the holiday calm at the very table we sat around when I was a child.

We bonded, and for a moment it was as if all previous tensions had disappeared. I can still count the number of heart-to-heart moments I've had with that man on one hand, and still have fingers to spare, but this was undoubtedly the most enjoyable for both of us. Food had repaired an otherwise worn out and tired family relationship.

Since the time food captured my attention, I have relied on it to express sentiments for which I can often not find words, as in the case with my father. And I happily use it today as a beacon to guide me through challenging or dark times. It is the one area that has never let me down, never led me astray, never turned me away.

Just the other day, I was exhausted and a bit overwhelmed. I walked an extra few blocks just to pick up a burrito at my favorite spot on 45<sup>th</sup> Street, but it was closed. Wandering around aimlessly, I saw little else worth noting. Chipotle was there (in fact, I'd passed three on my way home), but I find their overly uniform flavors and foods to be disconcerting, and I'd much rather have my money support a local business. Then I remembered a small Hispanic chicken and rib place just down the street from my apartment. I'd always wanted to try it, but had yet to do so; it was the kind of place that could be passed without so much as a second glance. I decided it was time, and thanks to the crispy chicken skin, the fluffy rice, and the sweet, little woman behind the counter, that turned out to be one of the best nights I'd had in a long time.

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