While I was growing up, my mother was a get-folks-fed, functional kind of cook. A teacher and mother of two, she always managed at least one meal (though it was usually three) each day, constructing well-balanced plates with a thoughtful array of proteins, vegetables, and starches.

She was careful to avoid the things she knew we would reject (lima beans for me; steamed broccoli for Dad) and loved to toss in treats (butterscotch pudding for everyone). Lunches were made for school.

Holiday dinners were a three-day affair that started with the heady scent of sautéed onions and ended with the sweetly fragrant spices layered into her pumpkin pie.

Half of the time she worked from a recipe — her collection of Southern Living Annual Recipes books were a favorite go to — but the other half, she worked “by the seat of my pants,” she’d say. There were a handful of favorite dishes she knew by heart, and usually measurements were an afterthought.

“I season by taste,” she’d say and dip a finger into a bowl of mashed potatoes, pausing to taste its contents, eyes looking upward as she pondered what might be missing. She cooked constantly — not for pleasure or to let off steam, but to get dinner on the table — and always produced tasty meals.

But that was all before the accident that stripped my mother of her taste and smell. That was before the years she spent avoiding the kitchen, avoiding food, and avoiding her fear of making something over-salted, undercooked, or completely inedible. It was also long before she overcame all of those fears and restrictions, started experimenting, and learned to fall in love with the joy of cooking.

My mother doesn’t remember much about the accident. She had been on a train from New York to Wilmington, Delaware, where we lived at the time.

When the train pulled into the Wilmington station, she quickly gathered her things and ran to the exit to jump off. Just as she was stepping down, the train lurched forward, and the motion of the beast spun her around. She fell, smacking the back of her head against the concrete platform.

It was late June and I had just finished my junior year of high school. Being very busy with my teenage life, it took me a minute to digest my sister’s words.
Mom. Accident. Hospital.

She had a concussion and a fractured skull. Thankfully, the doctors told us, she would be ok. But there was no way of knowing what the long-term effects might be.

Mom was discharged a few days later with a very tender head and some serious nausea. Within minutes of arriving at home, she asked my dad for a Diet Coke — she consumed anywhere from three to five on a daily basis. But with one sip, she told us it was flat. Another one? Flat. A ginger ale? Also flat. “It’s just not right,” she said.

“Well, that might go away,” said the doctor who’d treated her. “It’s typical to have that reaction when you suffer from the kind of concussion you did.” The olfactory nerves, which sit at the base of the skull, had likely been damaged, he said. Some time passed and Mom still couldn’t taste or smell anything. We started to realize that her condition could be permanent, and to keep from annoying her, we stopped asking if it was getting better. She saw a neuro-psychologist who eventually recommended an appointment at the University of Pennsylvania’s Smell and Taste Center, one of only two in the country, where there was a six-month waiting period.

Earlier that year, Dad had been transferred to Houston, Texas, and was already spending most of his time at the office down there. Mom was planning to join him as soon as I graduated, but until then, with my sister away at college, she and I were on our own.

By now, I was busy being a senior in high school. I tested her lack of smell by going out and smoking cigarettes. She never once noticed. And even though eating together at the dinner table had forever been a family ritual, I suddenly had plenty of reasons to avoid it.

Mom, meanwhile, had plenty of reasons not to cook.

Besides her fear of creating something inedible, she just wasn’t interested in spending time on a meal she couldn’t enjoy. The smell of chopped garlic, the peppery bite of a well-made vinaigrette—with those basic pleasures gone, what use was the effort? We muddled through dinner with take-out and trips to our favorite sub shop. And if I wasn’t around—an increasingly common behavior—she wouldn’t eat and quickly started losing weight.

A few months into the ordeal, I finally picked up the slack. With her guidance, I learned to throw together a few easy meals: baked, stuffed manicotti, homemade pizzas. They were simple projects that really only required some assembly, but it was my first experience understanding the sense of gratification that comes from feeding someone else. I became interested in the inner workings of our kitchen—why it was organized just so; how to put together a grocery list; seeing, probably for the first time, the simultaneous order and chaos that occurs when chopping, shredding, baking, and plating. While Mom sank further into a culinary void, I felt my first spark of romance with food.
Six months after the accident, we celebrated my 18th birthday. As she had done for every birthday of my life, and my grandmother had done for every birthday of hers, my mom woke up that morning and started baking an angel food cake.

There was no forethought; she simply pulled out the ingredients and got started. Cake flour. Sugar. Egg whites. Almond and vanilla extracts. She pulled out her old, overused tube pan and her mixer, then beat the egg whites and cream of tartar together before adding the sugar. As she worked, she thought about her mom’s angel food cakes and remembered how the sweet smell of almond extract would waft through the house, signaling yet another family birthday. “I could tell an angel food cake from ten miles away,” she says today. Folding the extract into my cake, she wanted so badly to smell that sweet, pungent scent. To feel that sensation of home.

And then, just like that, it hit her.

She sensed almond in the air.

She couldn’t smell anything, of course. But a smell memory had returned. “And that was the beginning of just saying, ‘OK. I know what that smells like,’” she says.

At long last, she had her appointment at the Smell and Taste Center, and they determined that her olfactory nerves had been severed. They called it “anosmia,” the inability to smell, which was ultimately affecting her sense of taste. She could differentiate salty and sweet and, to lesser degrees, bitter and tart. They recommended that she never live alone in case of a gas leak and to pay very close attention to milk carton expiration dates. Other than that, there was nothing they could do.

I eventually left for college, and Mom and Dad made their way to Houston. They took advantage of their empty nester status and ate out frequently.

When Mom did cook, she held onto the idea of her sense memory and imagined the many scents and flavors she was missing. She enlisted Dad to help her overcome her fear of seasonings (he was more than happy to assume the role of house guinea pig) and began to appreciate the construction of a bite: the sensation of the food and its texture, the color of various foods on the plate.

Instead of protein, vegetable, starch, she created dishes that had crunch, vibrant color, and two of her favorite detectable palate notes, salt and sweetness.

Tomato Caprese salads; simply baked fish over a bed of asparagus spears; quickly stir-fried vegetables. No longer confined to cooking to feed a brood, Mom started to cook for fun, pulling recipes out of magazines or cookbooks, buying kitchen tools and testing out new gadgets. Food and cooking became a hobby, something she looked forward to daily.

During my breaks from college, Mom would enlist me to help in the kitchen. Whether it was decorating a batch of Christmas cookies or helping her prep for Thanksgiving, I was usually eager to get to work (dorm cooking left plenty to be desired). Especially since I knew I would
pick up a few tips along the way. The holiday before I left to spend a semester studying abroad in London, where I would live in my first flat, she helped me plan a meal from scratch and took me shopping. We scoured the aisles in search of our ingredients and I marveled at her appreciation for the variety of colors and textures. She wasn’t seeking sustenance, that vital but mundane purpose she once survived on; now she was seeking pleasure. To this day, I can’t go into a grocery store without hearing her voice in the back of my head, calling, “Ooh! Grab some parsley and lemons. We need some color to go with all of those browns on the plate.”

She and Dad developed a close-knit group of friends who started their own gourmet group. They called themselves “Ten Chefs Too Many,” and each couple took turns hosting dinners, always challenging themselves to create elaborate, complicated menus. The theme would vary, from one particular cookbook to a specific country’s cuisine. Mom and Dad started cooking together more often — and always purely for fun.

One club dinner they hosted involved a complex menu of Chinese dishes, including Mom’s favorite, Kung Pao Prawns in Bird’s Nests. She and Dad spent two days testing the dish, practicing the dexterity required to remove the thin noodles of the “bird’s nest” from the piping hot oil in one piece. Dad tested the seasonings while Mom perfected the visual elements of the dish. And despite the fact that she couldn’t taste their final creation, Mom swears she savored every bite. “It had all the essential elements,” she says. “Crunchy, salty, fried, and fattening.”
I am walking along a secluded, wooded path in a park in Brooklyn—my favorite place to forage for wild edibles in the city. My backpack is filled with plastic bags, a worn field edition of Euell Gibbons’ *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, and a box cutter that doubles as a knife. The wood mulch and dirt are damp beneath my sneakers as I make the slow climb up towards my destination. Down below, cyclists and joggers are making their way along the road that loops through the park, and I can hear the resounding clomp of a horse along the bridle path. In the height of early autumn, everything below is obscured by a rich tangle of leaves just starting to turn reddish-gold in the morning light. A dog barks in the meadow.

I pause under the shade of a giant oak tree, scanning a fallen log where creamy white oyster mushrooms appear in the summer. We’ve had serious rains coupled with mild temperatures, and the air practically smells of fungi. But today, the log is bare—resembling a long, black plank under a thicket of Enchanter’s Nightshade, with its hundreds of irksome burrs, and native pokeweed, which while edible when young, has grown poisonous in full maturity.

This place is sacred, and not just to foragers like me. I’ve found the remnants of spiritual offerings in this ramble: Mardi Gras beads, a jewelry box in the shape of a grand piano, a baby cauldron tipped on its side, and even a plate of plantains, along with condom wrappers, baseballs, and empty 40 ounce bottles. More than once, I’ve stumbled upon the encampment of a homeless person—the plastic garbage bags, blankets, and Chinese food containers—but I’ve never seen anyone here except the occasional jogger, and once, a summer camp group of 8-year-olds doing a lesson on wilderness survival.

I’ve done this walk innumerable times, traversed over the wooded rise, across the road, and up to an even higher peak, and each time I discover something new. A chipmunk scrambling across my path before disappearing into a hollow log. An assortment of edible, wild fruit—mulberries, blackberries, black raspberries—that explode with bright flavor in my mouth. A cluster of cool-to-the-touch jelly mushrooms sprouting on a decaying tree.

I forage for myself nearly every week, even in wintertime when the landscape is icy and to an untrained eye it appears that nothing is growing, but today’s walk is special: I’m gathering ingredients for a pie that I’m going to enter into my first food competition. I’m on the hunt for savory lambsquarters, that free-range weed that gardeners hate but food lovers consider a culinary and nutritional treasure. Related to spinach, beets, and quinoa, Michael Pollan called lambsquarters “one of the most nutritious weeds in the world” (*In Defense of Food*). The first time I ate it raw, it fell flat on my palate—I really couldn’t distinguish the edible weed from any other leafy green—but once I sautéed some in extra virgin olive oil with some salt and pepper, I realized how very much it tasted like spinach. In fact, lambsquarters out-spinaches spinach in terms of pure greeny flavor.
Lambsquarters grows in backyards, college campuses, and even around parking meters on the busiest avenues in my Park Slope neighborhood, but the best place to get it is in the park, away from traffic and pollution. It’s a much-desired vegetable in Bangladeshi and Persian cuisine, but here it’s considered a weed—even otherwise open-minded urban farmers I’ve met tend to treat it with disdain. Since lambsquarters thrives in full sunlight, I am heading towards a clearing on top of one of the highest points in the park, where the *Chenopodium album* grows on a slope unchecked, producing the best-tasting crop in the city.

Once on the hill, I pass a variety of familiar flora: the arching canes of blackberry bushes, with their smaller-than-store-bought fruit that are a lot zingier in the mouth; last month I’d picked a small container-full but now the bushes are empty. Mugwort, or wild chrysanthemum, which were one-inch sprigs in spring, now brush my shoulders. In Flushing, Queens, where I was born and raised, I’ve encountered Chinese grandmothers collecting bundles of it for medicinal purposes—called *moxa*—where they burn the dried stalks to stop aches and pains. I bypass patches of violets and their heart-shaped leaves, so pretty in spring salads, and the insistent stalks of Asiatic dayflower, with an azure blossom that rivals the blueness of the sky, and which is as transient as your last thought.

At this peak, I sometimes encounter birdwatchers, or the occasional parks department worker wrestling weeds—the very things I like to eat—but today the peak is mine alone. Out in the distance, I can see the drape of the Verrazano, that elegant suspension bridge, which I take to my job as a professor at a local college; the giant cranes on the shoreline of Bayonne, New Jersey; and nearly everywhere I look, apartment rooftops and the verdant leafy tops of trees.

At the sunny, southern-facing slope that I like to call Lambsquarters Hill, the *Chenopodium album* are out in abundance. But instead of thick goose-foot-shaped leaves, the lambsquarters have completely gone to seed: giant bunches of buds sit clustered at the top of the plant, with only the scraggliest bits of half-assed foliage below. It would take hours to collect a colander full of leaves, and even then, when cooked, it would reduce to less than a cupful of greens.

During the high, humid days of summer, I’d led a small group of newbie foragers here, and the plants were thick and lush. Picking the tops like we were snipping garden basil, we collected enough lambsquarters for a large mixed salad and a sauté with eggs for everyone. At brunch, we added to our table: an assortment of wild wineberries, which many agreed tasted like a cross between a raspberry and a California orange; freshly picked Asiatic dayflower and violet leaves; some local breads and upstate cheeses; my own homemade mulberry jam, collected from a bodacious berry-laden *Morus alba* tree only blocks away from my apartment. The others marveled at the feast, foraged mainly by their own hands, before descending hungrily into the meal.

But here I stand now, looking down at thin, paltry leaves. It’s not the first time I’ve missed the timing of a plant, and I feel the familiar lunge of disappointment in my gut. Out of habit, I reach out and grab a lambsquarters leaf, tasting it.
It’s a zero on my tongue—with a tougher consistency than its young summer-time form, and rather tasteless. When a plant diverts its energy into making seeds, it leaves the foliage with little-to-no culinary value.

I’ve been foraging long enough to know that what you’re looking for is often elusive, and what you do find can be completely unexpected. You can train your eye, research the tell-tale clues and signs, but Nature has a way of surprising you, especially here in the city. Even if you return to the same place, at the same time year after year, charting the weather patterns—noting the ratio of sunshine and temperature to rain—it’s no guarantee that you’ll get what you’re looking for, no matter how well-prepared you might be.

Foraging for food is a little like a mythic quest. You may think you know what you want, and expend a lot of energy and dogged determination making lists and plans for obtaining it—losing a lot of sleep and garnering no small amount of heart-ache along the way—only to find it shimmering elsewhere, like a golden challis, just out of reach.

In the seasons that I’ve spent searching for wild edibles, taking long walks as a solace after a break-up, or searching for fruit-bearing trees after the death of a loved one, I’ve learned that Nature has a way of revealing things in its own timing, providing discoveries along the way—from morel mushrooms bursting through the soil to a swarm of on-the-move bees scouting out a new home.

I’ve been lucky enough to meet other foragers on my journey: from herbalists who’ve introduced me to the healing properties of common weeds like motherwort and stinging nettles, to Asian ladies collecting ginkgos, those stinky fruit that litter sidewalks every fall; expert and amateur mycologists on the hunt for wild morels and brick-top boletes, who’ve taught me how to make spore prints that resemble starbursts and how to cook up my fungal finds into fragrant culinary wonders; and burly beekeepers who’ve taught me the art of relocating honeybees safely in the city and given me tastes of the sweetest wild honey.

It’s the unexpected bounty and regenerative powers of Nature that has deepened my connection with my hometown, my family, and even myself, transforming old feelings of “not being good enough” or “unworthy” into new ways of seeing and being, like fresh wild asparagus or violets erupting from the earth every spring.

But this morning, I make my way down the hill empty-handed. Lambsquarters is one of the most sustainable, abundant foods available here, and without a big bagful of it, I am in serious trouble for this food competition. It doesn’t help that we are in between seasons: all the summer berries have disappeared—even the elderberry peaked early, so that only a few clusters remain on the trees—and it’s too soon for the new dandelion and garlic mustard rosettes to appear.

Ordinarily, I go home through a shortcut on the road, my bag filled with goodies, but today, I double-back to the old path that led me here.

Back under the shade of tall trees, I pass a fallen log lying horizontally alongside the path. This is where the reishi mushrooms grow—a medicinal fungus that boosts immunity and is prized in
Chinese medicine. Even though *Ganoderma lucidum* cannot help me with my dish, out of habit I peer over the log, which is damp and coming apart under the weight of my fingers. But there is only the ribbon-like curl of a few turkey tail mushrooms clinging to the bark.

I straighten up, disappointed, when there it is: that smell of mushrooms in the air again, and it’s not just coming from those turkey tails. Usually, I scan the ground for fungi, hidden in the decaying wood or growing on piles of mulch or dead leaves, but this time my eye goes up an old tree—a tree with dark, grooved bark that’s nestled so closely among its neighbors that it’s grown its branches up high in order to reach the sun. It is impressive: stories tall, higher than my 4th floor walkup apartment. I cannot make out what kind of tree it is from its far-away leaves. But then right where the trunk ends and the first of many central branches begin, I see it: a wide, creamy white cluster of oyster mushrooms spreading out from the tree like Chinese fans.

I peer up under it as close as I can manage. The mushrooms are a light beige-cream color, with barely a tint of yellow on the edges, and very young and fresh. The delicate gills run down the short, almost non-existent stem. Although you really need to make a print of the mushroom spores—the cells that allow fungi to replicate and grow—to make a proper identification, I know that if I had microscopic vision, I’d be able to see their white spores gently raining down. A mushroom, the fruiting body of a network of thread-like mycelium that thrives underground or inside decaying wood—is the organism’s virulent attempt to reproduce. This act of self-propagation, prompted by the right timing of weather conditions and moisture, is what I, and other foragers and mushroom-hunters like me, see as a supreme eating opportunity.

END
In summer, persimmon trees are in disguise, shrouded in shiny green leaves, their dull green fruits nearly hidden. Then October comes, and persimmons take you by surprise.

What is that tree, you wonder, with the bright gold and red leaves? Bright trees are not a dime a dozen on the Central Coast. It only gets better: after the leaves drop in November and December, the persimmons reveal sculpted bare limbs hung with pumpkin-colored globes. Persimmons know how to say autumn.

My family grew two varieties of persimmon trees in our San Fernando Valley backyard: a Hachiya, which produces large, oblong fruit that must be eaten when very soft (or else the fruit tastes terribly astringent), and the Fuyu, whose fruit is mildly sweet and can be eaten while crisp. The trees enjoy our climate, are easy to grow and, besides their natural beauty in the landscape, their fruit provides ambrosial culinary opportunities.

Persimmons grow well all over our state. I think of them as Californian, even though they are native to China, and have been grown for over a thousand years in Japan. Most of the named varieties of persimmon are Japanese. Besides Fuyu and Hachiya, some other varieties are: Maru, Tsuru no ko and Nishimura Wase (“chocolate” persimmons with brown flesh); and Jiro and Gosho, similar to Fuyu, though Gosho is much larger. All of these persimmons are members of the species Diospyros kaki (diospyros is Greek for ‘divine fruit), in the ebony family, known for their dark, hard wood.

Most of the “chocolate” varieties must be pollinated to develop a light-brown inner flesh and can be eaten while still crisp. I have a beautiful small Maru tree in my garden. I planted it thinking the fruit could be eaten while crisp, like a Fuyu, and that is sometimes true - but for that to happen the fruit must have been pollinated while it was flowering.

It’s nearly impossible to tell if it’s been pollinated until the fruit is cut open – the pollinated fruit will have seeds, and the flesh has streaks of chocolate-brown. Then the fruit is sweet and delicious. If the fruit has not been pollinated, however, the inner flesh will still be orange, and so astringent as to be inedible. In that case it’s better to have waited until the fruit was dead ripe and soft.

We just added a beehive to our garden to facilitate better pollination, and I am going to add another variety of persimmon tree, the Tsuru no ko, which will also help with pollination.

There are hundreds of species of persimmon in the world, and there is such a thing as an American persimmon, Diospyros virginiana. It lives on the East Coast, from Florida up into the Great Lakes, and makes a lovely large tree; the fruits, however are very small, and astringent unless ripe, but said to be incredibly sweet when they are soft. There are persimmons in Mexico
and persimmons in central Texas (persimmons that turn black when ripe, and will turn your teeth black when you eat them) and there are persimmons native to India and the Philippines.

But to keep life simple, Hachiya and Fuyu are the most common varieties found at our grocery stores and farmers markets. Their relatively large fruit size, pure sweetness and vibrant color have made them a worldwide favorite, to be cultivated wherever climate permits.

Persimmons have also managed to remain a seasonal fruit. With so many foods imported from around the world at all times of the year (grapes in February, for example), persimmons are still at the markets only when they are ripe in North America: October, November and into December. Perhaps it is their color that determines this: they do look an awful lot like pumpkins, another strictly seasonal food.

I had to learn to love eating persimmons. I thought the Hachiyas were rather gushy when I was young. When fully ripe they are gelatinous and sweet – some people think they are too sweet. Hachiyas are often made into puddings, cakes, and cookies. I enjoy them this way, but their flavor gets hidden when combined with flour, spices, and other ingredients. Now I love the fruit plain, or mixed into yogurt.

The fruit can be frozen whole, unpeeled, the top sliced off and then eaten like a sorbet, or the fruit can be churned into sorbet or ice cream. The ripe fruit can be cut into chunks, frozen on trays, and stored in bags or freezer boxes; the frozen chunks make delicious smoothies or milkshakes.

Perhaps my favorite way to eat Hachiya persimmons is dried: in Japan, China, Korea, and Vietnam, Hachiya persimmons are dried whole, making a delectable new year’s treat known in Japan as hoshigaki, which means “dried persimmon”. I have been making these for several years and I look forward to it every fall.

Fully orange but not yet soft Hachiya persimmons are carefully peeled in October or early November, left whole and hung on strings over bamboo poles. After four or five days, you gently massage the fruit, once every few days, as they dry. They soften as they ripen, but because they’ve been peeled, an outer “skin” forms that keeps the soft part from breaking through, if you massage gently. After a few weeks the persimmons will be massaged into a somewhat flattened state, and a sugary coating will form on the outside. In Japan, this coating is sometimes scraped off and put into tiny bottles and given to newlyweds – so they will have a sweet life together. (Persimmons are also romantic.)

Last year I tried another drying method for the Hachiyas. I was out of town for a couple of weeks at the beginning of the massage period, and had read in Sunset magazine that persimmons could be hung to dry without massaging at all. My persimmons therefore received very little massage in 2013. And do you know what? They dried beautifully, and nearly a year later, they are still succulent and sweet. They are more round than flat, though they did not develop their usual sugary coating. Massaging them brings the sugar to the surface. But, the sugar is still inside the persimmons.
To make Hoshigaki you need good fruit. I get mine from my friend and neighbor Shirley Roby. Shirley’s persimmon tree is estimated to be over seventy years old. It’s a towering beauty nearly thirty feet tall, located on the Riviera. Every year it seems to be loaded with fat, juicy persimmons (although in drought years, like last year, the fruit is smaller).

Shirley’s family used to be in the persimmon business. Years ago Santa Barbara was much more agricultural than now, and Shirley’s grandfather A.J. Haverland had a fruit ranch in Goleta: 40 acres at Cathedral Oaks and old San Marcos Rd. Her grandfather grew walnuts, lemons, avocados, oranges – and persimmons. About thirty large trees yielded plump Hachiyas each autumn.

Shirley recalls helping her mother pack the fruits carefully in sheets of waxed paper, which was placed in boxes filled with shredded paper to protect the persimmons while traveling. The family picked and packed on the weekends, so that on Monday the fruit could be shipped by express train to customers in the East and Midwest, where the large, desirable fruits were a rare treat.

In late October I go to Shirley’s house and we pick persimmons using a long-pole picker with a cloth basket. We lay them carefully in baskets, then sit outdoors, where we cut the persimmons from the still attached wood, leaving a stem long enough to tie a string around. We then peel the persimmons, throwing the peels onto newspaper at our feet. After the fruit is peeled, we tie long strings onto the persimmons, one persimmon at each end of the string to make a counterbalance.

I take mine home, and then hang the persimmons over bamboo poles in my dining room, balanced across two chairs. The room is warm and sunny in the autumn and the weather’s usually dry, so it’s a good environment for drying them. After a few days I begin the massaging process. (If the weather is foggy and damp, the hanging persimmons can become moldy, but only one year was this a problem.)

I love the Fuyu persimmons too, sliced crisp and eaten like an apple, (great with cheese) and sliced or cubed and tossed into salads with fresh greens. Fuyu persimmons can also be dried, by slicing, then dehydrating them. Their texture is different than Hoshigaki: more like fruit leather. Several growers sell them at our farmers markets in late fall.

One year we hosted a holiday party, and without thinking I had left a plate of still-whole Hoshigaki sitting out on the kitchen counter. There were several that had begun to fall off their strings, and rather than store them away, I thought a little further drying would be helpful so I left them near a sunny window. The guests thought they were an offering and helped themselves, eating the persimmons whole! That might not sound strange, but you’ve got to know that Hoshigaki are extremely sweet. To serve them, you cut them into thin slivers, meant as an addition to a cheese plate perhaps. The sight of these few guests (there weren’t enough for everyone to eat a whole one) eating the whole sweet thing was amazing, like watching someone eating spoonfuls of sugar. I didn’t stop them, and by the end of the evening the plate was empty. It was a very happy party.

END
Texts of Second and Third Prize Winners

Book Category

Second Prize ($100): Jen Karetnick of Miami Shores, Florida, Dining Critic, MIAMI Magazine, for the introduction from her book Mango.

Mango Introduction

I grew up with a diseased apple tree in my rather limited backyard in suburban New Jersey. The fruit it produced--before my folks finally cut it down--was good only for contributing to the acorn and pinecone wars the neighborhood kids and I perpetuated on each other. When the time came for me to buy my own home in the lush subtropics of Miami, I, however, had one stipulation: I required fruit trees. I didn’t care what kind, but I wanted a lot of them, with boughs weighed down by gorgeous, jewel-toned specimens. This is no doubt why Mango House was my siren call--one that had everything to do with being led down a pit-strewn, pulp-littered path.

One look was all it took to fall in love with Mango House. My husband, Jon, and I were moseying down one-way alleys when we turned a corner and spied the wrought-iron green fence, just barely containing the jungle-like property. Gazing at the coral rock front steps and the peaked green slate roof, I had a conviction--a premonition, as it turned out--that I was destined for the spot.

The house had been built in 1933 or 1934, a prefabricated Sears house. The small cottage, with floors made from Dade County Pine (now a protected species), was designed for the mango pickers of the plantation on which it sat; this acre, a corner lot, was all that was left. The alleyway bordering the southwest of the house used to be a canal, and the Miccosukee Indians would paddle up as recently as the 1960s, trading fresh venison for fruit and camping overnight before heading back to their reservation.

We were charmed as much by the history of Mango House as we were by the prospect of owning eleven fruit trees. We had wanted the experience of growing and picking our own, especially me, a food writer and dining critic since I moved to Miami in 1992. Well, I’ve had it. The experience, that is. The first spring we moved in, it was March, and the hard little fruit swaying in the wind clicked against each other all night long. They sounded like thousands of marbles being shot from champion thumbs. It took a while to get used to it. For a long time, we thought it was raining when it wasn’t.

From May until October, Mango House is hammered with a hailstorm of falling fruit. Two trees pepper the driveway with mangos, and one pummels the deck. Some of them are so large they make the deck shake. Mangos find their way into our pool drain, drop into the baskets of the kids’ bicycles, and plop down on our ficus hedges. The canopies of the approximately ninety-year-old trees are so large they tower over the roofs of our house as well as our neighbors.’ The trees branch out into other trees, making it hard to tell if our palm trees actually have coconuts or mangos on them.
I’ve read reports of nonagenarian trees the same ages as mine that can produce three thousand pieces of fruit per season, and while I’ve never counted the exact yield we get, I don’t doubt it. Together my fourteen trees, of eight different varieties, can give me an average of four hundred pieces of fruit per day that I collect and wash. This doesn’t include the rotten mangos that fall from the trees during the night or the ones that succumb to bugs, birds, and various rodents, which need to be cleaned up and bagged on a daily basis to prevent the yard from stinking like a subtropical winery, and which have me racing the garbage trucks to the curbs with bags weighing down both arms like kettlebells.

There are days when the mangos are so numerous that I dream about hydraulic lifts and hired help. When the lawn, what’s left of it, resembles a two-year-old’s Easter egg hunt, with so many good mangos in reach I don’t know where to begin. When I have just cleaned up one section of our acre and moved onto the next, only to hear the thump-thump-thump of rapidly falling mangos re-littering the area behind me.

The heavy fruit can make quite an impact when they fall. Not a summer has gone by that I haven’t borne bruises from mangos that I’d loosened accidentally--and then couldn’t duck fast enough--while the ones I was actually reaching for still dangled temptingly above my head. I’ve had to advise parents to move newborns out from under heavily endowed boughs. Fortunately no one has been seriously injured, not even our three dogs who are walloped every now and then.

By the time July rolls around, I’ve run out of boxes, and I move to filling 40-pound Hefty bags with mangos. By August, my hands are permanently tinged orange by the juice and my hair knotted with sticky sap, and I’ve piled the fruit on every available surface of our home and yard--including our hot tub cover. Yet somewhere along the way, while stumbling on days-old fruit and getting hit on the head with falling globes that range from a few ounces to a couple of pounds, I grew to love the prolific things.

[Text box, follows]
Once we realized (in the very first season!) that we couldn’t possibly handle all this fruit, Jon and I turned the place into a U-Pick. We reached out to our friends, most of whom are chefs, home cooks, and food lovers, and invited them to come get ‘em. In return, they’ve given me chutneys, jams, breads, ice cream--everything you can think of that can be made with mango. I also developed a serious collection of my own recipes using them.

Now known in some circles as the “Mango Mama” (the nurses in the hospitals where Jon works call him “Dr. Mango”), I am extremely well versed in cooking with mangos. And I don’t just mean the mango breads, puddings, and pies you’d expect. Pasta with mangos? Check. Mangos and meat? You betcha. Or my current favorite: frozen mango sangria, or “Mangría,” which I make with Malbec, the signature red wine from Argentina.

As another bonus of trying to find homes for hundreds of mangos per day, I’ve become good friends with many of the award-winning, hometown Miami chefs I’d been writing about for years. I started by delivering trunkfuls of fruit to Norman Van Aken at Norman’s in Coral Gables. He was more than delighted to take them off my hands.

I also went north to Allen Susser in Aventura. Susser offered diners who donated 200 pounds of dooryard mangos a free meal. Walking into his kitchen during mango season was like wandering into an edible Aladdin’s cave: fruits of every size and hue were piled like precious stones all over the stainless steel counters.

Over the years, other celebrated Miami chefs have benefited from the bounty of Mango House. It wouldn’t be a first to find Michael Schwartz hanging from my trees on a Saturday morning with pal and fellow-obsessor Eric Elliot to pick fruit, or to meet Kris Wessel and his daughters and husky mutt, Bella, picking the overripe fruit for his Mango Moonshine. Dewey LoSasso, Douglas Rodriguez, and Frank Randazzo and Andrea Curto-Randazzo live around the corner and are willing takers of the fruit. I’ve also prepared waxed boxes of mangos for Michelle Bernstein.
Often, in the interest of reporting the provenance of the fruit, many chefs give credit for “***’s Mangos” on the menus under certain dishes.

As with children, caring for fourteen mango trees takes a village. In this case, it’s members of an actual village (Miami Shores) and a figurative one (the foodie community). Thus the impetus for Mango. It’s a collection of recipes from some of Miami’s most time-honored and talented chefs—both the original Mango Gangers and the subsequent generation to which that “New World” generation gave birth—who are also my buddies, kind enough to lend their expertise here. In addition, the book features my own recipes that I’ve developed over the years, and those from friends and relatives who help me out by choosing to pick mangos from our trees.

[Text Box] The Mango Gang
Since Miami’s incorporation in 1896, and during its evolution over the next hundred years or so from sleepy, swampy backwater to internationally chic sophisticate, the subtropical metropolis has been granted many nicknames: The Magic City; Gateway to the Caribbean; America’s Casablanca; The American Riviera. Each accurately refers to various identities that Miami has modeled—railroad boomtown, refugee camp, vice paradise, and capital of a celebrity-driven world—with as much style and verve as a runway model in Milan.

The cuisine of this area has undergone similar changes, largely following the same kind of timeline. As the city developed, fish houses and Southern-style cafeterias eventually gave way to Cuban cafes and ethnic joints of all Latin American and Caribbean sorts; instead of frozen fish sticks and French fries, casual dining centered on pork croquetas and black beans and rice. With the end of the Freedom Flights in the 1970s and the advent of the excess of the 1980s, an interest in fine-dining venues, mostly in the continental or European vein, developed. Those who had grown bored with Cuban sandwiches and tostones could certainly find themselves a plate of veal saltimbocca and fettuccine alfredo.

Still, it wasn’t until a group of formally trained and forward-thinking chefs, specifically Mark Militello, Douglas Rodriguez, Allen Susser, and Norman Van Aken, set up shop that Miami began to garner attention from epicures around the globe. Because these chefs shared the common goal of combining high-end techniques with indigenous ingredients and plumbed the local ethnic communities for recipe inspiration (though their styles were in reality quite different), the food press dubbed them the Mango Gang. The handle was so catchy—and such a catch-all, if not quite accurate—it’s still in use decades later, much to their consternation. Now, it sometimes refers not just to these chefs but to their protégés cooking in other restaurants around that time, and according to the media, a second generation of Mango Gang progeny has been spawned and is on the rise today. But to purists, the Mango Gang will always be Mark, Doug, Allen, and Norman, even if they don’t embrace the moniker themselves.
Third Prize ($50): Lea Eskin of Baltimore, Maryland, from her book Slices of Life

Let Rise

Now we had a high school actress, dancer, journalist. We had a middle school scientist, ceramicist, shortstop. Parenting seemed more hands-off and daughtering more hands-on. We were all growing up.

Even Baltimore. Following the success of chefs Cindy Wolf and Spike Gjerde, local chefs cooked up new restaurants. Young talent tricked out food trucks, spun sassy ice cream, and—finally, blessedly—brewed some serious coffee.

Bob still liked gritty: cornmeal, ground almonds, crumble. Hannah sought startle: spicy, sushi, seafood. Noah relied on reliable: potatoes, steak, ketchup. We all developed a taste for adventure. We traveled more. We took the train to New York to see plays and slurp noodles. We celebrated Noah’s bar mitzvah in Israel, stopping first to introduce Hannah and Noah, my own Madeline and Pepito, to Paris.

I tried to learn the lingo of fangirl and South Park. I drove circles around the city, car floor crusted with leotards and protein bars. I flew circles to and from Denver, carry-on stuffed with bedside distractions for Dad.

Everything seemed to move both slowly and quickly. Already it was time to pack away the blocks, to box up the picture books. Who knew this recipe, the one that had seemed so long and savory, was really so short and sweet?

In the Dark

The day travels a standard arc, pajamas to pajamas. There’s the lift of coffee, the lull of work, the jostle of the ballerina-and-ballplayer-shuttle. There’s the calm of dinner prep and the oasis of dinner dispatch. Homework struggles, bedtime struggles, bed.

All assisted by the tool set that comes standard on the base model: sight, sound, scent, intuition, touch, and taste. Especially taste. The path from alarm-off to alarm-on is scattered with incentives—early morning buttered toast, late afternoon latte, midnight truffle—like crumbs across the forest floor.

Even so, I didn’t know that taste rides its own crests and troughs. I made this discovery one night when the agenda was full and the refrigerator empty. I was up packing for a trip, trying to download a novel and upload the clothes from dryer to suitcase. Periodically I’d stop to check on the moon. It was supposed to do something—lurch, or go dim—and I had sworn to wake my junior astronomer for the spectacle.
I looked through closets, looked at the moon, looked for a snack. Finally I settled for simple: honey on spoon. I stepped outside and in the extra-dark dark, swallowed sunshine.

I might have presumed the 2 a.m. taste bud tired, or tired of work. Instead, I got an extraordinarily precise report. I could taste the honey: golden, lightly lemon. And the contributing flower: delicate, pale purple. And the on-duty bee: burly, earnest. And his state of mind: pensive.

As was I. Perhaps I missed many such flashes of enlightenment, letting the daily jumble execute a full eclipse.

**Honey Butter**

Makes 1 cup

1/2 pound (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
1/4 cup honey
1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh rosemary, optional
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

1. **Mix**: Using a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat all ingredients until smooth.
2. **Roll**: Use soft honey butter immediately, or mound onto a stretch of parchment paper. Roll into a sausage shape. Chill.
3. **Smear**: Good slathered on almost anything, especially grilled corn, fish or shrimp; hot biscuits or crackers awaiting cheese duty. Without the rosemary, nice on toast or scone.

**Travels**
Crème brûlée needs no embellishment. The smooth cream under the crazed crust offers cold and hot, soft and sharp, plain and fancy. In a cup.

While traveling I came across crème brûlée enhanced with halva. Traditionally the simple French dessert doesn’t share a continent, much less a ramekin, with the simple Middle Eastern candy.

The combo intrigued me. Crème brûlée owes its dense texture and rich reputation to cream and sugar set thick over low heat. Halva owes its crumbly texture and jagged bite to sesame and sugar compressed at high heat.

Combining creamy this with crumbly that might undermine both enterprises. Yet miraculously it has the opposite effect—producing a dish that dishes out the best of two worlds. Which might also be the point of travel.
Halva Crème Brûlée

Makes 6
2 cups heavy whipping cream
1/2 cup halva, not coated*
6 egg yolks
2/3 cup plus 6 teaspoons sugar

1. **Bubble**: Measure cream into a large saucepan. Crumble in halva. Simmer, whisking constantly, until thick, about 1 minute.
2. **Fluff**: Whip the yolks with 2/3 cup sugar, using a stand mixer and whisk attachment, until thick and pale, about 2 minutes. Reduce speed to low. Pour in hot cream, whisking constantly. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a clean quart-sized measuring cup.
3. **Bake**: Arrange 6 ramekins in a deep baking pan (the kind handy for lasagna). Pour about 1/2 cup cream mixture into each ramekin. Add hot water to the baking pan to a depth of 1 inch. Slide into a 325-degree oven and bake until just set, about 25 minutes. Cool. Chill.
4. **Serve**: Sprinkle each crème with 1 teaspoon sugar. If you’ve got a kitchen torch, you know your mission. Otherwise, set ramekins on a rimmed baking sheet and slide under the broiler just until sugar melts, about 1 minute. Chill again and serve.
*Available in the imported foods aisle of many grocery stores and at specialty markets. Use any flavor that comes without a chocolate coating—plain, marble, nut—though nut chunks won’t make it into the final dish.

*A French Lesson*

Two French girls came to visit. They brought comic books, in French. They brought foie gras, in tins. They brought homework: a notebook full of questions about our native habits.

We played Twister, tangling into knots of right and left, *droit et gauche*. We watched “Les Simpson.” We identified local wildlife: the squirrel.

Their school-group itinerary listed landmarks: Lincoln Memorial, Liberty Bell, National Mall. They wanted to visit bowling alley, movieplex, shopping mall.

We cooked local: meatball, fried chicken, PB&J. We learned that even in France school lunch is scorned.

On the last night, they remembered the homework. The two girls worked their neat cursive against page after page: How many pupils attend your host school? What is the state motto? What leisure-time activities does your host family pursue?

We scraped our way through all the questions and all the leaves of two fat artichokes. When we got to the heart, we got a vocabulary lesson. “Coeur d’artichaut,” said one of the girls. “That’s what we call someone who’s shy.”

We said our good-byes, hearts heavy, and no longer shy.
Artichoke Omelet
Serves: 1

1 good-sized heavy artichoke
Unsalted butter
Canola oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon freshly grated Parmesan cheese
1 tablespoon snipped fresh chives
1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
1 teaspoon chopped fresh mint
Finely grated zest of 1 lemon
2 eggs

1. **Trim:** Using a serrated knife, cut away the top third of the artichoke and all but 1/2 inch of its stem. Snap off outer leaves until only pale green leaves are exposed. Use a vegetable peeler to smooth stem and ridges. Cut artichoke into quarters (stem to leaf). Use a small sharp knife to cut out the fuzzy choke; discard. Slice artichoke quarters into thin (1/8-inch) crescents.

2. **Crisp:** Heat about 1 tablespoon butter and 1 tablespoon oil in a small heavy skillet. Add artichoke crescents in batches and fry crisp and golden, about 2 minutes per side. Set aside artichokes. Season with salt and pepper.

3. **Mix:** Toss together cheese, herbs, and lemon zest in a small bowl. Whisk together eggs and a pinch of salt in a separate bowl.

4. **Puff:** Wipe out skillet. Add 1 teaspoon butter and 1 teaspoon oil; set over medium-high heat. When hot, pour in egg mixture. Use a soft spatula to lift edges of omelet; tip pan to let egg flow under. When the bottom of the omelet is lightly browned and the top not entirely set (about 2 minutes), scatter on cheese/herb mixture. Top with the artichokes. Fold omelet in half, cook until just set (about 1 minute). Voila.

Into the Wild

Noah gets up early and packs his knapsack with pocketknife, Band-Aid, and plum. He endures carpool, then is released into the wild.

At camp he chooses from the obvious: hike, paddle, climb. And the irresistible: dig a hole. Camp is hip to summer’s meditative pleasures.

On the last night there’s a campout. Noah roasts corn and gnaws it from the cob. He slouches by the fire and hums along. He sleeps under the stars and wakes to the scent of flapjacks.

He takes his time with the flapjack. It’s wide as a skillet, heavy with blueberries, and scorched with regret. Summer, and its meditative pleasures, is gone.
Flapjacks
Makes about 10 (4-inch) flapjacks

Stir 2 cups Flapjack Mix (recipe follows), 1 egg, and 3/4 cup water to a thick batter. Heat a heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Brush with vegetable oil. Pour in about 1/4 cup batter for each flapjack. Cook in batches until bubbles pop on the surface, about 2 minutes. Flip and cook until the other side is golden brown, about 2 minutes. Nice with fresh fruit and jam.

Flapjack Mix
Makes about 4 cups

3/4 cup all-purpose flour
3/4 cup whole-wheat flour
3/4 cup rolled oats
3/4 cup toasted pecans
1/2 cup nonfat dry milk
1/4 cup dark brown sugar
1 teaspoon fine salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) unsalted butter

Measure all ingredients except butter into the food processor. Process briefly to mix. Add butter. Pulse until mixture resembles rolled oats. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator.

END
Internet Category

Second Prize ($100): Micki McClelland of Pipe Creek, Texas, from My Table Magazine/SideDish online.

“Thanks, Dad!”

“Oh my Pa-Pa, to me he was so wonderful...”
Sung with unrestrained emotion by crooner Eddie Fisher, “Oh My Pa-Pa” was released as a single in 1953.

We all enter this world dumb as mud about food. Typically a kid will stumble her way through the perplexing twists and turns of the eating maze by following bread crumbs dropped by her mother.

One’s father, on the other hand—simply a taller, more filled-out kid himself—prefers to be led by the nose to the table… "That sure smells good, honey"… and cannot be bothered with teaching a chick where to peck for the tasty bits.

This was particularly true of family men in the 1950’s. Concentrating attention on the workaday grind, most post-World War II dads had no time for kitchen folderol, no time to lend culinary guidance to their offspring. That is, unless extraordinary circumstance made tutorials of the tongue necessary.

My childhood tongue was one of those begging for assistance. First off, my mother never dropped bread crumbs for me or anyone else. Reigning as the frozen fish sticks queen, the idea of preparing a full-blown meal from scratch made my mother break out in a rash.

It fell to my father to blaze the food trail. Armed with trusty knife and fork, he led me into the unexploded territory of gastronomy and showed me not only what a real live dead fish looked like but how to scale it, remove the guts and sauté in butter three minutes a side.

He gave me sweetbreads, which I ate because I was lured by the deceptively inaccurate “sweet.” At the innocent age of five, I swallowed my first raw oyster because he paid me two dollars to do it. On a vacation trip to Mexico City, he suggested we try the roquefort-stuffed beef tenderloin at a restaurant that had 12 tuxedoed men playing violins.

On a rustic note, when I was eight or so my father drove us west of Houston to a friend’s farm in Cat Spring where I had my first taste of milk. This was milk that had spurted straight from a cow’s udder a moment before. It was barn-temperature warm, and I don’t recall liking a liquid as much as I liked that milk until I tasted my first espresso.

He was not a corndog man (my mother was, was a corndog woman), but would seek out authentic German sausage makers who made authentic German bratwurst, blutwurst, landjager in some of the more remote, bucolic regions of Texas. I went with him and learned about mustard.

Into beer big time, he allowed me a sip of porter once and India pale ale twice and ruined me forever for Coca-Cola.

One time, when I was pre-teen and he was feeling generous, I got to sit on his lap and share a box of homemade white divinity fudge, coconut macaroon cakes and treacle-laced gingerbread squares sent from
Arkansas by his bake-happy mother to our house where any cookies we had in the pantry were labeled Nabisco.

A hunter, my father did bring home venison, which my mother refused to even look at. She left the job of cooking to his sister who came over specifically to see to the eradication of gaminess, to season, to roast, to serve and to drink scotch neat throughout the process.

In Anaheim, California for the opening of Disneyland in 1955, while my mother took innumerable turns on Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride, my father escorted me to the gift shop where he purchased a tin of Reese Brand fried ants. With eyes blazing a Dare you!, he presented me with the dubious treat and said to eat up. I did try a bite, but ant-eating did not follow me forward.

In Chicago he suggested potatoes au gratin as a side dish for the club steak; in Jamaica he introduced me to hearts of palm; in NYC, chilled and shamrock-green asparagus vinaigrette; in New Orleans, shrimp Arnaud and eggs Benedict; and in Mobile, Alabama, chitlins, which was a palate shot that missed.

I wouldn’t love steak Diane and bananas Foster had he not a great fondness for items cooked tableside in a chafing dish. Pleased by food theatrics, his admiration for waiters who burst into a dining room wielding flaming swords strung with kabobs was unbounded, which I learned to readily ditto.

An oldie from the 1950’s, my father’s favorite restaurant dessert was the snowball—a round scoop of vanilla ice cream, coated in coconut, rolled in nuts and dipped in chocolate with a cherry on top. When in his good graces, I got one too. A frown meant no snowball, and more likely a spanking.

In Las Cruces, New Mexico, he recommended stacked green enchiladas; in Canada, wild goose; after traipsing around the Grand Canyon, he took me among the Hopi tribe where we were graciously offered bowls of corn soup made with goat meat. And once, when I was still in buckled Mary Janes, he took me to the Hollywood Brown Derby where we had Cobb salads just like the movie stars seated around us.

The first time I saw a tomato plucked directly from the vine, it was plucked by his hands, and it was my father who added the salt and ice, then turned the crank on the old-fashioned wooden contraption that eventually gave us ice cream made from fresh peaches.

One peach of a guy himself, the memory of him loudly warbling some old fraternity song, while cranking out love for us so deliciously, is a fitting end to this tribute. Thanks Dad! But really, sir, I could have done without the ants.

END
Just as fashionistas flock to the runways every season, culinary passionistas swarm the annual Summer Fancy Food Show in New York City for a staggering display of edibles from around the world. Everything from beet yogurt to white truffle brie to bourbon pickles to duck bacon — what used to be called “gourmet,” now, “specialty food” — is represented and this year’s spectacular was the largest on record, with more than 2,700 exhibitors from more than 49 countries sprawled over 369,000 square feet at the Jacob Javits Convention Center.

I hoped it meant that quality food products were on the rise, but after working my way through the exhibits, I wondered whether we’re any closer to that than we were more than 30 years ago when Mimi Sheraton ruffled feathers by writing in the New York Times, “a good 75% of what was passed off as fancy last week at the Coliseum could just as easily be labeled junk.”

Fancy Food’s right and wrong

What is “Fancy Food” anyway? To me, it’s a microcosm of what’s right — and wrong — in today’s food world. On the one hand, we find genuine products from around the world that illustrate the durability of artisanal traditions in the face of a global economy that threatens the very existence of small farmers. On the other hand, the aisles (as mirrored in markets across America) are crammed with novelties inside beautiful jars and packages.

There’s stuff that struts the fashion, like bacon marmalade, smoked chocolate chips and — yet again — kale, a vegetable I like well enough, but not in my muffins. One year, when slipping fruit into everything was trending, it was tomato and raspberry “marinara.” Is nothing sacred? Much doesn’t fit into the category of actual food, and an awful lot of it is revved up with chemical flavorings, steroids for food.

Nevertheless, the show brings to light unique and worthy products that restaurant chefs seize upon — food such as Mugolio, a sweet pine bud syrup redolent with wild Alpine herbs made by a forager from the Trentino Alps, where the locals have been making it for centuries, or wood-roasted Calabrian figs swaddled in their own leaves.

Unless a discriminating retailer brings such ingredients to market after discovering them at the show, jewels like these don’t typically make their way to home cooks who, by using them, could just as easily elevate their food as chefs do. At the show, I always make it a point to catch up with maverick importers such as Rolando Beramendi (Manicaretti), Ari Weinzweig (Zingerman’s) and Beatrice Ughi (Gustiamo), who go off the highways and even off the map to track down exceptional producers.

Another is Marta Lisi, who discovered the wood-roasted figs and sells them and other artisanal products from Italy’s diverse regions to a few U.S. retailers. I’m a fig aficionado, and I never tasted figs so delectable as these. Headquartered in Sicily, her company, Attavola, distributes her family’s traditional Salento oils as well as a new citrus-olive oil under the label of Pianadegli Ulivi. Recently I tasted all of these splendid oils at their estate in Miggiano, Puglia, which has
been making olive oil for 750 years. Lisi also runs tasting tours to small “intergenerational” food and wine producers who are off the tourist track.

Discoveries
At Manicaretti’s booth, while dipping a spoon into a jar of Il Colle del Gusto pistachio spread to give me a taste, Beramendi recounted wandering the open market in Rieti, a hilltop city near Rome, and finding a couple selling pistachio and chocolate-hazelnut spreads that looked like Nutella but tasted a lot better. “I told them on the spot that I’d buy everything they made,” he said. Before he knew it, he was back at their farm, sleeves rolled up and helping them to make more. His newest product, ZeroTre, is the first line of organic artisanal vegetable pastinas introduced into this country, the brainchild of an Abruzzese elementary schoolteacher whose family happens to be in the pasta business. It is a product I consider long overdue here, as readers of my column know.

Gustiamo’s Ughi is as fierce a champion as there could be for the products she hand-picks. She’s been a veritable Joan of Arc for her San Marzano tomato producers, denouncing the big corporations for their fraudulent practice of counterfeiting “San Marzanos” to make us think we’re buying the real thing. Another of her finds, Sant’Eustachio coffee, has had a cult following since it was established in 1938. International celebrities and discriminating locals alike flock to its cafe in Rome, just across from the Italian Senate where the organic and fair trade beans are roasted over a wood fire. Even though the open fires are illegal in Rome, the government never shuts them down. What politician would want to be without his Sant’Eustachio espresso?

Ultimately, “Fancy Food” may seem to symbolize the tastes of an affluent society for new and exotic foods. Yet, in the best of all worlds, it also celebrates the enduring cultures of those whose lives are inextricably tied to the vitality of their soil. The Fancy Food Show, along with other exhibitions such as the International Artisans Show in Florence I attended just two months earlier, provide an invaluable platform for new generations who continue the ancient traditions.

Fancy Food Show product highlights

- **Benedetto Cavalieri Pasta:** artisan dried semolina pasta from the Salento | From Cavalieri’s own local heritage wheat; bronze die-extruded, intense wheat flavor, ideal elasticity and chewiness | Producer: Benedetto Cavalieri, Puglia, Italy | 1999 sofi award winner, best pasta

- **BroccoloFriariello di Napoli:** friarielli in extra virgin olive oil | As yet undiscovered in the U.S., friarielli is a variety of broccoli rabe that has inspired endless poetry in Naples; preserved in the producer’s own olive oil, to toss with pasta. | Producer: Maida Farm, Campania, Italy

- **Crunchy Capers:** dried capers (new product) | Exceptional floral flavor and big crunch; the best thing you could ever put over deviled eggs. | Producer: Gabriele Lasagni/La Nicchia, Pantelleria, Sicily, Italy | 2014 sofi awards nominee

- **Faella Pasta:** artisan dried semolina pasta from Gragnano, the original pasta-producing area around Naples | AnelliRigati, “ridged rings” are elusive outside of a few of Italy’s regions; it’s about time they were exported here; great for pasta e fagioli — the beans fall right into the holes. | Producer: Pasta Faella
• Gustarosso Pomodoro S. Marzano D.O.P.: The real San Marzano plum tomato, meaty and simply the richest-flavored tomato in the world, grown in the Sarno Valley, near Naples | Producer: Danicoop

• Marina Colonna’s Citrus Oils: bergamot, clementine and lemon extra virgin olive oils | The citrus zest is pressed with the estate’s olives, resulting in delicate and fragrant oils that are suitable for finishing and baking. | Producer: Marina Colonna, Molise, Italy

• Mostarda: Mixed fruit mostarda | Lombardy’s unique, ancient sweet and pungent fruit preserve, spiked with zingy mustard oil; an essential ingredient in the pumpkin tortelli of Mantova; accompaniment to the region’s famous boiled meat dish, even better with roasts. Producer: Corte Donda, Lombardy, Italy

• Mugolio: rare pine cone bud syrup | The Alp’s answer to maple syrup, with complex and delicate wild flower and rosemary essences, used for finishing anything from roasted pork, poultry and game to topping ice cream and panna cotta. | Producer: EleonoraCunacci/Primitivizia, Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, Italy

• Palloni di Ficchi: wood-roasted fig ball | Just eat it. It’s incredibly good. | Producer: DolciPensieri di Calabri, Calabria, Italy | Importer: Attavola

• PianadegliUlivi: extra virgin olive oils | Estate bottled extra virgin olive oils from Cellina di Nardò, and Ogliarola Salentina olives from the Lisi family trees; also, a new, intensely citrus extra virgin olive oil made from pressing one-third lemon fruit with two-thirds olives — for finishing and flavoring. | Producer: Merico Maria Rosa, Puglia

• Pomodoro del Piennolo del Vesuvio D.O.P.: These famous organic cluster tomatoes from the mineral-rich volcanic soil of Vesuvius are an ideal balance of sweetness and acidity; they’re what make Neapolitan pizzas and tomato sauces incomparable. | Producer: Casa Barone, Campania, Italy

• Pistacchiosa, Noccioliva, Granellona Brut: pistachio or hazelnut-chocolate spreads (smooth or chunky) made with extra virgin olive oil | Move over Nutella, not only does this stuff taste lightyears better; it’s actually good for you. | Producer: Il Colle del Gusto, Lazio

• Sant’Eustachio: Wood-roasted Arabica espresso | With coffee quality on the decline, Italians have resorted to inventing new ways of drinking it — more and more “latte,” “macchiato” and the like. Not so with Sant’Eustachio — they drink this straight up. | Producer: Raimondo and Roberto Ricci, Lazio

• TreZero: Organic pastina (new product) | Italy’s baby food, four varieties: zucchini-spinach, pumpkin-carrot-tomato; gluten-free; classic wheat | artisanal process

END
Print Category
Second Prize ($100): Kim Ode, staff writer, Minneapolis Star Tribune.

“The Baron of Brats”
A Hugo butcher, who started in the business when he was a kid, is making his mark with 110 flavors of bratwurst.


Want to hear more bratwurst flavors?


We could go on.


OK, that’s 12, leaving 98 other brat flavors at Grundhofer’s Old-Fashion Meats in Hugo. Most are available year-round.

Unless they’re sold out, which can happen when it comes to the bestselling brat in the joint, the one made with Gummi Bears.

Yeah, Spencer Grundhofer can’t believe it either — and he makes about 300 pounds of Gummi brats a week, which speaks to repeat business.

This was not the meat market Grundhofer imagined when he opened seven years ago. His backroom is stocked with mini-marshmallows, chocolate chips, green olives, peanut butter and dried cherries. That old line about it being better to see neither laws nor sausage being made? The sight may give law the advantage, but Grundhofer doesn’t question success.

“People come in: ‘What’s the newest flavor?’ I put Caramel Apple brats on the sign out front last week. Gone. One hundred pounds. Gone. Seems like everything we make, it sells,” he said.

The charm of a butcher shop

If you’re unfamiliar with Hugo, you might drive right past Grundhofer’s the first time. It’s set back from Hwy. 61, hidden by a nice stand of trees north of the traffic light with Hwy. 8. Its sign notes “quality meats since 1983,” which would make Grundhofer, 42, about 11 years old when he started in the meat business.

Which is true.
When he was 10, he worked in the freezer of a butcher shop owned by a friend’s parents, packing meat in boxes. “But I hung around, asking to do more.”

By age 11, he’d convinced them to let him try cutting meat, “and I could break down a whole beef by the time I was 13 years old.” He slaps one of the 200-pound hind quarters of a steer hanging in the cooler with a sort of fond familiarity, himself being about as broad and necessarily outweighing the hunk of meat.

After 18 years at that first job, he worked at Festival Foods for seven before opening his own business, becoming one of the few full-service butcher shops around anymore.

This confounds him.

“What surprises me is that there aren’t more places like this,” he said. In a good butcher shop, someone’s always behind the counter, offering cuts you don’t find in most grocery displays, meats that they’ve smoked or boned themselves.

Take the slabs of bacon. “We have a dial on our slicing machine to calibrate thickness. People will come in and say, ‘I need two pounds sliced at 16,’ and that’s really nice. They’ve been around enough to know their numbers.”

Offering a tyranny of choice

“Gummi Bear? I don’t know.”

“Here’s Chicken Broccoli Cheese.”

“I like spicy. What about Chili Cheese Jalapeño?”

“I don’t know — there are too many choices!”

Andrew and Jamie Feist of Forest Lake stood before the freezer case, squinting at all the labels, seeking some different brats for the weekend. Grundhofer’s No. 2 bestseller, Bloody Mary, was sold out. Jamie was veering toward the chicken and turkey brats, skeptical of the stranger flavors, but Andrew was game. Finally, they settled on the Chili Cheese Jalapeño and the Chipotle brats. Then Andrew backtracked.

“Let’s get one of the Gummi Bear ones.”

“Um … yeah … OK.”

Beware the dare

Grundhofer has told the Gummi Bear brats’ back story too many times to count. In 2008, Joe Berglund, who owns Hometown Auto Repair next door, suggested throwing some of the chewy
bruins into a batch of ground pork and seasonings. Grundhofer was experimenting with flavors such as Mushroom and Swiss Cheese, and Apple Cinnamon. But even he grimaced and waved Berglund off. Ha-ha.

Every once in a while, though, a customer came in asking for Gummi Bear brats, and he’d have to tell them he didn’t make them. Weird.

“Then I finally figured it out, duh,” he said. Berglund had been sending people over, telling them to ask his buddy for the special brats. Ha-ha.

That Christmas, Grundhofer made a batch, took them next door and announced, “There, now we’ve made ’em and you’re gonna eat ’em,” he told Berglund, who returned the next day with the stunning verdict: “Awesome.”

Grundhofer added a few to his selection, figuring the kids would get a charge out of them, the bears’ little faces straining through the casing. But then the Hugo paper and a Twin Cities TV station did stories “and it just exploded.” People said they liked the play of savory and sweet, and the brat in and around the candy was terrific, too.

Grundhofer himself prefers brats he makes with Skittles. “With the Gummi Bear, you get into, like a sweet pocket. But the Skittles brats taste more like Froot Loops, which I didn’t think would happen. But you never know when you start adding candy to meat.”

**Ignorance can be bliss**

The sleeper of the shop’s offerings may be a brat made for Minnesota Monthly’s GrillFest last May. Butcher Wayne Mackenroth, who was working the grills, saw that one of the samples kept getting passed over when people read its label.

“My daughter was helping me and I told her to turn that sign around,” Mackenroth recalled. “Then people would reach for it and once they tried it — and didn’t know what they were eating — they loved it.”

The flavor? Banana Cream Pie.

Not every idea works. Grundhofer once tried a version with Snickers, “and I said, ‘We aren’t even putting these out to sell.’ ”

Of course, people also buy Regular brats because, at heart, the basic brat has to be good, no matter how it’s embellished. Grundhofer buys pork from local producers, and has a secret seasoning. And he’s firm about using natural casings — the intestines of sheep or hogs — instead of artificial collagen casings.

“Natural casings have that unique ‘snap’ when you bite into them,” he said. “That’s what I started with, and what I’ll use ’til I’m dead. They cost more, but they’re worth it.”
With pork prices rising, he had to raise prices 40 cents a pound not long ago. “Nobody said a word,” he said, with a note of gratitude in his voice. A package of five big brats averages about $8, depending on ingredients. “People don’t come here for cheap brats.”

The stuffing machine kicked in, sending a plump skein of sausages across the stainless steel counter.

“Those are Peach Mango,” Grundhofer said, then smiled. “You can’t be surprised at anything here.”

SIDEBAR:

But how do they taste?

Creativity, however crazy, still needs to taste good. We brought five bratwurst flavors to a family reunion and prepared them according to Grundhofer's instructions: Grilled, turning often, for about 15 minutes. Never, he pleads, ever boil a brat.

Here's how they went down.

Turkey Stuffing and Gravy: A nice, well-seasoned bratwurst, although nothing to make you seek out Black Friday sales.

Crab and Butter: A finely textured brat, rich flavor with a faint whiff of the sea.

Gummi Bear: Delivers nuggets of Gummi Bear flavor amid savory sausage, a combo that most were amazed to find they liked.

Philly Cheese Steak: The most favored by far, with bits of red and green pepper and pockets of cream cheese creating an attractive and flavorful brat.

Banana Cream Pie: Opinions split dramatically on this one. The lovers loved it, the haters hated it. But most found it intriguingly tropical.

END
On a stretch of bitterly cold evenings, I reached for Laura Ingalls Wilder’s “Little House” series, the fictionalized account of her Midwestern youth in the late 1800s.

I had read these nine books so often as a child that the characters felt like family — in fact, I had considered naming my firstborn Laura — but decades passed before I turned their pages again. Now for a week in January, temperatures plunging and snow falling outside my double-insulated windows, I immersed myself in the tales of pioneer life, from the early years of “Little House in the Big Woods” to the marriage of Laura Ingalls and Almanzo Wilder in “The First Four Years.”

What I discovered through adult eyes, long before reaching the last chapter, surprised me. Pa still fiddles, of course, and Ma keeps the girls busy with household chores. But on another level, which I had not seen as a child, food dominates these stories — growing, harvesting and cooking the necessities of life. The “Little House” pages celebrate the family meal, in all its simple pleasures.

When I turned to “The Long Winter,” sixth in the collection and the most thrilling of the “Little House” books, its drama gave me pause. This is a tale of a family near starvation, of a town crippled by lack of food when blizzards keep the supply train from reaching the settlers.

The account, told through the eyes of 13-year-old Laura, takes place in the fall of 1880 and continues through May 1881 in De Smet, S.D., during what turns out to have been one of the worst winters in U.S. history. Meteorologists have verified the accuracy of Wilder’s account of the weather.

The first blizzard blows through unexpectedly in October 1880. Anticipating a bad winter, the Ingalls family moves to De Smet, population 80, from their shanty a mile outside of town. Blizzards after blizzard follows. The Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway, which serviced South Dakota and elsewhere across the Midwest, shuts down its supply trains in January as the snow piles too high for trains to pass through, at one point 12 feet in depth. Townspeople in De Smet carve tunnels to get from one building to the next.

By Christmas, the grocery store no longer has food and the family runs out of coal and kerosene. The Ingalls twist hay into sticks for fuel and switch to axle grease to light their home.

Then they run out of flour. To make bread, they grind wheat with a coffee mill.

The Ingalls switch to two meals a day to save fuel and, presumably, food, though in the upbeat speech Ma gives, it’s because “… the days are so short that there’s hardly time for three meals.” Sourdough bread keeps them going. So do potatoes.

“There’s only this month, then February is a short month, and March will be spring,” says Pa.

The Ingalls are starving. Pa’s eyes look funny. He’s too thin and not as strong as usual. Wilder describes Laura in terms that clearly reflect the symptoms of malnutrition: feeling cold (though the outdoor temperature was certainly a factor), tired, listless and dull.

Desperation sets in. With wheat running out, Pa demands the seed hidden behind the feed-store wall. Rumors of a possible cache of wheat on a farmstead 20 miles away prompt Almanzo Wilder and another young man to brave the weather, no Gore-Tex or Under Armour to keep them dry and warm. They return with 60 bushels of grain and face the greed of the shopkeeper, who had paid for the wheat and wants to price-gouge the town.

April brings more snow and yet more despair. “Winter had lasted so long that it seemed it would never really end. It seemed that they [the Ingalls] would never really wake up,” writes Wilder.

Relief arrives in early May with a warm sun and a bounty of food on the supply train. “It will be so good to have enough of everything to cook with again,” says Ma, as she plans to prepare a belated Christmas dinner in May.

“This is quite an extraordinary document that really captures both the town’s experience and her own family’s brush with real disaster,” said Caroline Fraser, editor of the “Little House” edition from Library of America, in an interview.

“The focus on food in the ‘Little House’ books becomes a celebration of what was joyful about their lives in the midst of complete insecurity and what we would term ‘poverty,’ though that’s clearly not how she [Wilder] saw it. She was grateful for whatever they had.”

I am, too, including those double-insulated windows and the grocery store down the block. And for the reminder from Wilder: Don’t take food for granted.

END