



## **LDEI's 2017 M.F.K. Fisher Awards for Excellence in Culinary Writing**

### **GRAND PRIZE WINNER**

(and first prize winner of Internet Category)

\$1000 plus a trip to the LDEI Conference in Newport Beach, California

### **“A Voice from the Nuevo South”**

**By Sandra Gutierrez, Cary, North Carolina**

[www.oxfordamerican.org/item/977-a-voice-from-the-nuevo-south](http://www.oxfordamerican.org/item/977-a-voice-from-the-nuevo-south)

Soon after arriving from Canada to live in the South, I became the first Latina food editor and columnist of a newspaper in North Carolina. It was 1996. My husband and I were settling into the small town of Cary, and we were the only Latinos in our neighborhood. I had been at the paper a week when one of my editors received a letter from a disgruntled subscriber, upset that her beloved paper had chosen “a Mexican” to write the cooking section. It hurt. Not only because my family is not Mexican (we’re Guatemalan), but also because the term Mexican isn’t an insult, and she clearly meant it as one. I took the slight as a challenge and set out to prove her wrong.

I started as a generalist, writing about ingredient-based cooking, technique, and world cuisines, intentionally avoiding writing about Southern food. First I had to decipher its secrets: the biscuits and field peas, the cobblers and fried pies. I read and studied voraciously. Books by the contemporary greats—Nathalie Dupree, Damon Lee Fowler, John Egerton, and Paul Prudhomme—joined my copies of the classics: *The Virginia Housewife* by Mary Randolph, *In Pursuit of Flavor* by Edna Lewis, and of *Southern Cooking* by Bill Neal. I amassed a collection of regional community cookbooks and spent hours leafing through historical books like *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking*, *Soups, Pickles, Preserves*, etc. in my local library.

For twelve years, I learned the food of my new home—including the racial injustices that were part of its culinary legacy. I relearned how to cook, this time from Southerners. My family’s vacations became opportunities to stop roadside for tastes of peach ice cream and tomato jams found on Highway 211 in the Sandhills. I sampled my first boiled peanuts in a run-down gas station somewhere near Savannah, Georgia, and I devoured my first chicken-on-a-stick at a Chevron in Oxford, Mississippi. I went to as many potluck suppers as I could, and my rule was taste everything. At first, I sleuthed in secret. Then I began asking my readers to teach me to cook in their home kitchens. I still hold close the memory of standing in Mrs. Johnson’s linoleum-floored kitchen, me mirroring her as we mounded piles of winter flour, cut lard into it with our fingers, poured “just enough buttermilk to make the dough wet and sticky,” patted it together, folded it over three times, rolled it lightly with a shared wooden pin, and then, with the metal rounds she’d inherited from her grandmother, cut out biscuits. I stood by the oven door watching my first Southern biscuits rise with the same excitement I felt as a little girl waiting for my first cake to bake in my toy oven. No matter how many biscuits I make now, none have tasted better than Mrs. Johnson’s.

I am ashamed to tell you it took me many more years before I had the guts to start writing about Latin food.

Two decades have passed since that first newspaper column, and the South is now second to the Southwest in Latino population. The Nuevo South is no longer just black and white.

The first Mexican migrant workers arrived in the 1880s, but, with the exception of Florida, the South remained hermetically sealed off from widespread Latino immigration for much of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, legal changes such as the repeal of the Temporary Protective Status (which precluded the deportation of immigrants back to their countries due to natural disasters or armed conflict) welcomed Latino residents. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Central Americans alone grew nine-fold between 1980 and 2013. Arriving contemporaneously were highly skilled South Americans, who fled the flailing economies in their countries. From 2000 to 2010, the Latin population in the region grew by almost 70%.

Today, all you have to do is take a drive to witness the explosion of Latin culinary businesses. In North Carolina, the grocery chain Compare Foods has giant stores that rival the size and opulence of any Kroger, and inside you'll find aisles of Latin American fresh and processed products, organized by country of origin. In smaller communities, strip malls house *tiendas* (stores)--family-owned markets that usually include butcher shops and bakeries. Travel the highways beneath the 39th parallel, and you'll encounter kiosks that sell empanadas (hand-held pies), pop-up Peruvian rotisserie chicken restaurants. Love Cuban food? Try Nashville's Back to Cuba Café; or sample Venezuelan *arepas* (griddle corn cakes) in Liz Hernandez's ArepaMía of Atlanta.

I've spent most of my adult life in the South. Yet I've found that many of my neighbors still don't know what to do with me. I don't fit the label of what a Latina "should be like." Even to many of the intellectual Southerners I have met--most of whom claim to be socially progressive--I seem to be too light-skinned, too well educated, or too well off (all so relative, of course). I can't tell you how many times I've heard, "Oh, my cleaning lady is from Guatemala"--right before I get a brush-off at a party. Sometimes, people are prepared to accept only a certain kind of Latina. The kind they can feel sorry for. The kind they can feel superior to.

For the same reasons, some members of my Latin community seem to think I am too American, a *gringa* even--particularly when they meet my blue-eyed husband (a descendant of Europeans who migrated to Guatemala last century to escape wars and economic devastation). When he speaks to them for the first time with a perfect Guatemalan accent, his words are often followed by nervous giggles and comments like: "You speak Spanish?" At times I have felt like I live between two worlds, neither here nor there. As much as I worried for our daughters--that they, too, would experience frustrations over their multicultural identities--I'm proud to say as adults they've joined the new Southern-Latino generation of professional women who are an integral part of the socio-economic reality of the region, one as a dentist and the other a lawyer. Latin Americans settling in the South--like any demographic reduced to an ethnicity--are of diverse economic, cultural, and racial backgrounds.

Three years after I began my job at that North Carolina newspaper, my editor asked me why I had written about so many international foods but had never covered Latin American cuisines. I told her I was afraid of being stereotyped. Her answer was simple: "You were hired over dozens of Southern candidates because of your writing skills and food expertise--and because we knew you'd bring a new vision to the paper." So I began approaching Latin foodways, but I did so through its truth: that it's a tradition with twenty-one different cuisines, of which Mexican is only one.

I prioritized familiarity, even as I broke with stereotypes. Southern readers were comfortable with Italian food, so I wrote about the cuisine of Argentina, greatly influenced by Italy, with its multiplicity of pasta dishes. Did you know that every 29th day of the month, Argentineans eat

gnocchi? Neither did my readers in Cary, who were fascinated that gnocchi could provide filling meals to those who couldn't afford meat until payday (traditionally, the last day of the month). Building on the growing interest in Asian flavors, I wrote about Peruvian food, showcasing recipes for *chaufa* (fried rice) and Nikkei-style dishes such as *tiradito* (a mix between sushi and ceviche). Cary ate it up.

I wrote about Mexican food, too, but not the bastardized version found often in American eateries. I bridged cultural differences through foods like *tortas* (sandwiches), *chilaquiles* (tortilla casseroles), and *cochinitapibil* (Mexico's version of pulled pork). And, through it all, I continued to write about traditional Southern cuisines. The honest voice that came out of my complex Southern life touched a nerve with my readership; suddenly, my column's popularity rivaled that of larger newspapers, and nationally recognized chefs, authors, and cooking personalities sought coverage in my section.

My voice, now so unafraid, was being heard and respected. When I left the newspaper in 2004, the same disgruntled reader from my first week called to say she was sorry to have sent that letter; she would miss my columns.

While I researched and wrote, I noticed a new culinary movement developing throughout the South. Chipotle peppers were making their way into barbecue sauces and jalapeños were peppering hushpuppies. My friends were filling tacos with brisket and serving them with chimichurri. Others were making tamales with cornmeal and topping them with shrimp and pineapple salsas, or smothering *dulce de leche* on biscuits, dousing pound cake with it. I knew, together, we were onto something.

By the time the University of North Carolina Press asked me to write a book on the subject in 2009, the "New Southern-Latino Movement" was impossible for anyone to ignore. People were extending their Southern roots by joining them with those of others, exposing the new racial and sociopolitical realities of an entire region one dish at a time. The next year, Southern Foodways Alliance dedicated an entire conference to the Global South, which included the Latin American influences on Southern regional cuisine, and chefs like Bill Smith of Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill were creating fused dishes like sweet potato tamales. In less than a decade, the Movement had reached professional kitchens.

What we might be at risk to forget, though, is that the New Southern-Latino Movement was not born in academia or acclaimed restaurants. It was an organic crosspollination in which Latino and Southern home cooks, finding themselves in the same territory—and with similar cooking techniques and ingredients—had begun to adapt and create recipes that married their cultures. I was able to taste the Movement before I named it, at dinner parties in people's homes. My Latin friends were substituting grits for nixtamalized corn flour and replacing traditional *chipilines* with collard greens. My white friends were serving unforgettable menus featuring *cabrito en barbacoa* with *tostones* and coleslaw. This was a revolution created by regular folks seeking to find common ground through what they ate. Much like Southern foods, Latin American foodways originates from a history of need: poverty, slavery, and strife; and it tastes of survival: of wars, injustice, and oppression. But in this revolution, at this table, cultural marriage is a healing force because it comes from the people; it's happening by choice. As a Nueva Latina, I am not the maker of this movement. I am a part of it. So are you. *Bienvenidos a la mesa!* (Welcome to the table!)

END

## BOOK CATEGORY WINNER

First Prize \$500

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### ***BUTTER, A Rich History***

**By Elaine Khosrova, Chatham, New York**

Prologue from *BUTTER, A Rich History* (Algonquin Books)

Norbu marches up the steep slope, trying to catch up to his mother. The three-year-old carries a small bowl and a look of determination. His blue plastic boots slip often on the dewy turf, but he steadies himself and keeps on, his little body leaning into the tall rise of earth. The boy is headed toward a flat ridge about two hundred yards above where a small herd of yak are stationed. This is a familiar hike for Norbu; every morning he makes the ascent to claim his breakfast—a bowl of warm yak milk that his mother will dispense from the animals.

By the time the boy reaches the ridge, his father, Kado, and mother, Choney, have just begun their daily two-person operation of plain air milking. Norbu knows to stand by as this negotiation of man and beast unfolds. He climbs the wobbly side of the small bamboo-fenced corral surrounding a group of restless calves. Inside, his father ropes one of the young animals by the neck and leads it out a makeshift gate, pushing back other calves that crowd near the opening. They're hungry for the milk of the mother yaks lingering outside the fence.

But Choney takes the first share of milk. With a wooden pail hung from a rope around her neck, she aims to collect about six gallons of raw, whole milk to fill her churn for buttermaking this afternoon. Yak butter is a virtual currency here in Bhutan, the gold of nomadic highland yak herders like Kado and Choney who sell or trade it for rice, tea, barley, and other bare necessities. As the number of these high-altitude herders dwindles in Bhutan, the appearance of yak butter—often bundled in thick green leaves and tied with bits of string—is increasingly rare in the towns and cities. Norbu's parents can sell theirs for twice the price of cow's butter made in the valleys. Locals place a premium on handmade yak butter not just because it's traditional but because it's considered healthier and better tasting, especially in their habitual beverage, *su ja*, black tea whisked with butter and salt. Having loyal customers in the lowlands, Choney's butter is often sold even before she's churned it.

But before this precious butter can be made, let alone change hands far below in the valley, the female yak (locally called *dri*, ['dree'])—must first be induced to give their milk to the cause. That is the work this early morning, like countless mornings before. Mother *dri* don't readily cooperate with milking, even when it's a routine maneuver as it is for this herd. Maternal instinct dictates that they withhold the milk in their udder for a calf. So to start the "let down" of milk this morning, Choney and Kado use an ancient dairy ploy: One at a time, Kado brings a calf out of the corral, prompting its mother to slowly sidle up alongside her babe. (Domesticating these massive animals is all about shepherding their offspring; yaks will never desert their young.)

Kado allows the calf to suckle for a minute, which triggers the release of milk. Then he quickly pulls the young animal off the teat with his rope as Choney steps in; she briefly strokes the flank of the *dri*—a kind of pre-emptive milking signal—and then kneels beside the udders. She wears a full-length Bhutanese *kira* (wrap-skirt) with a red fleece jacket and red wool cap; it's August, but the temperature hasn't yet edged above 40 °F. As Choney sits on her heels, balancing the pail in her lap, she begins milking by first wiping the *dri*'s teats with a wet rag. She wraps her fingers around two

teats and alternately pulls and squeezes in a fast, steady rhythm. Dual streams of milk swish into the pail.

The calf, meanwhile, strains against the rope to be with its mother, hungry for more milk. But its mom is indifferent now; she stands placid and still as if being milked by Choney is somehow hypnotic. Beneath her thick horns, she gazes east at the horizon. The view is like a pastoral house of mirrors. Under a cobalt sky the rounded arcs of land covered in whiskery grass repeat endlessly, endlessly; for the yak, it represents a limitless buffet.

When Choney has mostly emptied the mother's udders, she slowly backs off the animal, then Kado releases the calf, letting it lunge toward the mother for its remaining meal. Besides getting the morning leftovers of milk, the young yaks are free to trail their mothers all day long, suckling at will, in the open pastures. It's only at night that the calves are separated in the corral, ensuring that the herders get first dibs at the day's early tide of milk. By contrast, most modern dairy farmers in the west would collect every ounce of their cow's milk; calves are typically fed with manmade rations until they can graze. But nomadic dairymen in Bhutan split the milk capital since buying rations is cost prohibitive and impractical. It's a delicate dairy time-share, but one that has sustained pre-industrial men and their livestock for millennia.

Norbu is whining for his bowlful of milk. As Choney pours the milk from her small wooden pail into a larger plastic barrel, the boy thrusts out his little bowl to intercede in the transfer. "Na ong . . . na," he says ("Milk, yes . . . milk"). His mom fills the bowl halfway. Norbu holds it to his lips and drains it instantly, going back for a refill, and then another.

Finally satisfied, he drops his bowl and dashes to a pile of small rocks. As he tosses them about, his parents continue their quiet work. Hardly a word is exchanged between them. Having descended from countless generations of herding families in these high mountains, both Choney and Kado handle the mighty animals reflexively, whose nature is more familiar to them than the ways of their own twenty-something contemporaries 7,000 feet below in Thimpu, the rapidly modernizing capital of the country.

When the milking is done, Choney's large plastic barrel is nearly full. With one shout of, "Jogay!," ("Let's go") Kado sends the yak down the ridge, in the direction of lower pastures. The animals file past the family's two-room stone shelter in a small notch, then over the mountain stream that runs beside it. In one long black shaggy procession, the beasts move over the neighboring slope. Meanwhile, Kado and Choney carry the barrel of milk to the stream and partly submerge it in a cool deep pool. The softly tumbling cold water will eventually chill the milk slightly, making it easier to churn. As Norbu and his parents disappear behind the door of their home, the last dark shapes of the yak vanish over a mountain rim. So ends the first act of Bhutanese

Its choreography might appear to be the start of a butter story particular to this time and place, a remote mountainside so unlike other dairy vales elsewhere in the world. But, in fact, the steps are both universal and timeless. Choney and Kado's milking routine not only replays centuries of dairy practice in Bhutan, but it also allows a rare glimpse at the far-off origins of butter. Long before early people settled into dairy farming, they were nomadic hunters who came to realize that it was better to keep certain animals than to kill them. Yak, as well as horses, sheep, and goats, were among the first beasts trained to submit to milking by a new class of shepherds and herders. In practice, these people worked no differently than Choney and Kado. The method for milking a beast in the pasture was identical. And once milk was at hand, stored in various primitive vessels,

buttermaking became a serendipitous accident waiting to happen. Very likely, the first ever churning was the result of milk's early rough ride on the back of a pack animal, inside a skin sack, where it rocked and bounced its way to butterhood. Every churning since then—no matter how refined the technology—has essentially been a reenactment of that first lucky happenstance, the birth of butter.

Choney turns her milk into butter using one of the earliest models invented for getting the job done—a plunger churn. It goes by many different names around the world, but the design is standard: a tall, slim wooden bucket covered with a tight donut-shaped lid, its center hole just wide enough to fit the handle of a long wooden staff—called the plunger. The bottom end of the plunger is fitted with a crosspiece of wood. The milk or cream is churned into butter rhythmically pumping this crosspiece up and down. That's it. Assuming the temperature of the liquid is right, grains of butter will eventually start to materialize.

Choney's three-foot tall churn—a wedding present from her family—is positioned under a small skylight, the only source of daylight, apart from the front door, in an otherwise windowless stonewalled room. The family's two-room home feels like a bunker. And in many ways it is, built by hand to withstand the snow and icy thaw in winter that completely engulfs this treeless mountaintop. There is no furniture. Since they move seasonally, Choney and Kado own only what can be carried on the backs of their yak. A fire pit burns on one side of the room. The family sleeps on the floor, atop thick rug-like blankets that Choney has woven from yak hair. During the day the blankets are stacked neatly in a corner. Wooden shelves on two sides of the room are lined with a few large bowls and pots, plus several tall baskets. On this day, two of the baskets are nearly filled with rounds and wedges of yak butter and semi-hard cheese. Soon Kado will make the daylong trek down to the city to trade these dairy goods for cash.

As Choney transfers the chilled raw whole yak milk into the churn, Kado prepares butter tea for two men who have come to visit—a farmer from the lowlands and young man who heads the nomadic community in this region. Kado lifts a pot of salted tea off the fire and adds a lump of butter. He rubs the handle of a bamboo whisk back and forth between his palms to spin the ball end inside the tea. The mixture becomes frothy, the opaque color of butterscotch; he serves it in small teacups. Butter tea can be a pungent, oily drink if the butter is rancid, but Kado's version is sublime, with just a hint of salt and a silken butteriness.

Having fastened the lid of the churn to the base with rags and twine, Choney's buttermaking begins. She stands gripping the plunger, one hand on top of the other, and moves it smoothly up and down like a piston. A thick slushing sound accompanies each rise and fall of the plunger as it plows through gallons of milk in the churn. The technique is simple, but the task is laborious. It's like creating a storm in a bucket, a tempest strong enough to forge solid butter from milky liquid.

There's no timer, no clock, just the changing sound of the churn to announce when the butter has started to form. Just before the milk surrenders its fat, the churning becomes muffled, softer, as air meets milk. Then when the butter finally comes, the noise is louder, more percussive. Such acoustics have guided buttermakers around the world and throughout history. It's a very old tune, yet one that reliably signals when waves of milk have yielded rafts of butter.

END

## PRINT CATEGORY WINNER

First Prize \$500

### **“The Epiphany That Turned Me into a Good Baker”**

From *The Washington Post*

By **Kathy Gunst, South Berwick, Maine**

When I attended the Cordon Bleu School of Cookery in London in the late 1970s, I learned the foundations of French cuisine. But even as Ms. Cadbury was teaching us the proper way to fold butter into puff pastry and the technique for making silky béarnaise sauce, I made a silent vow to myself: I would follow the rules, and then I would break them. I would be a jazz musician, riffing on the classics, creating my own dissonant, experimental compositions in the kitchen. And for years, that has been my approach to cooking.

For the most part, it has worked. Except for when I bake.

I’ve always believed that great bakers are good at following rules. And so, for someone who prides herself on being a bit of a rebel — in the kitchen and out — baking has been a challenge. Being a really good baker requires understanding what makes bread dough rise and why some cakes are light and fluffy, and that is a matter of working within the lines. Isn’t it?

Then, a few years ago, I was asked to judge a prestigious cookbook competition — in the baking category. I tried to decline, explaining what an honor it was but telling the organizers that they had picked the wrong person for the job. I lobbied to switch categories. “Why would you want someone who isn’t proficient in a subject to judge the experts?” I asked.

“Think of it as a challenge,” the head judge said. “Call me if you get into trouble.”

Within a week, I had three enormous boxes of books: close to 50 devoted to cakes, cookies, pies, French pastry, ice cream sandwiches and more. I tucked myself into bed each night with a dozen or so titles and made my way through the pile. Eventually, as instructed, I narrowed the field to the five that made me believe I could become a better baker.

Then came the scary step. I needed to test two or three recipes from my top choices. Because this was baking, I would have to follow the recipes to the letter. And that was going to be tough.

No more eyeballing it

I spent 10 days testing recipes: baking pies and fancy pastry, icing cakes and generally feeling bad about myself. Honestly, who likes spending time doing something they’re not good at? I started having nightmares about my tyrannical fifth-grade math teacher, who insisted we write all our math equations in ink.

Instead of calling my therapist, I dug in deeper. I started weighing everything, and I learned there was a big difference between what I called 1 1/2 packed cups of brown sugar and the generally accepted 330 grams that 1 1/2 cups of packed brown sugar is supposed to weigh. Expert bakers could have predicted that: My eyeball-it approach was a big part of the problem. When I scooped out 1 cup of flour that should have weighed 128 grams, my scale showed close to a 20-gram

discrepancy. When I actually measured the spices called for in a gingerbread cake, I was amazed: My practice of filling the spice cap up to what I'd assumed was 1/2 teaspoon was way off.

I had a major aha! moment. From then on, when a recipe told me to take the eggs or butter out of the refrigerator an hour before I used them, I did what I was told. If a recipe called for a 9-inch cake pan, that's what I used. If it said to whip eggs and sugar at high speed in a mixer for a full 10 minutes, until light and fluffy, I didn't call it quits after five. I was a soldier, following the commands of my superior. I didn't cut a single corner or question the requirements.

My first (typically rushed) attempt to make French tuilles (delicate, buttery cookies that resemble the roof tiles on French houses) resulted in cookies too fragile to hold their shape. But when I retested them, measuring the ingredients and nailing every detail, they came out perfectly. Every failure led to deeper inquiry. I looked through each book for answers. The books that made the cut answered my questions about what to do if the dough fell apart when you rolled it out, or if the cake didn't rise properly, or if the crème anglaise separated.

When my three-layer chocolate cake with mocha-chocolate buttercream came out looking like it could be sold in a real bakery (or at least would be the first thing to go at a bake sale), I felt victorious. I'd gone into the experiment kicking and screaming, and many cakes, cookies, puddings and pastries later, I'd emerged a much better baker.

#### A crash course pays off

Then, one fall, several months after I judged the competition, a friend brought me a basket of apples from her orchard. Time to make a pie. I didn't want to follow someone else's recipe. I wanted to try something different, something I could call my own. I also didn't want to slip back into my old sloppy baking behavior. For the crust, I decided to substitute nut flour for half of the wheat flour.

I whirled the flours with butter and ice water, and it became a wet, sticky mess. But something told me to forge ahead: I placed the dough in plastic wrap and chilled it for several hours. It was way moister than what I was used to, and when I tried to roll it out, it was almost impossible to work with. So I draped it into a French tart pan with a removable bottom, pressing it together like a kid molding Play Doh.

I peeled the apples and tossed them with brown sugar, ground ginger and cinnamon, then overlapped the fruit slices. It was pretty, but it looked dry. So I boiled down apple cider with ground ginger and a touch of cinnamon. I waited until it was almost thick enough to coat the back of a spoon. I poured that glaze over the apples and placed it in the hot oven, and soon the kitchen smelled like some kind of autumnal fantasy. The tart was a perfect balance of nutty crust, juicy, sweet apples and fragrant spices.

At Thanksgiving, when my youngest daughter asked for pumpkin cheesecake, I went a little off-script again. I studied several recipes and made a plan: Rather than blend pumpkin puree into a cream-cheese base, I swirled it in by the tablespoon. I was patient in the baking, nestling the cake in a water bath for its oven time and letting it rest and cool before refrigerating. The rewards were huge: a perfectly creamy, smooth-topped cheesecake with a stunning marbled effect.

Another revelation came this past Valentine's Day, when I planned to serve my husband a chocolate dessert. I used the same nut pastry I had discovered when baking the apple tart and filled it with a simple dark chocolate batter. Feeling the need to be creative without veering off-course too wildly, I

sprinkled coarse sea salt and toasted unsweetened coconut on top of the still-warm tart. The white flakes set against the dark chocolate tart looked, and tasted, pretty impressive.

This spring, when I visited San Francisco, the season's first locally grown strawberries appeared at the farmers market. I wanted to bake fluffy biscuits that would showcase them, and I kept fantasizing that Mary Berry of "The Great British Baking Show," in her clipped British voice, would taste them and say: "Nice bake! Very nice bake, indeed." In the past, my biscuits have fallen .??. short. I didn't have my baking books with me at the time, but I remembered that one had advised folding finished dough over itself several times to create layers. That's what I did, without overworking it, and the results were light, layered and truly spectacular. (A ginger butter took them right over the top.)

The winning baking books from the competition now line my shelves. When I pull them out to bake, I feel a weird sense of pride, as if I wrote them myself. During my two weeks as a full-time "baker," I gained a few pounds and got jazzed up on sugar. But I also learned that if you follow the rules and understand why they are there, you can go ahead and start to break them, a little at a time. My crash course in baking taught me plenty of techniques, and it taught me a few things about myself: namely, that I needn't fight my urge to experiment. I just needed to learn how to do it right.

Even a rebel, it turns out, is capable of restraint.

Recipes: Buttermilk Biscuits with Double Ginger Butter  
Chocolate Tart With Sea Salt and Toasted Coconut

END

## BOOK CATEGORY

Second Prize \$100

### **“RASHT. Tales of rice paddies and tea plantations”**

From *The Saffron Tales* (Bloomsbury USA)

By **Yasmin Khan**, New York, New York

The lush green countryside surrounding Rasht, the capital of the Gilan province in northern Iran, provides a scenic backdrop for sampling some of the country’s most enticing food. Its soaring mountains, dense forests, and trickling streams are interwoven with rice paddies, tea plantations, and olive groves that flourish in the region’s fertile, sub-tropical climate.

My family has its roots in Gilan, and it was here that as a child I spent long, balmy summer holidays running around my grandparents’ farm with my cousins. Under the hot sun, we would scamper through rice paddies, jumping in and out of water pools to cool off and resting under the shade of the fig, apple, and greengage plum trees. Each year, countless clothes were ruined following the discovery of a new thicket of blackberries, and new muscles were flexed carrying watermelons the length of our forearms to the nearby stream for picnics.

The cuisine of Gilan is as green as its landscape. Mounds of fresh cilantro, parsley, and dill are cooked down to create fragrant bases for stews and kucus. Garlic is invited to every meal, either simmered by the bulb in sauces, pickled in vinegar, or plucked of its sprouting leaves, which are sautéed with split peas. Often we would eat fresh young garlic raw, delicately unwrapping cloves at the table and nibbling on them as we tucked into our *khoresht*.

Eggplants, squash, and pulses make up the bulk of traditional Gilaki food, making this the best place in Iran for vegetarians. It is also home to one of the country’s most majestic food pairings, ground walnuts and pomegranate molasses, which come together in an earthy, sweet and sour paste used to marinate kebabs, stuff fish, or poach chicken.

Each spring the heavily scented flowers of Seville oranges are distilled to make orange blossom water, which is added to jams, rice dishes, and pastries. Orange blossoms are also dried and sprinkled into the loose-leaf tea from Lahijan, in the south of the region: this was the first place in Iran to cultivate tea. Lahijan tea is delicate and light and Iranians drink endless rounds of it, always black, always served in small, clear glasses.

In the city of Rasht, I spent an afternoon cooking with Sima Mohamadzahdeh, a pharmacist who had offered to teach me how to make *Aloo esfinaj*—a plump chicken, spinach, and prune stew (page 169). As she put me to work, searing the chicken in a large pan of sizzling hot oil, I asked her what she thought it was that makes Gilan cuisine distinctive. “Food is more garlic-based here than in the rest of Iran,” she tells me, “and being so close to the sea, we always like to have a bit of fish with every meal—smoked, salted, or fried.”

This rings true for me. We always had some smoked fish roe (ashpal) or crispy fried river fish (kuhli) alongside meals at my grandparents’ house. On occasion we’d even enjoy some local caviar, back in the days before over-fishing took its toll. I loved eating the small, black, salty eggs with bread and butter for breakfast. Sturgeon, the fish that produces caviar, is also used to make

succulent kebabs in Gilan, doused in a simple dressing of Seville orange juice and extra-virgin olive oil.

With all this exceptional produce around, it is no surprise that the people of Gilan are known throughout Iran for being shekamoo, the Farsi word for people who love food and eat plenty of it. “Iranians spend a lot of time eating,” Sima points out. “I just got back from visiting my sister in Canada. For lunch, she takes just a small piece of chicken and some salad to work with her and eats at her desk. In Iran, we put aside a few hours to eat our lunch. I close my pharmacy at 1 pm and come home for a proper meal with the family.” She laughs. “Then of course we all enjoy a little siesta.”

Eating this way has its roots in the region’s historic farming traditions. To find out more about the agrarian way of life, I spent some time with Roya Baighi, a farmer from Astaneh-e Ashrafieh, a small town in central Gilan. Roya studied agriculture at college, but her studies were cut short in 1979, when the Islamic Revolution led to universities being closed for a few years. After getting married, she moved in with her husband’s family and threw herself into farming life.

“I harvested rice and beans and vegetables like eggplant and corn,” Roya recalls. “You have to work from dawn till dusk, especially in the summer, but I love the life and I get energy from seeing my plants grow. I still coo over purple eggplant flowers as if they’re my children!” Showing me around her farm, Roya pauses to collect handfuls of fresh green leaves for the lunch we will prepare together: a Gilaki herb stew (page 152). “We try to grow as much as we can organically and live off that,” she explains. “That way, we can avoid the pesticides and chemicals of the fruit and vegetables in the market—and of course it tastes so much better too.”

To discover what keeps Gilaki workers going all day, I met with Babak Rabiee, a young electrician who is also from Astaneh. Warm and charismatic, Babak has an infectious grin and a mischievous twinkle in his eye, as if he is always on the brink of doing something he probably shouldn’t. At a roadside café, we breakfasted on *kalehparcheh*, a broth made from the meat and bones of a lamb’s head, along with a portion of tongue and cheek. Not a breakfast for the faint-hearted. Some freshly baked flatbread and halved Seville oranges completed the meal, and Babak showed me how to squeeze the juices into the broth.

Babak was in his final year of university and, like many people at this stage of life, was trying to decide what to do next. “I’m not sure yet. I might continue my studies and do a Master’s, otherwise I’ll have to do military service.” Completing two years of military service within Iran is compulsory for men after they finish their formal education. In addition to the usual uncertainty about what that might entail, and about being posted far from friends and family, Babak had serious concerns—what with him being a typical Gilakishkamoo. “One of my friends told me that his sergeant made their unit throw their lunches on the floor and then walk over the food in their army boots. Then he made them eat it, all of it, right off the floor!”

No sooner had I laid my spoon down in my empty bowl and wiped the corners of my mouth with my now greasy napkin than Babak insisted we try another breakfast spot. We waddled across the road to a café serving *Loobiapokhte* (page 70), a rustic dish of beans infused with citrus and golpar, served with a fried egg, tomatoes, cucumber, and flatbread.

Mid-feast, Babak patted his belly: “I love that feeling you get when you are eating something really tasty and can’t stop, even though you are full.” I told him that the Georgians have a word for that—

*shemomedjamo*, which is not too dissimilar to the Farsi word for a person who eats too much. And I reached for another piece of bread...

END

**BOOK CATEGORY**  
**Third Prize \$50**

**“Chicken and Me”**

**By Cynthia Graubart, Atlanta, Georgia**

From *Chicken: A Savor the South Cookbook* (University of North Carolina Press)

One of my earliest memories of chicken is five-year-old me standing outside a white clapboard house in a long line of people waiting to get inside. The heat was oppressive, and I wiggled my sweaty little hand out of my mother’s grasp. No one seemed to mind standing in line, and I suppose I didn’t either (except for the hand-holding part). The fried chicken served at Beach Road Chicken Dinners on Atlantic Boulevard in Jacksonville, Florida, was worth the wait. All the chicken dinners came with mashed potatoes and creamed peas, and that was the extent of the menu.

(I cannot attest to how the peas tasted. It was the only table at which I ever sat for dinner that I was permitted to omit the peas from my plate.) The mashed potatoes were fluffy and gloriously buttery, but I was still allowed to put more pats of butter on top. The chicken arrived so hot that I was the last one at the table who could bite into it. My mom would reach over and lift a little piece of skin, letting the steam escape so maybe I wouldn’t have to wait too long. It seems like it was always hot weather when we went to eat there, and, in hindsight, I now suppose that my grandmother, who made wonderful fried chicken herself, had declared it too hot to fry in her own kitchen (no air-conditioning), so we went and ate the second best.

Both grandmothers were good cooks but completely different kinds. Nana, who lived in Jacksonville, had a repertoire of salad and luncheon-type dishes she produced for her bridge club. Nana Stuffie (short for “short stuff”) was a born country cook—she hailed from Hastings, Florida—who grew up wringing chicken necks. And, boy, she could fry chicken! I’m sorry I didn’t get her recipes. I’m sorry I never had the chance to spend much time in the kitchen with either one of them.

My mother was the queen of can-of-soup casseroles in every suburb we ever lived in, and I didn’t want to inherit that crown. I’ve always said I learned to cook in self-defense.

My college days encouraged my own exploration of new foods and tastes, and not long after graduating, I was producing Nathalie Dupree’s nationally syndicated PBS cooking show *New Southern Cooking*. I had no idea there was such a thing as cooking technique—nor that it could be learned. I had always been a good student, and now I saw I could save myself from my unfortunate culinary childhood.

Born in Florida to southern parents and grandparents, I’ve eaten chicken through my Southern lens in the Middle East, South Africa, all over Europe, and in most of these United States. Superior recipes come from every corner of the world, but the ones from your own family or community are the most cherished.

As children, my sister and I couldn't wait for the wishbone to dry on the kitchen windowsill after a meal of whole roast chicken. We believed in the folk wisdom that said that if two people make a wish and pull on opposite ends of the wishbone until it breaks, the wish of the person with the longer end will come true. The pony never arrived, in case you are curious.

I remember when I was twelve years old languishing for three weeks with a horrific bout of the flu, which seemed to last three months in my young mind, and finally having an appetite after an eternity of clear liquids. My mother roasted a chicken sprinkled with a bit of Lawry's seasoned salt (ubiquitous at the time) and served the golden bird with tender green beans and creamy whipped potatoes, both lavished with butter. I still remember the miracle of my reawakened taste buds and appetite that night, and the knowing reassurance that I would indeed live. That menu still reigns supreme as my comfort-food meal of choice.

### The Southern Chicken

Chicken is among the most iconic foods in the South, and our connections to it run deep. True Southern fried chicken is the chicken dish many dream of long after they've left the South. Sunday dinner here has always been a special meal, and if the preacher was coming, there would surely be chicken on the menu, demonstrating the family's largess in serving a precious dish. Prior to the 1940s, chicken was more expensive than beef or pork. Families with chickens in the yard were reluctant to kill their egg-laying hens, though by the time those hens finished their usefulness as layers, they were tough old birds, fit only for stew. In the post-World War II South, chicken farming became industrialized, lowering the price, and you could buy chicken nearly everywhere. The poultry industry hit the jackpot when high cholesterol was linked with heart disease. Red meat consumption dropped, and chicken, which is low in cholesterol, was declared a healthier protein. As the popularity of chicken grew, it became a staple for family meals. As distribution widened, there seemed to be "a chicken in every pot."

In what began as a "servistation" in 1930 in Corbin, Kentucky, Colonel Harland Sanders built a motel and restaurant on his gas station property and turned the fried chicken from his restaurant into a franchise known the world over. He invented the process of frying his chicken in large pressure cookers and controlled his secret recipe of eleven herbs and spices by packaging and selling the seasoning mixture to Kentucky Fried Chicken franchisees, never parting with the recipe. The colonel helped to make fried chicken a national dish.

But Southerners have strong ideas about fried chicken and what makes the best fried chicken. In 1985, the legendary chef Bill Neal wrote in his acclaimed book *Southern Cooking*, "Southern fried chicken is the center of more controversies than perhaps any other item of food." Frying in lard, shortening, or oil; cooking in a cast-iron skillet or not; and even the flouring method—dry-wet-dry or just dry—are all points of great debate. Do you pat your chicken in flour only once? Or do you then dip it in an egg wash and flour again?

Brining today is more popular than ever, and chefs are creating inventive brines with molasses or beer, while home cooks tend to use buttermilk or sweet tea brines. John T. Edge, writer and director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, gets into the fray in his book *Fried Chicken*, declaring, "By my reckoning, fried chicken must have a bone."

The Chicken Bone Express is the name used to identify the northbound train travels of African Americans during periods of migration out of the South. Fried chicken was the logical food choice for a portable meal for travelers prevented from using whites-only dining establishments. But even

before those routes were so-named, in the days just after the Civil War, a group of black women in Gordonsville, Virginia, began to serve food to train travelers who stopped at the prime rail junction of two railroads there. Denied licenses and permits to set up inside the station, they approached the train's opened windows from the track side, offering fried chicken, biscuits, pies, and coffee. Breasts and legs sold for a dime; backs and wings for a nickel. The women called themselves "waiter-carriers" and were welcomed by the travelers as there were no dining cars at that time. Enterprises such as theirs became an important source of income and independence for black women. In honor of those entrepreneurs, a plaque commemorating them was placed near the tracks in front of the Exchange Hotel. Be sure to see the recipe Ode to the Women of Gordonsville, Virginia, on page 58.

Southern cuisine owes a substantial debt to enslaved Africans and African Americans who have contributed their vast knowledge of their own culinary heritage and foodways to the southern table. Many of the most beloved southern foods, such as okra, yams, rice, and so much more, originated in Africa and made their way to our southern farms and kitchens by way of African American cooks who used skills that were passed down orally for generations and then went unacknowledged for generations in writing. Our sideboards would not be what they are today without the tremendous contributions of these unsung cooks.

Today, the South dominates the chart in annual poultry production. The state of Georgia leads the pack, with Alabama, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Mississippi rounding out the top five producers. Georgia produces seven billion pounds of chicken annually—that's about 26 million pounds per day. Americans eat an average of eighty-five to ninety pounds per person annually. And to think it was only about thirty-six pounds per person in 1965.

Gainesville, Georgia, became the "poultry capital of the world" thanks to the work of Jesse Jewell, who was a pioneer in the poultry industry. As the Great Depression drained the feed and seed company his father started, Jewell saw a way to increase the grainsales. He sold grain to cash-poor farmers on credit and gave them baby chicks to raise. When the chicks were grown, Jewell bought the chicks back at a price to provide money to the farmer to payoff the feed debt and to give the farmer a profit from raising the chicks. By 1954 Jewell had his own hatcheries, feed mill, and processing plant, making him the innovator of the first vertically integrated poultry business. He is also credited with introducing frozen chicken to the marketplace. Jewell sold the business in the 1960s, after a very successful career. He was a leader in the industry nationally and lived to see Gainesville grow exponentially in the poultry market, helping to make Georgia the number one producer of chicken in the United States.

With industrialization came low prices, but its cost to chickens was steep. Crowded cages, poor diet, antibiotics, and hormones became the norm. Over time, and with a few well-publicized public health issues arising, consumers began to care about how animals were raised and cared for, as well as the health and safety conditions for poultry workers. The farm-to-table movement introduced small-scale farmers to more and more consumers and has increased the visibility and public awareness of humanely raised and more flavorful meat. Animal welfare laws have been slow to address the plight of the industrial chicken, but that is beginning to change for the better.

END

## INTERNET CATEGORY

Second Prize \$100

### **“Good Graces”**

**By Carolyn Phillips, Alameda, California**

<https://lifeandthyme.com/reflections/good-graces/>

My new Chinese mother-in-law is visiting us at our grungy little studio apartment in Long Beach, and she is definitely not impressed. Sitting there on a cool autumn day in 1978 with her son – my husband – perched protectively beside me, I plaster a welcoming smile on my face and try to look delighted to see her as I pour some oolong tea into our mismatched mugs.

She scans the place with hooded eyes, giving monosyllabic responses in her very northern accent to my intensely chipper little queries in tortured Mandarin, and strenuously avoiding a glance in my direction. She is obviously mystified as to why she has to be in such a cheap dive, why her eldest son should be letting her down so completely, and most of all why she has to be confronted with the impossibly foreign bride he recently brought back with him from Taiwan.

No guidelines exist on the proper way to weasel into a Chinese mother-in-law’s good graces, and I’m foundering in the dark. I offer her some candies and nuts, but they cannot be expected to wield much magic here. No, for that I have to wait another 10 minutes, when the contents of the bamboo baskets steaming away on our chipped Wedgewood stove will save me. Or not.

The problem is, I don’t know what is going to happen. I am only certain that she thoroughly dislikes me. No, dislike is much too mild a word for what’s going on here. My mind runs over as many escalating verbs as I can list, while the other half of my brain fretfully attempts to come up with something clever to say during those long, awkward silences.

I realize now I should have known better than to take her dislike, distaste, opposition, aversion, hostility, abhorrence, repugnance, hatred, loathing, detestation, repulsion and utter antipathy for me as something personal. It’s obvious in hindsight that she lived in fear unintelligible America might some day work its way into her carefully molded Chinese world. And now a white girl was finagling her way into the family tree, muddying ancient traditions, upsetting the ancestors and insistently blurring the unblemished Chinese bloodlines that had demarcated their lives for millennia. As far as she was concerned, I was a disaster of epic proportions.

Still quite oblivious to my role in this drama, I have invited her over just to feed her, to get to know her, and to give her a chance to know me. I happen to have one arrow left in my quiver, though: I have always loved to cook. I figure that I might be able to use this to my advantage, for she almost never gets to eat dishes from her home in North China. Instead, the clan’s feasting tends to take place mainly in one or another of greater Los Angeles’s Cantonese dining palaces that feature the glorious foods of the South, where our upcoming dinner lazes around in gigantic tanks by our table and shiny lacquered ducks hang in windows before being whacked up and served on massive white platters.

My mother-in-law devours her meals with gusto at times like this, and I revel in these temporary ceasefires in her war against my presence, when the only sound at our table is that of eating. Her family dives into plates of massive steamed prawns with roe still clasped between their tiny legs or

coral-hued crabs studded with black beans and chopped garlic. Shreds of poached chicken are dipped in salty oils seasoned with ginger and green onions, while precise squares of roast suckling pig perch on savory soybeans. It's all utterly delicious and yet all downright nerve-wracking.

The good news is that she cheers up considerably when she is full. This must be a congenital trait, for in becoming the newest Mrs. Huang on the block I have discovered that feeding my husband his childhood favorites is the easiest way to make him happy. Before he came along, I had never seen such a strong connection between eating and mood. Now that we are in Long Beach, I start to connect the dots: like mother, like son.

However, even if I do find that edible Proustian key to her psyche, I worry that this tough little cookie won't crumble very easily. She is as notoriously closemouthed about herself as a Cold War spy. She won't even tell anyone her birthdate. All we are certain of at that point is that once upon a time she had grown up in Beijing's main seaport, Tianjin, as the pampered little daughter of a warlord.

Nevertheless, I pester my husband for more clues, and one day he mentions the steamed little thimbles called chestnut *wowotouer*. When a tattered Chinese memoir tells me that such pastries had also been a favorite of the Dowager Empress Cixi, I can't help but make a few inappropriate connections in my mind between the famed old lady who had once terrorized the Forbidden Palace and the one who is so nonchalantly intimidating me now.

We manage to get our hands on one or two old cookbooks, and before long I have mastered a handful of North China dishes that I think just might be the ticket, including those thimbles. Rich brown, slightly sweet, and naturally smoky in aroma, these are fashioned out of dried Chinese chestnuts, a half pound of hard little nuggets that have to be soaked, peeled, steamed and then finely ground up into a paste before being mixed with flour and leavening. They are a labor of love – or, if not love, then at least a desperate longing for acceptance.

And so on this morning, with two baskets of these *wowotouer* steaming behind me on the stove, I consider myself armed and ready for an audience with my mother-in-law. More carefully honed weapons from North China are set out in this battle array: Two-dozen buttery sesame cookies, a large pot of creamy walnut soup, and a red-cooked chicken with mounds of black mushrooms and mealy potatoes just in case she stays long enough for dinner, plus a pyramid of homemade steamed buns rolled up into twists around specks of green onions and ground Sichuan peppercorns. I have organized my master plan down to the last detail as if it were the invasion of Normandy. Now I just need those starchy little thimbles and their backups to flip the right switches in my mother-in-law's mind.

As she sits there at my kitchen table this afternoon, aromatic tendrils from the bamboo steamer begin to attract her attention. She sniffs the air and keeps looking in the stove's direction. Even though she won't deign to ask me what I'm making, I feel the first small glimmers of hope.

When the timer goes off and I open a basket, her eyes twinkle as she recognizes the pastries of her childhood. She plucks one up with her chopsticks, bites into it, and lets out an appreciative little sigh. As we eat our way through the first round, I ask her when she had last eaten these *wowotouer*, and she tells us a bit about her home back in Tianjin, her mother, her uncles, her nanny.

She expands on her story over the second basket. She talks about being the only child of a powerful commander, a man she could only worship from afar, but also someone who eventually abandoned his little family when his wife did not bear him the son he so desperately craved. Her eyes flash as she remembers the guilt and anger she felt at having been born a mere girl. I murmur something consoling and most likely incredibly feeble as I serve her a plate of hot cookies and portion out the softly sweet soup.

As she nibbles on these, she remembers someone saying that her father had taken on yet another young wife, or maybe it was a concubine, who finally bore him a male heir. He was so proud of this accomplishment that he paraded his troops in front of them. Not long after that, he was shot during an insurrection. No one knows for certain what happened to the body, or to the young mother, or even to the infant son.

The light in our apartment starts to fade as I heat up the chicken and buns. I can see my thoughts reflected in my husband's face as he digests this news about the possibility of an uncle being out there somewhere. I continue to feed her food from her past as she feeds us her memories.

Left to her own devices for the first time in her life, her mother took to running a shipping warehouse in Tianjin. She prospered in her newfound freedom, and she did this while tottering around on excruciatingly tiny bound feet. Like most Han Chinese girls, all the bones in her feet had been broken so that the heel and toes could curl toward each other and form a stunted ball three inches long. The agony of learning to walk on bone shards in submissive silence was considered good training for the bitter life a girl could look forward to back then in the good old days. I try to imagine someone actually crushing a little daughter's feet so that she could eventually be handed over to some man to use as he pleased, but fail miserably and instead just feel terribly cold inside.

As my mother-in-law reaches out and refills my cup, I do not know whether I am more shocked by the senseless cruelties in her story or by the fact that she has just now actually served me tea. She takes a sip and continues. It didn't happen to her, thank the heavens and the earth, she says. The feudal ways were finally disappearing in China, and her independent mother wanted to see her daughter walk and even run with ease – simple pleasures that she, of course, had never enjoyed.

This decision ended up allowing my mother-in-law to escape just as the Japanese were poised to invade Tianjin in 1937. Japan's soldiers were notorious for their almost inhuman savagery – especially toward women – and the city was preparing itself for a siege and bombardment, and then the inevitable horrors and humiliations of a long occupation. She tells us proudly of how she hacked off her black tresses before putting on boy's clothes and stowing away on a ship bound for Vietnam. Though little more than a teenager, she hiked from there across Southeast Asia and up the Burma Road into China's wartime capital of Kunming in Yunnan province.

She blossomed in the tropical air of the central highlands to become a true beauty, and before long she married a dashing fighter pilot from the southern province of Guangdong. She eventually bore her husband four children, decamped with them to Taiwan when the communists won the civil war, and finally followed her family to the United States.

As she slows down, I realize from her story that she had never managed to leave China – and especially her hometown – behind. There was too much unsettled business back there in Tianjin that still had to be addressed, processed and perhaps even forgiven. And then by never bothering to learn to drive or speak much English or even make a friend or two here, she had managed to keep

America a distant reality safely beyond her family's walls. That is, at least until I came along. My defensiveness wanes as I no longer see her as my tormentor, but rather as someone who has simply turned her life in on itself.

Slowly unraveling herself from her memories, my mother-in-law finishes the last of her dinner. We empty our teacups. She has run out of words to put to her thoughts. She looks much frailer than I have ever seen her, but the disapproving crease between her eyebrows has softened. As we say our goodbyes, I give her a tiny hug that at first makes her freeze. Then, she tentatively squeezes me back before her son drives her home.

END

## INTERNET CATEGORY

Third Prize \$50

### **“Why I Garden”**

**By Elaine Cicora, Macedonia, Ohio**

<http://growforthmag.com/why-i-garden/>

A recent Saturday morning found me padding about the kitchen, coffee cup in hand, when I spied two beady eyes, surrounded by a vibrating orb of iridescence, peering at me through the French doors.

“Hank the Hummingbird is back,” I called to my husband. “He’s been checking out the petunias in the window box again.”

Hank (and yes, I do name all our feathered and furred visitors) is also fond of the honeysuckle vines twining around the air conditioning unit on the south side of our suburban split level. Sometimes I see him perched, in a rare moment of stillness, in our locust tree. Other times, he zooms across the deck on his way to a neighbor's flower patch. Along with the hawk moths and swallowtails, the blue jays and the woodpeckers, the raccoons that raid the compost, and even the skunks that — for reasons all their own — keep trying to excavate my Japanese maple tree, Hank is a welcome presence on my property.

Or more correctly, he makes me feel like a welcomed guest on his. When it comes to hobbies, I'm not known for my stick-to-it-iveness. Stacks of forgotten quilt squares, dusty boxes filled with scrapbooking supplies, even guitars and dulcimers now tucked beneath beds or hanging on walls in hopes of passing as folk art: All testify to the fact that my avocational interests are as fickle as a libertine's glance.

Yet I've been a constant gardener for more than half a century. Why, I wondered, has this one activity become a part of my identity, when so many other hobbies and interests have fallen away?

It's not like my family needs the food. Sure, back in the day — in the 1970s, when I became really serious about playing in the dirt — the chances of finding a Brandywine tomato, fresh-dug spuds or dew-kissed berries in your friendly neighborhood Fazio's was nil. Nada. Not happening.

(To illustrate just how far we've come on that topic, I distinctly remember standing in my field of basil, circa 1977, and presciently wondering aloud to my husband if there wasn't a chef somewhere

in Northeast Ohio who would like to buy some of my bounty. “Why would a chef want to buy locally grown herbs?” he asked incredulously. “Dream on.”)

But today, with the easy exchange between farmer and fork bearer, it is a simple thing to score a couple pounds of heirloom toms when you need them; far easier, in fact, than going through the trouble of planting and pampering your own. Count the cost of seeds, plants, gardening soil, mulch and fertilizer, and buying at the farmers market is probably cheaper too.

As for the healthful impetus toward sinking one’s hands in the soil, the link between gardening and wellness is well documented. Whether it’s the sunshine, the exposure to soil microbes, the physical exertion, or some ineffable chemical compound that exists only in a freshly picked pepper, scientific studies have demonstrated repeatedly that gardening can measurably reduce stress levels, boost brain function, build self-esteem, and rev up the production of serotonin.

Psychology Today, for one, reported on a 2007 study by University of Colorado neuroscientist Christopher Lowry, then working at Bristol University in England. Lowry found that certain strains of soil-borne mycobacteria sharply stimulated the human immune system. The same bacteria also boosted serotonin levels in the brains of mice.

But there is a telling caveat, and it’s one based on our contemporary culture’s obsession with “hygiene.” As author Daniel A. Marano points out in the article, “Accumulating evidence suggests that lack of exposure to ... common dirt-borne pathogens early in life—resulting from deliberate attempts to sanitize our environments—might explain the sharp rise in chronic inflammatory, allergic, and immune disorders (such as asthma and inflammatory bowel disease) in the industrialized world.

“The hygiene hypothesis suggests that there are real costs to displacement from the natural world. It disrupts a deep and direct connection we have to the soil and its resident organisms, a connection that our own immune and nervous systems have relied on for well-being all along.

“Getting out in the garden plants us back in what now appears to be our optimal habitat. Eating fruits and vegetables—even antioxidant-rich tomatoes, melons, beets, cabbage, and berries—turns out to be only half of a newly evolving story of health. Our bodies and brains depend on the whole experience of growing our own. Our mental and physical health seem to be deeply rooted in the dirt.”

Amen to that.

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I grew up the daughter and granddaughter of Italian gardeners. Much of my toddlerhood was spent on the back of a tractor, learning from my grandfather the names of all the trees and shrubs he grew in his nursery. In the winter, I visited him in his greenhouse, where he grew fig trees and lemons (and stashed cases of POC beneath his workbench); to this day, the aroma of a coal-burning fire evokes the warmest of memories.

My father oversaw an enormous vegetable garden, bordered on one side by grape arbors, on another by a mountainous compost pile, and on a third by a towering row of garlic plants. Beans, corn, blueberries, zucchini, peppers and tomatoes: I took them all for granted when they showed up on our dinner plates night after night, fresh in season and frozen or canned the rest of the year.

Mostly I was assigned to weeding, a task that, as a girly girl with a horror of spiders, I both hated and feared. In retrospect, those hours spent crawling between the rows in the company of my taciturn dad were irreplaceable, both as a learning and a bonding experience.

Despite the predictable distractions of the 1960s and 70s, I never gave up on gardening. I dug up the soil around a rented shanty in Akron and put in tomato plants and marigolds. In Kent, I foraged for herbs among the overgrowth surrounding our tiny apartment. And when my granddad's former 3.5-acre evergreen nursery became available, I jumped at the chance to buy it.

You can grow a lot of things on 3.5 acres, and we did. Asparagus and zucchini. Beans, broccoli, and Brussels sprouts. Cabbages and kohlrabi. Kale and chard. Parsnips, carrots and potatoes. Did somebody say "peppers?" California Wonders, sweet banana, cayenne and jalapeno. We had a grape arbor, a raspberry patch and an old, weary apple orchard that I nonetheless managed to coax a few batches of applesauce out of each year. I cooked, canned, dehydrated, froze, fermented and even packed a few things in sawdust and stashed them in a root cellar. I was the wonder of the neighborhood, the envy of our friends, and arguably the most accomplished cook in my family. Still, one of my proudest moments came when my bemused father, a son of the Depression who no doubt wondered why we — children of plenty — still strove so mightily to harvest our own food, looked at my bearded, hoe-wielding husband and declared, "I can't believe you actually turned that boy into a farmer."



Children change everything.

As our family grew, it became apparent that maintaining the country homestead wasn't going to cut it. My husband wanted our kids to have sidewalks to skate and ride bikes on. I wanted them to have neighborhood playmates. We both wanted to stop spending every spare minute laboring over our back-to-the-land lifestyle.

Still, even in suburbia, the gardening continued, albeit on a much smaller scale. As a covenant of our ongoing faith, we installed a bed of asparagus; the slender stalks require three years of growth before the first harvest. There was no room for corn, but plenty of room for beans. No raspberries, perhaps, but radishes proved a hit with the younger generation. As a result, these suburban children grew up planting, harvesting and eating what they had helped grow. At 2, our youngest developed a marked jones for homemade pesto; our oldest, a solemn and thoughtful child, would declare gravely before most dinners, "This is what a farmer eats."

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Over the years, our backyard garden — along with our energy and ambition — grew smaller. Pole beans still rappelled down bamboo teepees in the garden plot, but the tomatoes pulled up roots and relocated to pots on the deck. Why break our backs growing carrots, my husband and I began to wonder, when we can buy them for a song at the farmers market? And with our nest empty and just the two of us in the house, does it really make sense to grow all that basil? ‘

The year the perennial asparagus bed finally ran out of steam — after a laudable 20-odd year run — we had to admit that our era of backyard gardening was over.

Which is not to say I no longer garden.

This year, I've reimagined my deck as a garden plot, with edibles replacing most of my usual ornamentals. Parsley and tarragon grow predictable well in one window box; an experimental zucchini stretches out in another, its expanding length lashed loosely to the deck railing for support. Potted rosemary sits on the coffee table in place of the usual petunias. A mix of leaf lettuces — enough to keep us in daily salads for several fortnights — wink from a whiskey barrel. And as the piece de resistance, this spring I splurged on a massive trug-style planter. Capacious enough to hold five heirloom tomato plants, three pepper plants and two basils, not to mention the oregano and thyme, the trug is a waist-high back saver, and weeding it takes all of two minutes.

What I don't grow, I secure from friends, trips to farmers markets and roadside stands. Fresh, local produce still stars at nearly every meal, the freezer still overflows with pesto and zucchini bread, and I can still while away a sunny afternoon with my hands stuck deep in the soil. It's just easier than it used to be, as befitting my age and abilities.

So why do I garden? It's everything I've mentioned and more, I suppose.

I garden because it's an invitation to commune with hummingbirds and eavesdrop on the conversations of goldfinches ... to put down my phone and feel the sun on my skin ... to rejoice at the sweetness of a just-picked tomato.

Gardening gives me a reason to love the rain. It reminds me that winter does not last forever. It's a promise that the world will go on.

I garden for health, happiness and a sense of well-being. It's a reflection of my heritage ... a thread to my past ... my gift to the future.

I garden because it's part of Life. And it's a reminder that, especially when I'm in my garden, I am part of Life too.

Now where did I leave those lettuce seeds?

END

## PRINT CATEGORY

Second Prize \$100

### **“Farm to Fable”**

**By Laura Reiley, Tampa, Florida**

Published in the *Tampa Bay Times* and

[www.tampabay.com/projects/2016/food/farm-to-fable/restaurants/](http://www.tampabay.com/projects/2016/food/farm-to-fable/restaurants/)

The restaurant's chalkboard makes claims as you enter from the valet parking lot. At the hostess stand, a cheery board reads, "Welcome to local, farm-fresh Boca."

Brown butcher paper tops tables and lettuces grow along a wooden wall. In a small market case, I see canned goods from here and produce from somewhere. Check the small print: blackberries from Mexico and blueberries from California.

With the tagline "Local, simple and honest," Boca Kitchen Bar Market was among the first wave of farm-to-table restaurants in Tampa Bay to make the assertion "we use local products whenever possible." I've reviewed the food. My own words are right there on their website: "local, thoughtful and, most importantly, delicious."

But I'd been had, from the snapper down to the beef.

It's not just Boca. At Pelagia Trattoria at International Plaza, the "Florida blue crab" comes from the Indian Ocean.

Mermaid Tavern in Seminole Heights shouts "Death to Pretenders" on its menu, but pretends cheese curds are homemade and shrimp are from Florida.

At Maritana Grille at the Loews Don CeSar, chefs claim to get pork from a farmer who doesn't sell to them.

This is a story we are all being fed. A story about overalls, rich soil and John Deere tractors scattering broods of busy chickens. A story about healthy animals living happy lives, heirloom tomatoes hanging heavy and earnest artisans rolling wheels of cheese into aging caves nearby.

More often than not, those things are fairy tales. A long list of Tampa Bay restaurants are willing to capitalize on our hunger for the story.

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People want "local," and they're willing to pay. Local promises food that is fresher and tastes better; it means better food safety; it yields a smaller carbon footprint while preserving genetic diversity; it builds community.

"They say if you spend your money locally, it gets multiplied three times," said Michael Novilla, who owns Nova 535 event space in St. Petersburg and tries to buy local, from soup to soap.

He was speaking of the local multiplier effect, a term coined in the 1930s by economist John Maynard Keynes. And part of Novilla's motivation is health, finding clean sources for the food he eats. So if he found out markets and restaurants he loved were playing fast and loose with the truth?

"It would be like finding out your husband was married to someone else the whole time."

One of his favorite places to eat local is the Mill.

The Mill in St. Petersburg opened last summer to instant acclaim. With walls that look like tooled leather saddles, a men's room sink inset in a tractor tire and chandeliers made of wagon wheels and mason jars, it's what the designer called "farmhouse industrial chic." Sandwiches run around \$13 at lunch, and at dinner, sous vide fried chicken hits \$24.

We gave it three stars out of four, and in December it was awarded best new restaurant in Florida Trend's Golden Spoon awards.

Servers are likely to start proceedings with a mini-disquisition on how all the food comes from within a couple hundred miles of the restaurant (mileage may vary).

"Everybody's spiel is a little different," said chef-owner Ted Dorsey. "But I say a 250-mile radius." Dorsey said he buys pork from a small Tallahassee farm through food supplier Master Purveyors. But Master Purveyors said it doesn't sell pork from Tallahassee. Dorsey said he uses quail from Magnolia Farms in Lake City. Master Purveyors said the quail is from Wyoming. Dorsey said he buys dairy from Dakin Dairy Farms in Myakka through Weyand Food Distributors. Weyand said it doesn't distribute Dakin. Dorsey said he gets local produce from Suncoast Food Alliance and Local Roots. Both said they have not sold to the Mill. He named three seafood suppliers. Two checked out, but a third, Whitney and Sons, said they had not sold to the Mill yet. They hope to in the future.

I called him on all this. He said he needed to speak with his chef, Zach West. When he got back to us, the results didn't get any closer: farmed trout from Idaho, beef from Colorado, yellowfin tuna off the northern East Coast.

"Local Florida proteins are not quality," Dorsey explained. But what about the mileage claims? "Well, we serve local within reason."

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If you eat food, you are being lied to every day.

The food supply chain is vast and so complicated. It has yielded extra-virgin olive oil that is actually colored sunflower oil, Parmesan cheese bulked up with wood pulp, and a horsemeat scandal that, for a while, rendered Ikea outings Swedish meatball-free.

Everywhere you look, you see the claims: "sustainable," "naturally raised," "organic," "non-GMO," "fair trade," "responsibly grown." Restaurants have reached new levels of hyperbole.

What makes buying food different from other forms of commerce is this: It's a trust-based system. How do you know the Dover sole on your plate is Dover sole? Only that the restaurateur said so.

And how can you be sure the strawberries your toddler is gobbling are free of pesticides? Only because the vendor at the farmers market said so.

Your purchases are unverifiable unless you drive to that farm or track back through a restaurant's distributors and ask for invoices.

I did.

For several months, I sifted through menus from every restaurant I've reviewed since the farm-to-table trend started. Of 239 restaurants still in business, 54 were making claims about the provenance of their ingredients.

For fish claims that seemed suspicious, I kept zip-top baggies in my purse and tucked away samples. The Times had them DNA tested by scientists at the University of South Florida. I called producers and vendors. I visited farms.

My conclusion? Just about everyone tells tales. Sometimes they are whoppers, sometimes they are fibs born of negligence or ignorance, and sometimes they are nearly harmless omissions or "greenwashing."

I have been a restaurant critic since 1991 and have always known there are fraudulent menu claims. This "housemade dessert" is Sysco's Fudgy Wudgy chocolate layer cake I've eaten a dozen times. That "fresh snapper" has done serious freezer time. I know about the St. Petersburg restaurant that refilled Evian bottles with tap, the fancy Tampa restaurant where the "house wine" is a dump of open bottles on their last legs.

It was around 2012 that Tampa Bay menus sprouted the sentence "we source locally" near the admonition about consuming raw or undercooked meats. Fiction started to seem like the daily special.

Most restaurants buy food from one of a small handful of distributors who source products in bulk at the best price from around the world.

The national biggies are Sysco and US Foods. Smaller Florida-based companies include Cheney Brothers and Weyand. Then there are specialty distributors such as Master Purveyors in Tampa or Culinary Classics in Orlando. Most restaurants do not have the time or wherewithal to deal directly with farmers and producers; most farmers and producers don't have the infrastructure to do their own sales, marketing and delivery.

So the storytelling begins.

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Mermaid Tavern has been a Seminole Heights draw for craft beer since it opened in 2011. In 2015, Gary Moran, chef-owner of the defunct restaurant Wimauma, took over in the kitchen at the restaurant owned by Becky Flanders and Lux DeVoid, tweaking an edgy, independent-minded menu.

The restaurant's tagline is "Death to Pretenders," and one of the appetizers is the "F\*\*k Monsanto Salad." Monsanto, if you need a reminder, has come under fire for innovations such as Agent Orange, Roundup and genetically modified "frankenfoods."

The menu reads: This menu is free of hormones, antibiotics, chemical additives, genetic modification, and virtually from scratch. We fry in organic coconut oil and source local distributors, farmers, brewers and family wineries ... Our fish is fresh from Florida or sustainable/wild fisheries.

During Tampa Bay Beer Week, I stopped in to eat.

"Do you make your cheese curds here?"

"Yes," said the bartender, "everything is made in house from scratch."

Only it's not. Those cheese curds arrive in a box. The fish and chips, which the menu says uses wild Alaskan pollock, are made from frozen Chinese pollock treated with sodium tripolyphosphate, a common preservative.

And although the menu says its shrimp are Florida wild caught, they are actually farm-raised in India, Preference Brand from Gulf Coast Seafood.

Moran didn't deny it.

"We try to do local and sustainable as much as possible, but it's not 100 percent," he said. "For the price point we're trying to sell items, it's just not possible."

And that F\*\*k Monsanto Salad? Moran said he buys his produce at wholesaler Sanwa on Hillsborough Avenue. According to Sanwa produce buyer Beatrice Reyes, while produce is labeled by country of origin, it would not be labeled as "local" or "non-GMO." Unless you're buying from Sanwa's small organic section, there's no way to assure you're getting non-GMO. Even some certified organic foods have been found to contain GMOs.

Could some of the ingredients in the salad be grown from Monsanto seed?

"It's really hard to find non-GMO produce," Moran said.

Moran followed up via email, claiming to also shop at farmers markets and providing a list of ingredients he believes to be non-GMO.

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Government oversight regarding the word "local" is nearly non-existent. In many cases, farmers police things themselves.

Jim Wood pasture-raises Hereford pigs at his Palmetto Creek Farms in Avon Park. He's so frustrated with restaurants lying about using his pork that his invoices now say, "You cannot use my name unless you reference the line item sold." That includes chalkboards.

"Chefs make a lot more money by using my name and selling someone else's product," he said. "There are some chefs who respect us and respect our brand, and others who use it for monetary gain without compensating us."

"I don't think Adam Putnam has a clue what's going on."

He was referring to Florida's two-term commissioner of agriculture and likely candidate for governor. Putnam oversees Fresh from Florida, a state-run food marketing program with an annual budget just under \$10 million. The program was created to give small producers an avenue to be part of a brand. Recently, the program has sponsored advertising on an Xfinity Series race car.

In 2013, an On the Menu program was added for restaurants. Restaurants fill out a two-part application and, once accepted, are able to use the Fresh from Florida logo to identify ingredients grown or produced in the state.

Here's how it goes awry.

Restaurants supply vendor information up front about their sources for Florida-grown products, said Putnam's press secretary, Aaron Keller. But otherwise, the program is an honor system. No restaurant has ever been demoted or removed.

And while the Fresh from Florida logo is supposed to apply to specific ingredients, restaurateurs may slap it on menus, giving the impression that it represents everything.

Putnam declined several requests for interviews. Keller said the program was never intended to be regulatory and that its aim was to encourage reputable restaurants to source Florida products. And if they lie?

"Should a restaurant misuse the program or intentionally mislead consumers, that's a different matter entirely, which we would want to pursue."

I called Joel Salatin, arguably the country's most famous farmer, whom you might recognize from the documentary Food, Inc. or from Michael Pollan's book The Omnivore's Dilemma. He opined while waiting for a load of manure at his Polyface farm in Virginia.

"Anybody who trusts the government with our food hasn't been paying attention very much," Salatin said. "The government's track record on food is pretty abysmal."

We're on the front edge of a "local-food tsunami," he said. And nearly no one is keeping watch.

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For 40,000-some Florida restaurants, 191 inspectors from the state's Department of Business and Professional Regulation oversee them all for safety, sanitation and - occasionally - lies. By comparison, Georgia, with about half the population, has 300 inspectors. Ohio has 637 for about 22,000 restaurants.

[Story continues but is beyond the 2,000 word limit. See newspaper's website for continuation.]

END

## PRINT CATEGORY

Third Prize \$50

### **“Ooh, can I have a taste?”**

**By Kim Ode, Edina, Minnesota**

**Published in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune***

Snitching food from your dinner companion’s plate is permissible, although never without permission.

The fork hovers.

An eyebrow arches with the proper sense of supplication.

The desire: a morsel of your tuna lying amid a confetti of blood orange segments and mild Fresno chiles.

Just a taste, hmm? Thanks! Oh, um, can I get a little more sauce on that?

In many restaurants — well, OK, not McDonald’s, etc., where curiosity rarely is an issue — snitching food from companions’ plates is a time-honored behavior. If you’ve waffled between ordering the risotto or the polenta, you can always cadge a bite from those who ordered the other.

Ah, but listen to us, loading the dice with talk of “snitching” and “cadging,” as if this is illicit.

“I prefer to call it sharing, or tasting,” said Carol Manning of Minneapolis, a longtime seeker of all the flavors on the table. “I’m just genuinely interested in what everything tastes like, and other people’s food always looks so interesting.”

Her hovering fork also doubles as a boyfriend test.

“If they don’t want to give me a taste of something, or if they’re not interested in what’s on my plate, well, that’s someone I’m not interested in,” she said, finding such incuriosity rather dull, such territoriality rather selfish.

Of the many social crevasses that crease our lives, one of the craggiest separates those who freely snitch and share from those who believe that if you wanted the squid ink pasta, you should have ordered it. (Jeez!)

To snitchers, trading tastes seems harmless. Yet some diners resist, conscious of germs, wary of reaching across wine glasses, or just honestly wanting to enjoy every smidgen of their crème brûlée.

They might steer clear of Kris Hase, Minneapolis, who doesn’t limit her tasting to friends’ entrees, but has eaten off the plates of strangers.

“I always try to foster a sense of community around me,” she said, “and tasting each other’s food does that.”

Sometimes, the effervescent Hase (“I know how to charm people”) even ends up with food thrust upon her. Take the time at Butcher & the Boar in downtown Minneapolis, one of those restaurants where the tables are set so close, just sitting down calls to mind a strand of dental floss.

But such proximity also prompts conviviality, such as with the mother and son at the next table who gave Hase their leftover cornbread in its cast-iron pan.

“We’d just been chatting,” Hase said. “I ask a lot of questions about what people are eating: ‘What did you order? Would you recommend it?’”

“They were so excited about how good the food was they wanted to share. That’s how I am, too, so we all had a great time.”

Reading the body language

Manning and Hase each stressed that they never snatch without permission. That would be rude. And they’ve grown adept at reading a companion’s body language.

“The people who sort of cradle their plates — you just don’t go there,” Hase said.

Manning said she gives non-sharers several dining opportunities to say yes before she finally gives up.

“A longtime friend is just so not interested in sharing,” she said, despite repeated forays toward her plate. “But I’ve now given up on asking her.”

A poll on Serious Eats, a popular foodie website, once posed the question: “Do you ask before eating off your friend’s plate?” The response overwhelmingly favored asking first, and also not pouting if you are rebuffed.

Several respondents said they employed the strategy of first offering a bit off their own plate, thus encouraging their companions into offering a taste from theirs. “Sort of passive-aggressive, I suppose,” one noted. “But it works.” (Her certificate as an honorary Minnesotan is in the mail.)

Another said groups of good friends order expecting a quasi-potluck experience, “passing around bites on the bread plates.” When one woman dines with her husband, “it’s not unusual for us to swap plates midcourse.”

No worries, said Daniel Post. Sorta.

### Rules, ragu, relationships

Post is the great-great-grandson of etiquette expert Emily Post, and with his cousin Lizzie Post runs the Emily Post Institute and hosts the “Awesome Etiquette” podcast on American Public Media ([infiniteguest.org/awesome-etiquette](http://infiniteguest.org/awesome-etiquette)).

So, is it permissible to share food in a restaurant?

“One of my favorite themes in talking about etiquette is that you have to know the rules to know when to break them,” Post said.

The baseline rule here: You eat off your plate and I eat off mine.

“Having that baseline is important because it helps you get through a meal with more formality.”

But say you’re lunching with a new client and the question of sharing a dessert comes up, he said. He recommends declining, “deferring to that more formal behavior, sticking to the code of conduct I know.”

He quickly added, “But I wouldn’t recommend that for a first date. Ordering a dessert to share may not only be OK and appropriate, but the start of a memory that lasts a lifetime.”

As for the best method of scoring a smidgen of scallop, Post said it’s easier if you proffer a taste and see if it’s reciprocated. At the least, you’ve shown yourself to be a generous soul, which serves a larger goal.

“The way we relate over food is so fundamentally important,” he said. “I don’t think there’s anything inappropriate here. It’s just managing expectations at the table.”

### **When we share, we care**

Indeed, a study in 1997 in the European Journal of Social Psychology found that American college students who shared food were seen as having positive social interactions. Actually feeding food to each other implied a romantic relationship.

Yet the most intimate or heartfelt connections were when one person accepted food that their companion had tasted, bitten or touched — something that researchers called “food consubstantiation,” which pretty much is all the further we need to go on that subject.

Bottom line: When we share, we care.

Still, there are legitimate reasons to keep one’s plate private. Germs, for one.

Manning, a retired internist, said she’s always careful to share tastes from a portion of food she’s not yet touched, and uses clean utensils.

Likewise, she doesn’t share beverages.

And, despite Hase’s theory that food snitching took off in the ’60s era of fondue pots, “what with all those forks flying around,” cultures around the world long have regarded sharing food as a way to strengthen relationships and forge bonds.

Post said he believes that rules of etiquette are founded in consideration, respect and honesty. Thus, snitching with permission is fine, when balanced by offering without sanction.

Hase wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I always offer up as much food as I take,” she said.

Manning agreed. “I can’t think of a time I haven’t offered someone a taste.” Although, she added upon reflection, “sometimes it’s a very little taste.”

Etiquette guru Daniel Post shared a few rules of dining - and one observation about ritual.

- "Once a utensil has been in your mouth, that doesn't go back into a shared or communal dish, or used to pass a taste to someone."
- "If you are going to ask [someone to share food], recognize that it's an imposition."
- "It's easier to offer than to ask."

Finally, he noted anthropologist Margaret Visser's 1992 book, *The Rituals of Dinner*, in which she noted the most sacred and most taboo extremes of dining practices and how, ironically, they are closely related.

The most sacred, she wrote, is the eucharist, in which a wafer representing the body of Christ is offered and consumed.

The most taboo is cannibalism, in which you also eat a body, albeit an actual one. In this case, though, Post said that etiquette forbids any snitching from others' plates.

"You don't eat each other," he said, "and you don't share each other as food."

END