

INTRODUCTION: A COOK'S LIFE (AS YET UNPUBLISHED)

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There is a black and white photograph taken of me when I was about five years old, sitting in Full Pout at our family's picnic table. In the background is the brick fireplace my father built and the profile of an unfamiliar adult. For years after I first saw this photo, probably at age ten or so, the source of my unhappiness was a mystery to me. A few years later, while watching home movies—the kind in which relatives move in herky-jerky motions through holidays, communions and weddings—the mystery was finally solved. There I was on the screen, wearing the same sweater and seated at the same picnic table, when an adult arm reached into the shot and placed a hot dog in front of me, then doused it liberally with mustard. I was, at the time, a confirmed ketchup man and, although there was no audio, I imagined the dialogue as it unfolded all those years ago: I asked for a hotdog with ketchup, reasonably at first, then considerably less so. The mustard-defiled hot dog remained and eventually the pout came out.

It seems I have never liked being told what to eat, by the press, vegetarians, 'foodies' or, apparently, by an anonymous authority figure in grainy black-and-white hound's-tooth Bermuda shorts. I do, however, love learning how other people cook and eat. Bits and pieces of all I have seen make it into my personal database of food smarts, gripes and prejudices. And, when it comes to the people I have cooked with and learned from, I have been incredibly fortunate.

At the time of the Mustard Incident, my likes and dislikes were a pretty simple, clear-cut deal. All that has changed, thanks mainly to the influences of the chefs—famous and not-so-famous—I have cooked with, the travels I have taken and the meals I have enjoyed with friends and family during my 30 years in kitchens of one type or another.

I have lived through Nouvelle Cuisine and witnessed "The Return of Homey Food" heralded annually for the last umpteen years (as if it ever went anywhere). I did not suffer Fusion gladly. At the eye of those and every other 'new' food storm the real pros keep cooking, with a sense of calm rooted in a few

unshakeable principles: Start with good, fresh seasonal ingredients—and not too many of them--don't fuss with them, and rely on a few pieces of well-made equipment to cook them in.

And that is the foundation of my advice to help you learn, or re-learn, the pleasures of sitting down to a meal you make for yourself: Leave the teetering towers of hand picked greenery for the restaurants. Learn to roast a chicken, cook pasta *al dente* and make real soup. Those are the dishes that chefs from *haute-y* to homey make for themselves on a busman's holiday in their own kitchens. I have asked enough of them, or cooked with enough of them, to know that as a fact.

The first well-known chef I met—not in person, that would come later—was Craig Claiborne. We met through the pages of the *New York Times Cook Book*, which I had cajoled my mother into ordering from her book club. From the seventh grade on, when I had to hightail it home as fast as possible from school to baby-sit my sisters, I started playing around with the recipes in Mr. Claiborne's book. From its pages I made good Greek butter cookies and the sorriest excuse for Danish pastry you ever saw. (But then, and now, I cut myself some slack for that one: Maybe Danish was a tad ambitious for a 12-year-old.) But mostly I read, thumbing through the pages imagining the exotic types who could actually pull off paella for twelve and sophisticated households where crocks of Brandied Tutti-Frutti lined the countertops. I still have that book, its cover so badly abused over the years that its spine is showing and the bulk of its pages and glued together with splotches of potato soup or seven-minute frosting. The book is as smudged, dirty and beat up as any cookbook worth the paper it is printed on should be.

Shortly after I met 'Craig' for the first time, I was in freshman in Miss Ries's study hall when I met Mr. Sax. (AKA Richard Sax, who many of you will recognize as the teacher, writer and author of six cookbooks including *Classic Home Desserts*, easily the most approachable, welcoming book of its kind.) He stood in front of the surprised students, in full beard and black Earth shoes, after strolling in to make this simple announcement: Anyone interested in dropping study hall for his Drama class located across the hall should see a guidance

counselor and do so. I had no real interest in taking a drama class, but I didn't in studying either, and something about the way Mr. Sax annoyed Miss Ries with his unannounced entrance and his somewhat subversive invitation made me think it was worth a shot. I ended up taking at least one of Mr. Sax's classes per semester throughout high school, mainly because I liked the guy, but also because we had a mutual interest in food and many conversations about turning that interest into a career.

When I was a junior in high school—and sometime between Drama II and Speech—I applied for and was accepted to Johnson & Wales College (now a University) in Providence, Rhode Island. At the advanced age of seventeen, and right out of high school, I headed to J&W for two years. I don't know that I can recall a specific dish I learned to cook there, but that experience was enough to let me know that there was something to the idea of cooking for a living.

After graduating I headed up to Martha's Vineyard to hook up with Richie again, this time at the Black Dog Tavern, where he had signed on to run the kitchen for a summer. About 20 years before Bill bought Monica's coffee cup at the Black Dog's gift shop, I learned first hand from Richie the importance of simple, local and ultra-fresh ingredients. We had hippies who brought us vegetables from their gardens, local and off-island fishermen who caught fish just for the Black Dog and visits from a spectacularly eccentric woman who picked fresh cress a stream bed near her teepee and walked it to the restaurant cradled in her outstretched peasant dress. We worked with bootleg unpasteurized cream, striped bass so fresh you had to wait for the rigor mortis to pass before you could fillet them and squid that Charlie the waiter caught from his dinghy by using a hook tied to the end of a piece of string. There is nothing like working with ingredients that arrive fresh one or two times a day and are turned almost immediately into dinner. Over the years I have seen that same sort of immediacy in the kitchens where I worked in Italy and, increasingly, right here in the States. But that first lesson in freshness that I learned in the shingled building on Tisbury Harbor was the most poignant and threw out the deepest roots.

I hung out on the Vineyard for a while, but I decided that I couldn't really live there. I didn't own a hammer holster, had no pickup truck (or black Labrador to put in the back of it) and, quite frankly, I sucked at cribbage. I was toying with the idea of moving to New York City, but didn't really have a way to get my foot in the door. That foot came in the form of yet another call from Richie Sax asking if I could sub for him in the test kitchen of Food & Wine magazine while he took a five-week trip to Alsace.

Michael and Ariane Batterberry were among the founders of the slick magazine which had been publishing beautiful, innovative issues for a little more than a year at the time I had signed on. I was like a kid at the circus in the F&W test kitchen, staring wide eyes as just about every chef I had ever read about and admired came by to visit the tiny kitchen and demo a few recipes. I made duck confit with Paula Wolfert, pasta with Marcella Hazan, omelets with Julia Child. I worked on stories that dealt with authentic curries, traditional American foods, regional cuisines from regions I had never heard of. I still make gravlax exactly the way Tore Wretman showed me during a visit to F&W 25 years ago because I haven't found a better way. My five-week stint turned into a year and a half of pure, unadulterated food fun. I continued at Food and Wine after Richie left for London to work with Richard Olney on the legendary Time-Life cooking series and left only when eased out by the sale of the magazine.

During that period, I worked across the hall from Helen Witty, who walked me—with great patience—through the process of writing a recipe. Helen's style managed to be warm and giving and no-nonsense at the same time. Just like my early struggles cooking from recipes became easier with time, writing recipes got to be less of a torturous experience with practice and Helen's help and guidance. At the time, the process seemed a little silly to me. As a professional cook I figured everybody knew how to fillet a fish or clean an artichoke. But those early exercises at the hands of a pro have served me incredibly well. My recipe writing has come a long way since those choppy beginnings, as I learned from other people's style and refined my own, in much the same way my cooking has

evolved. I now look at every recipe I write as a little edge I give to people who might not be as comfortable in a kitchen as I am. Thanks, Helen.

After a short period between jobs ('out of work,' we called it back then) I ended up doing freelance work for Barbara Kafka who at that time, in addition to being a food editor for *Vogue*, was writing cookbooks and consulting on restaurants. I was the link between Barbara's ideas and the finished dish. We made wonderful food during those days, developing recipes for everything from barbecue sauce and onion rings for a national fast food chain to exotic menus for far-flung restaurants. It was Barbara who first urged me to taste, *really taste*, a dish and use that, not convention, as the basis for improving it.

When people heard I was working for Barbara, they would usually say something along the lines of, 'I hear she's difficult.' My standard reply was, 'It's better than working for someone simple.' But the truth is Barbara wasn't hard to work for. Most of the time. Yes, just when you thought you'd hit the culinary nail on the head, Barbara would change her mind about what it was she wanted, based on something she ate the night before or suddenly remembered eating during her college years in Cambridge. But what did that matter? Like my years in the test kitchens, I was being paid to play, to experiment and to gain exposure to ingredients and technique other cooks might never see during a lifetime in a kitchen. One day, for fun, we lined up 6 different types of peppercorns and steeped them in hot oil, cold oil, hot and cold water, and so on. Then we tasted them to see the difference. Try pulling that stunt just before the dinner rush and see what the head chef has to say.

I met Brendan Walsh on one of the projects I worked on with Barbara. He and his band of merry men had invaded New York from small town Connecticut and had been charged with the task of opening a high-profile waterfront restaurant on the East River with a spectacular view of Manhattan. I did my best to hold my own with this bunch of remarkably talented deviants—one of whom 'played' the squeaky broiler drawer in perfect tune to Duran Duran's '*Hungry Like the Wolf*' every time it came on the radio—being thankful when each night's shift was over and we could get down to the business of drinking beer and playing

pool at Branca's, the neighborhood joint. The camaraderie and sense of loyalty that I experienced in that kitchen made me want to get back into that world, which I did off and on for the next several years, balancing that part of the food world with a new interest in writing and recipe development.

When I wasn't in a restaurant kitchen I always felt as though I was missing something. The remarkably clever (and usually filthy) words substituted for the lyrics of popular American standards, chefs visiting the kitchen to shoot the bull, or, most of all, the way a truly good kitchen pulls together and gets the job done. The paradox of a well trained kitchen crew is this: they are both fiercely independent and almost maniacally loyal to each other. There isn't anything someone won't do for you if you ask, but watch your fingers if you dip into somebody else's supply of chopped rosemary without permission. They are also a profoundly unsettled group, mental health wise, and are not particularly careful about who knows it. Mike King, who spent the better part of his day at the riverside restaurant in an eight-by-eight room cutting up fish, once emerged from his 'office' wearing a pair of eyeglasses and a matching purse, both fashioned from the skin of an 18-pound striped bass. I could go on, but most of the people I worked with back then have children old enough to read.

It was being part of the team that helped Brendan open Arizona 206 in 1986 that was the peak of my restaurant experience. In that pint-sized kitchen, Chef Walsh and crew turned out food that was setting Manhattan on fire—not an easy thing to do. The excitement he created, and the dishes he put out were, nothing short of amazing. Like working with Barbara, the ideas that spun out of Brendan's head had the effect of opening my eyes to flavor combinations and possibilities I hadn't thought of before. I remember talking to Brendan on the phone one day when he was describing a lobster salad he was working on. When he got to beef marrow as one of the ingredients I thought, 'Now he's really lost it.' That salad of poached lobster, avocado, barely cooked beef marrow and greens over toasted red pepper brioche is—to this day—one of the best things I've ever eaten. On days off and for months after I left the kitchen, I would go sit

at 206's tiny bar and order randomly from the menu, always expecting that the taste of these dishes in my memory was somewhat exaggerated. It never was.

In another one of those moments where everything comes together (I seem to have had a lot of those), I was asked by Harriet Bell at William Morrow to work with Sylvia Woods. Miss Sylvia, who started as a waitress in a Harlem restaurant and ended up owning it, a good chunk of the rest of the block and a line of specialty foods to boot, is the proprietor of Harlem's famed Sylvia's restaurant. I was asked to get the restaurant's recipes down on paper. It was the first time I melded my restaurant experience with the writer/editor side of my equation, and I had a blast doing it. The image that sticks in my mind from the time I spent in Sylvia's kitchen is the enormous pot used for cooking greens. It stood about 4 feet tall and was almost always on the back burner, filled to close to the top with boiling water and collards. Those greens cooked a good 4 hours, with the constant addition of drippings from the spare ribs pans, the fried chicken pans and so on. Whatever qualms I had about eating greens cooked that long and with so much fat disappeared instantly with the first bite. Once again, everything I thought I knew about greens went out that window on 126th Street. A home-style version of that dish (using considerably less than the 7 cases of collards that the Sylvia's cooks prepared at a clip) is one of my favorite things to make.

In what was to be my last full-time stint (so far) in a restaurant kitchen I hired Bill Hodge as sous-chef for a club-cum-restaurant in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. Bill was a natural born cook who would be working five pots on top of the stoves and two ovenfuls of veal bones before I had my morning coffee and drew up a prep list. (Bill's prep list was always in his head.) For one reason or another, things didn't work out at the club, but something good came of it: Bill and I went on to start Blue Collar Food, a catering company based in Soho. We started up about the same time the coffee bar craze hit New York and we captured a lot of that business right off the bat, supplying them with small sandwiches, brownies, cookies and salads. Our research into this market amounted to this: What Bill and I liked, we made. If people ordered it fine. If not,

we tried something else. What I don't miss about the Blue Collar days was setting the alarm for three A.M. as I did for the three years we ran the company. I do miss the date nut bread and the free-form approach we took to running our business. And I miss cooking with Bill.

While famous people may put their pants on one leg at a time, they—like the rich—are not like you and me. I know, I have worked for some of them. If slinging hash for Bruce Springsteen's wife sounds like your idea of a glam gig, remember this: Although it has not been clinically proven, I am convinced there is a link between a person's first song (or book, film or TV show) making the charts and a total loss of that person's reason. How else can you explain a request for Surf and Turf for eight at ten P.M. in rural New Jersey without any advance notice? (If I could have, I would have. But I couldn't so I didn't.)

Around the same time, Pat Brown, my former boss at CUISINE, called to see if I was available to work with Lidia Bastianich on a new book she was writing. I was disappointed that I couldn't, having just committed to a six-week stint in Bogota, Columbia to work on a project for The Joseph Baum and Michael Whiteman Company. But under the all-things-happen-for-a-reason heading, I made it through the trip to Columbia, and returned to New York to find that Lidia hadn't really gotten started yet. I was, more or less, just in the nick of time. I started out testing a few recipes for *Lidia's Italian Table*, but ended up testing all of them, then editing the whole book, with Pat's input.

I will sum up my experiences with Lidia in a few words: I cook a lot more like her now than I did before I met her. Lidia is another great cook who gets miles out of her ingredients by choosing them carefully and cooking them patiently. Maybe it's patience that I learned most from Lidia. As busy as Lidia is, and as many people as make their way through her restaurants in a day, she still takes the time to coax the most flavor she can out of every ingredient. When I think of Lidia, I see her standing over a pot of risotto, slowly stirring, carefully adding just the right amount of hot stock.

When it came time to shoot the series for PBS that was derived from the book, Lidia tapped me as the guy to run the 'back kitchen' that supplies the set with all the prepped food. When I finished my speech on how I thought Lidia would be better off going with someone who did that for a living, Lidia replied in her typical fashion. "I'd rather have you." And that was pretty much that.

I'm happy Lidia didn't pay attention to me. I picked up the basics of television production pretty quickly and had a blast doing it, getting the same kind of buzz from pulling off the near impossible under incredibly stressful conditions that I got working the line on a busy Saturday night. I also got involved with Geof Drummond and Nat Katzman, the yin-and-yang partners of A La Carte Productions. This led to a host of other television opportunities, most notably a three-week stretch in Cambridge, Massachusetts running the back kitchen for Julia Child and Jacques Pepin's 22-part series *Julia and Jacques: Cooking at Home*. Our prep kitchen consisted of two folding tables set up in Julia's laundry room and a couple of cutting boards balanced on her washer and dryer. We worked incredible hours, with constantly changing show outlines—some of which changed in mid-taping. Despite the stress factor I couldn't have been happier. I got to watch two masters at opposite ends of the spectrum: Jacques the consummate professional with skills and abilities that blow anybody's away and Julia, the home cook guided by common sense and a devotion to good food.

The previously mentioned trip to Bogota reestablished my ties with the Batterberrys and launched another of my mini-careers. Before I left I called Michael, told him of the trip and offered to keep a diary of my experiences in

Columbia. When I returned to New York, I submitted the journal to *Food Arts*, which ran it in two parts. It was the first story I sold to *Food Arts* and the beginning of a long-term affair that continues.

Today, I balk when people ask me what I do. I usually try to get away with “lots of things, all food-related,” but that usually gets me into deeper explanations. On the other hand, “menu and recipe development, restaurant consulting, cookbook editing, television production, journalism and teaching,” has a way of making me sound like some sort of multiple personality disorder. I weave a career from all these threads, balancing stints in restaurants with a position as Editor-at-Large for *Food Arts*, editing and testing recipes for cookbooks with running the ‘back kitchen’ during the taping of television shows. I never set out to inhabit all these worlds, I just followed good food, and here I am. I am lucky and spoiled, and sometimes have to remind myself of that when deadlines from two or more of my worlds collide with me at the center of the impact.

All these people and jobs have shaped how I cook in ways both subtle and profound. A couple of things have remained constant: I still love to cook and I still hate being told what to eat.