

MY PERSONAL STORY

THE RICHNESS OF CONNECTION

“If you take food out of the context of culture and people it has no meaning, no joy, and no place on the center of my table.”

We absorb the most valuable lessons from our parents through how they live their lives. My father, a computer scientist, loved his kitchen, revered heritage grains, and always sought out foods with connection, flavor, and vitality. His father, the Head of Alcohol Studies at Rutgers, became passionate about baking after a trip through France in the early 1950s. Upon return, he lined his home oven with fire bricks and acquired a water mister to simulate the team injected brick ovens he saw in Europe. He boiled bagels, fermented doughs, and injected steam into the bake to facilitate a proper Maillard reaction in the crust. The biochemistry, transformation and taste held tremendous pleasure for him.

Ancient wheats and heirloom rice lined our cupboards when I was growing up. My father used a burr coffee mill to grind his own flours and always found the kitchen to be a primary source of both pleasure and contentment. He sought food that was special, authentic, and meaningful. While traveling in Costa Rica in the 1990s, he befriended a coffee farmer and stayed with him for several nights. They wrote each other afterward, and my father bought green beans from his farm and roasted them in his kitchen for many years. I roasted coffee in my father’s little old toaster oven until it finally gave out last year. This is how food creates meaning in our lives. It is the connection we have to the history or “heritage” of our food source and of all the people connected with it. The more we know, the more meaning there is. Knowing our farmers, knowing the people who work to bring food to your table in exchange for your contribution completes the loop of reciprocal generosity. Some might call this good karma, or paying it forward. Whatever you call it, when you work to make the collective experience better for your fellow humans and aim your efforts carefully at those who appreciate it, a meaningful and fulfilling albeit difficult, challenging and at times brutal life can be lived to its fullest.

My father was also an accomplished flutist, and initially I followed his musical inclinations more than his gustatory ones, pursuing music as my main creative pursuit from the time I was about 10. I was always inspired and nourished by his love of cooking though, and I grew up in a sort of craft kitchen immersion experience. Breakfast consisted of homemade pancakes, crepes, bagels, or muffins. Lunch was leftovers punctuated by milk shakes and yogurt smoothies, and dinner could be anything from gumbo to Buddha’s delight, spaghetti and meatballs, or pad thai. All were made from the most authentic and best ingredients he could find, and inspired by his travels and the people and food he encountered around the world.

Dinner and baked goods were essential to a good day. He sought out international markets and local organic food co-ops, as well as up-and-coming bakeries to satisfy his craving for authentic and interesting foods. He had a small herb and vegetable garden and always stopped at roadside farm stands for the best seasonal produce. He brought home organic yogurt from a small dairy in New Hampshire and explained to me that “this was the good stuff.” My friends liked to stay for dinner, though it was a nu-

My Mother and My Grandmother were both professional visual artists and my mother (Cooper Union and Harvard Graduate) also worked in community organizing and as the Director of Housing for the Mentally Ill Metro Boston for 25 years.

Between my Father’s passion for the culinary world and science smarts (graduated Harvard Magna Cum laude) and my mother’s visual aesthetic abilities and community organizing I had the perfect upbringing to do what I do now. I’d like to think my work is a perfect blend of all my family heritage.



In the fall of 2000, when I was 19, I was down in my basement music studio at my mother’s, practicing percussion, when I was called by my mother to pick up the phone. It was my dad. (My parents had separated.) I couldn’t call him back? It was extremely unusual for my father to call me like that, and I was concerned. It was not unfounded. He had been experiencing stomach pains for several months and had been to the doctor again. The news was not good. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and would most likely lose the battle to it in the next six months.

My world was rocked. My father was my best friend. At 53, he was recently remarried, enjoying his life more than ever, and could not believe the news. Once pancreatic cancer is detectable, it’s almost always too late. My step mother, Nancy, sister Jessica, and I took care of my father throughout his illness, and he passed away the following May. I was devastated, but I didn’t realize how much. I’d been holding back much of my grief for half a year and I wasn’t about to stop, although these things have every way of catching up with you, and in time of course they did.

I’d been accepted to Bennington College the year before, and while my father was sick I decided to matriculate the following autumn. When I arrived at Bennington I was still holding myself together, but over the first month or two I began to fall into severe depression. I simply could not move my body at times. It was as if my body was leaden.

Resilience and Reconfiguration

Despite my intense grief, I somehow found myself with a new friend. I didn’t realize it at the time but in hindsight I think I was drawn to her because she helped me remember and feel connected to my father. Adrienne was smart, well-read, creative, and loved food and cooking. Introverted but sweet and feisty, she was my new best friend and eventual partner in next level food exploration.

Keeping the memories of my father alive was and still is very important to me. I have come to realize that the intersection of the memories of my father and the shared love of cooking with my new partner was a profound way for me to keep my father’s spirit alive. Food slowly became the centerpiece of my life and then my work. I now think that my father’s passion for cooking and baking in the kitchen was his way of staying connected to his father.

In my early twenties I was still deeply connected to and working in music. My father had believed in me and supported me throughout my musical journey. I felt I had to continue my music without him. But food allowed me to find my way back to him. Food soon became my new calling.