

PERSONAL HISTORY

## SERIAL MONOGAMY

*My cookbook crushes.*

BY NORA EPHRON

My mother gave me my first cookbook. It was 1962, and I began my New York life with her gift of "The Gourmet Cookbook" (Volume I) and several sets of sheets and pillowcases (white, with scallops). "The Gourmet Cookbook" was enormous, a tome, with a gloomy reddish-brown binding. It had been assembled by the editors of *Gourmet* and was punctuated by the splendid, reverent, slightly lugubrious photographs of food that the magazine was famous for. Simply owning it had changed my mother's life. Until the book appeared, in the fifties, she had been content to keep as far from the kitchen as possible. We had a wonderful Southern cook named Evelyn Hall, who cooked American classics like roast beef and fried chicken and world-class apple pie. But, thanks to "The Gourmet Cookbook," Evelyn began to cook chicken Marengo and crème caramel; before long, my mother herself was in the kitchen, whipping up Chinese eggrolls from scratch. A recipe for them appears on page 36 of the book, but it doesn't begin to convey how stressful and time-consuming an endeavor it is to make eggrolls, nor does it begin to suggest how much tension a person can create in a household by serving eggrolls that take hours to make and are not nearly as good as Chinese takeout.

Owning "The Gourmet Cookbook" made me feel wildly sophisticated. For years, I gave it to friends as a wedding present. It was an emblem of adulthood, a way of being smart and chic and college-educated where food was concerned, but I never really used it in the way you really use a cookbook: by propping it open on the kitchen counter,

cooking from it, staining its pages with spattered butter and chocolate splashes, conducting a unilateral dialogue with the book itself—in short, by having a relationship with it.

The cookbook I used most during my first year in New York was a small volume called "The Flavour of France." It was given to me by a powerful older



*Like most relationships, cookbook-love is all about projection.*

woman I'll call Jane, whom I met that summer in the city. She was twenty-five, and she took me in hand and introduced me not just to the cookbook but also to Brie and *vitello tonnato* and the famous omelette place in the East Sixties. In fact, the first time I went to the omelette place, which was called Madame Romaine de Lyon, I was a mail girl at *Newsweek*, making fifty-five dollars a week,

and I almost fainted when I saw that an omelette cost \$3.45. Jane also introduced me to the concept of One Away. You were One Away from someone if you had both slept with the same man. Jane had slept with a number of up-and-coming journalists, editors, and novelists, the most famous of whom, at the end of their sole night together, gave her a copy of one of his books, a box of which was conveniently situated right next to his front door. According to Jane, his exact words, as she prepared to leave, were "Take one on your way out."

The night President Kennedy was shot, Jane was having a dinner party, which went forward in spite of the tragedy, as these things tend to do. Jane served as an appetizer *cèleri rémoulade*, a

dish that I had never before encountered and that remains a mystery to me. A few months later, I had a thing with someone Jane had had a thing with. Jane and I were now One Away from one another, and, interestingly, that was the end of our friendship, though not the end of my connection to "The Flavour of France."

"The Flavour of France" was the size of a datebook, just six by eight inches. It contained small blocks of recipe text by Narcissa Chamberlain and her daughter, Narcisse, and large black-and-white travel photographs of France taken by Narcissa's husband (and Narcisse's father), Samuel Chamberlain. I didn't focus much on the curious Chamberlain family as I cooked my way through their cookbook, and, when I did, I usually hit a wall: for openers, I couldn't imagine why anyone named Narcissa would name her daughter Narcisse. Also, I couldn't figure out how they

collaborated. Did the three of them drive around France together, fighting over whose turn it was to sit in the back seat? Did Narcisse like working with her parents? And, if so, was she crazy? But the Chamberlains' recipes were simple and foolproof. I learned to make a perfect chocolate mousse that took about five minutes, and a wonderful dessert of caramelized baked pears with cream. I made

LAURIE ROSENWALD

those pears for years, although chocolate mousse eventually faded from my repertory when the crème-brûlée years began.

Just before I moved to New York, two historic events had occurred: the birth-control pill was invented and the first Julia Child cookbook was published. As a result, everyone was having sex, and when the sex was over you cooked something. One of my girlfriends moved in with a man she was in love with. Her mother was distraught and warned that he would never marry her, because she had already slept with him. "Whatever you do," my friend's mother said, "don't cook for him." But it was too late. She cooked for him. He married her anyway. This was right around the time that arugula was discovered, which was followed by endive, which was followed by radicchio, which was followed by frisée, which was followed by the three M's—mesclun, mache, and microgreens—and that, in a nutshell, is the history of the past forty years from the point of view of lettuce. But I'm getting ahead of the story.

By the mid-sixties, Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," Craig Claiborne's "New York Times Cook Book," and Michael Field's "Cooking School" had become the holy trinity of cookbooks. At this point, I was working as a reporter at the *Post* and living in the Village. If I was home alone at night, I cooked myself an entire meal from one of these cookbooks. Then I sat down in front of the television set and ate it. I felt very brave and plucky as I ate my perfect dinner. O.K., I didn't have a date, but at least I wasn't one of those lonely women who sat home with a pathetic container of yogurt. Eating a meal for four that I had cooked for myself was probably equally pathetic, but it never crossed my mind.

I cooked every recipe in Michael Field's book, and at least half the recipes in the first Julia, and as I cooked I had imaginary conversations with them both. Julia was nicer and more forgiving—she was on television by then and famous for dropping food, picking it up, and throwing it right back into the pan. Michael Field was sterner and more meticulous; he was almost fascistic. He was full of prejudice about things like the garlic press (he believed that using



one made the garlic bitter), and I threw mine away for fear that he would suddenly materialize in my kitchen and disapprove. His recipes were precise, and I followed them to the letter; I was young, and I believed that if you changed even a hair on a recipe's head it wouldn't turn out right. When I had people to dinner, I loved to serve Michael's overcomplicated recipe for chicken curry, accompanied by condiments and pappadums—although I sometimes served instead a marginally simpler Craig Claiborne recipe for lamb curry that had appeared in his Sunday column in the *Times Magazine*. There were bananas in it, and heavy cream. I made it recently and it was horrible.

Craig Claiborne worked at the *Times* not just as the chief food writer but also as the restaurant critic. He was hugely powerful and influential, and I developed something of an obsession with him. Craig—everyone called him Craig even if they'd never met the man—was renowned for championing ethnic cuisine, and as his devoted acolyte I learned to cook things like moussaka and tabbouleh. Everyone lived for his Sunday recipes; it was the first page I turned to in the Sunday *Times*. Everyone knew he had a Techbuilt house on the bay in East Hampton, that he'd added a new kitchen to it, that he usually cooked with the

French chef Pierre Franey, and that he despised iceberg lettuce. You can't really discuss the history of lettuce in the past forty years without mentioning Craig; he played a seminal role. I have always had a weakness for iceberg lettuce with Roquefort dressing, and that's one of the things I used to have imaginary arguments with Craig about.

For a long time, I hoped that Craig and I would meet and become friends. I gave a lot of thought to this eventuality, most of it concerning what I would cook if he came to my house for dinner. I was confused about whether to serve him something from one of his cookbooks or something from someone else's. Perhaps there was a protocol for such things; if so, I didn't know what it was. It occurred to me that I ought to serve him something that was "my" recipe, but I didn't have any recipes that were truly mine—with the possible exception of my mother's barbecue sauce, which mostly consisted of Heinz ketchup. But I desperately wanted him to come over. I'd read somewhere that people were afraid to invite him to dinner. I wasn't; I just didn't know the man. I must confess that my fantasy included the hope that after he came to dinner he would write an article about me and include my recipes; but, as I say, I didn't have any.

Meanwhile, I got married and en-



tered into a series of absolutely pathological culinary episodes. I wrapped things in phyllo. I stuffed grape leaves. There were soufflés. I took a course in how to use a Cuisinart food processor. I even cooked an entire Chinese banquet that included Lee Lum's lemon chicken. Lee Lum was the chef at Pearl's, the famous Chinese restaurant where no one could get a table. If you did get a table, you remembered the meal forever because there was so much MSG in the food that you lay awake for years afterward. Lee Lum's recipe for lemon chicken involved dipping strips of chicken breast in water-chestnut flour, deep-frying it, plunging it into a sauce that included canned crushed pineapple, and dousing the entire creation with a one-ounce bottle of lemon extract. Once again, the recipe was from the Sunday *Times* column written by Craig Claiborne. Craig, of course, had no difficulty getting a table at Pearl's, and I looked forward to going there with him someday, after we had actually met and become close personal friends. I'd gone to Pearl's once, and was stunned to discover not only that it was impossible to get a table if you weren't famous but that being famous was not enough: there

were degrees of famous. There was famous enough to get a table, and then there was famous enough to get Pearl to come to the table to tell you the nightly specials, and then there was true fame, top-of-the-line fame, which was famous enough to get Pearl to allow you to order the sweet-and-pungent crispy fish. This was what it came down to in New York: you had to have pull to order a fish.

I became a freelance magazine writer. One of my first pieces, for *New York*, was about Craig Claiborne and Michael Field, who turned out to be at war over an unfavorable review Claiborne had written about the first of the Time-Life cookbook series, which Field was in charge of. In the course of reporting the article, I met Craig Claiborne, and after the article appeared he invited me to his house. What he served for dinner was not memorable, and, in any case, I don't remember it. Then Claiborne came to our house for dinner, and I served a recipe from one of his cookbooks, a Chilean seafood-and-bread casserole that was a recipe of Leonard Bernstein's wife, Felicia Montelegre. I can't believe I can come up with her name, and even how to spell it, especially given the fact that her recipe

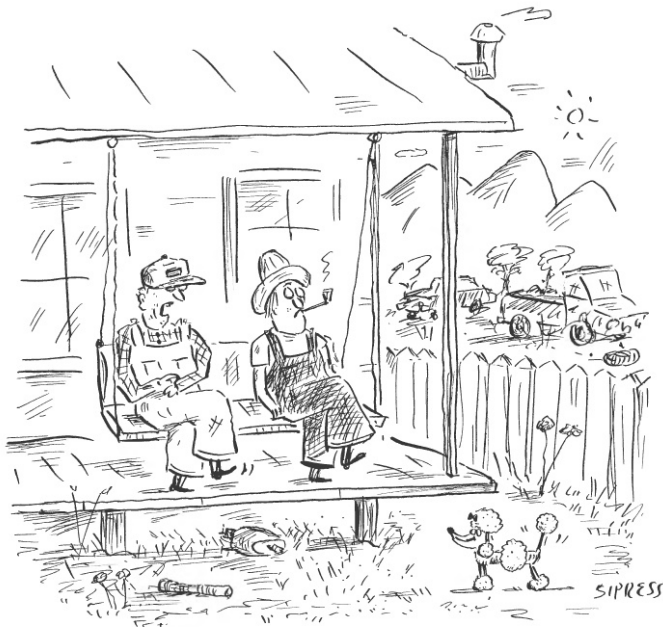
was a gluey, milky, disappointing concoction that practically bankrupted me.

I don't think it was Felicia Montelegre's fault that Craig and I never became friends, but there was no question in my mind after our two meals that he and I had no future together. Craig was a nice guy, don't get me wrong, but he was so low-key that once I'd got to know him I was almost completely unable to have even imaginary conversations with him while cooking his recipes.

Around this time, I met a man named Lee Bailey, and I guess I would have to say that if there were any embers burning in the Craig Claiborne department they were completely extinguished the moment I met Lee. Lee Bailey was a friend of my friend the gossip columnist Liz Smith, who believed that everyone she knew should be friends with everyone else she knew. So one night she invited us to Lee's house for dinner. Lee lived in the East Forties, in a floor-through below the ground, and what I distinctly remember about it was that it had some sort of straw matting on the walls that probably came from Azuma, and it was just about the most fabulous place I'd ever seen. It was simple, and easy on the eyes, and comfortable, but nothing was expensive, there was no art to speak of, and no color at all. Everything was beige. As Lee once said, "Be very careful about color."

And then dinner was served. Pork chops, grits, collard greens, and a dish of tiny baked crab apples. It was delicious. It was so straightforward and plain and honest and at the same time so playful. Those crab apples! They were adorable! The entire evening was mortifying, a revelation, a rebuke in its way to every single thing I had ever bought and every dinner I had ever served. My couch was purple. I owned a collection of brightly painted wooden Mexican animals. I had red plates and a shag rug. My menus were overwrought, overthought, and overproduced. Would Lee Bailey ever in a million years consider cooking Lee Lum's lemon chicken? Certainly not. It was clear that my life up to that point had been a mistake.

I immediately got a divorce, gave my ex-husband all the furniture, and began to make a study of Lee Bailey. I copied the theory of his menus—which always included a surprise fourth item like those



"That dawg won't hunt."

crab apples or carrot pudding or spoon bread. I bought the chairs he told me to buy and the round dining-room table that seemed to be part of the secret of why Lee's dinner parties were more fun than anyone else's. Lee put everything out on a buffet and let people help themselves; so did I. He didn't care if everything was piping hot; I threw away the Salton hot tray my mother had given me. When Lee opened a store at Henri Bendel, I purchased the white plates, seersucker napkins, and wood-handled stainless flatware that were just like his. I bought new furniture for my new apartment, and all of it was beige. I became Lee's love slave, culinarily speaking. Long before he began to write the series of cookbooks that made him well known, he had replaced all my previous imaginary friends in the kitchen, and whenever I cooked dinner and anything threatened to go wrong I could hear him telling me to calm down, it didn't matter, pour another drink, no one will care. I began to osmose from a neurotic cook with a confusing repertory of ethnic dishes to a relaxed one specializing in faintly Southern food.

You might think that having Lee as a real friend might have made it superfluous to have him as an imaginary friend, but you would be wrong. As I conducted my inner conversations with Lee—about what to serve, or what would be the perfect fourth thing to accompany what I was serving—it never occurred to me to pick up the phone and ask him. Lee was much too easygoing; he would have just laughed and said, "Anything you feel like, honey." He was, in his way, as close to a Zen master as I've ever had, and all of us who fell under his influence began with his style and eventually ended up with our own.

I always secretly wished that Lee would include one of my recipes in one of his cookbooks—he frequently came to dinner, and was always fantastically complimentary about the food—but he never asked me for any of my recipes. He did take a photograph of my back yard for one of his cookbooks, and he used my napkins and plates in the photograph; but, of course, I'd bought them at his store in Bendel's, so it didn't really count.

Meanwhile, I got married again, and divorced again. I wrote a thinly disguised novel about the end of my mar-

riage, and it contained recipes. By then, I'd come to realize that no one was ever going to put my recipes into a book, so I'd have to do it myself. I included Lee's recipe for baked lima beans and pears (unfortunately, I left out the brown sugar, and for years people told me they'd tried cooking the recipe and it didn't work), along with my family cook Evelyn's recipe for cheesecake, which I'm fairly sure she got from the back of a Philadelphia cream-cheese package. A food expert who wrote about the book carped that the recipes were not particularly original, but it seemed to me that she had missed the point. The point wasn't about the recipes. The point (I was starting to realize) was about making people feel at home, about finding your own style, whatever it was, and committing to it. The point was about giving up neurosis where food was concerned. The point was about finding a way that food fit into your life.

And, after a while, I didn't have to have long internal dialogues with Lee—I'd incorporated what I learned from him, and I'd moved on. Lee never served salad or cheese, but I like salad and cheese. So there were more dishes to wash; so what?

And I got married again, by the way. In the course of my third marriage, I have had a series of culinary liaisons. I went through a stretch with Marcella Hazan, a brilliant cookbook author whom I could never manage to strike up an inner dialogue with; with Martha Stewart, whom I worshipped and had long, long imaginary talks with, mostly having to do with my slavish adulation of her; and, only recently, with Nigella Lawson, whose style of cooking is very similar to mine. I gave up on Nigella when one of her cupcake recipes failed in a big way, but I admire her willingness to use store-bought items in recipes, her lackadaisical qualities when it comes to how things look, and her fondness for home cooking. I especially like making her roast-beef dinner, which is very much like my mother's, except for the Yorkshire pudding. My mother didn't serve Yorkshire pudding, although there is a recipe for it on page 61 of "The Gourmet Cookbook." My mother served potato pancakes instead. I serve Yorkshire pudding *and* potato pancakes. Why not? You only live once. ♦

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