

Bloody Food Family

How did you learn to cook? Grandma? Mom? Or, if yours was a modern family, maybe Dad? Do you remember rifling through time-worn recipe boxes brimming over with dog-eared cards that contained family secrets passed down through the generations? Did you wait eagerly, flour-dusted and rolling pin ready, to help Mom with those Christmas sugar cookies? Was it your job to flip the burgers on the barbeque while Dad tousled your hair?

It was never mine.

My culinary education involved lighting cigarettes on stoves, soup exploding from blenders, mauling others with knives, and smashing faces into cakes. This all sounds violent, possibly even abusive, but it wasn't.

I live for food. Every aspect of it excites me—planting produce, washing fruit, creating lists, perusing menus, wandering around grocery stores, cooking all day, sharing with others, eating until I'm full, and, on occasion, gorging myself until I have to undo the zipper of my jeans.

This hungry delight was borne from an unorthodox parentage. My immediate and extended family had very little to do with my food journey, and yet, food has written my history. Mine is a history of teenagers experimenting and celebrating in the kitchen. It is a history of misfit kids that became family. For me, cooking is bonded to best friends, not to blood.

At least, not to blood ties. There was plenty of the bodily fluid.

Growing up, dinners at my house were not special. They weren't bad per se, and I'm always awestruck that my baby-boomer mother worked a full-time job but still managed to put something resembling food on the table almost every night. However, I know Mom only made

those meals because she's a superwoman, *not* because she likes to cook. In fact, she hates to cook. It stresses her out to the point of panic attacks. And my dad only heats things up in the microwave.

My mom's disinterest in cooking showed in the repetitive and ordinary menus—bland Midwestern, all the way. Breaded and fried pork chops. Overdone beef roasts. Spaghetti with meat sauce. So many creamy casseroles: slow-cooked chicken in cream of mushroom soup. Orange roughly in cream of celery soup. Tuna in cream of chicken soup. And of course, Hamburger Helper, Rice-a-Roni, and Betty Crocker—just add water and meat! As it was for so many middle-class Millennials, Mom and Dad both worked, so boxed dinners were as regular as the bowel movements they induced. However, the lack of inspiration didn't matter to me at the time. In fact, every dish was perfectly delicious to my equally mundane and untested palate. I *loved* these meals because I didn't know what it meant to eat well.

This reflected in my own culinary choices. I shudder to think about the disgusting things I “cooked” as a young person. The endless helpings of pepperoni bagel bites. Frozen Salisbury steaks. Toasted bologna and American cheese sandwiches. And my absolute favorite—cheese hotdogs. To make this gastronomic marvel, I would split a hotdog lengthwise, fill it with shredded cheddar cheese, microwave it for fifty second, and plop it all on a room temperature bun separated into two pieces. I ate the excess cheese that oozed off the ends of the meat and licked its greasiness from my fingers.

I made things like that because we weren't encouraged to cook. But my mom did require me to help with one particular dish—mashed potatoes. Every Thanksgiving, I got out the ancient KitchenAid mixer and poured the steaming potatoes into the metal bowl. As I creamed the butter, salt, and milk in, thrills trickled down my arms. I was COOKING! Recalling that feeling makes

me wish that recipes and techniques would've been part of my growing up. But, alas, it would only be mashed potatoes for many, many years.

This all changed with my first serious boyfriend Brian. We started as friends, but I was hopelessly in love with him—with his crazy, blond, white-guy dreadlocks, his silly paintings of landscapes, and his clumsy dancing. It was a total bonus that he was eighteen and could buy me cigarettes.

That initial friendship and eventual relationship opened me up to adventurous eating. Even before we were dating, I would sometimes crash on his parents' couch, which meant I got to enjoy dinners *and* breakfasts at the Schmitt house. Sidling up to that kitchen table was like going to a mysterious international buffet—everything was so new! Cheese blintzes. Chicken enchiladas. **HOMEMADE PIZZA!** And the takeout—Greek gyros, tikka masala, lo-mein. In retrospect and certainly to any foodie, these dishes probably seem mundane and common. But to me, a girl who assumed that the entire world subsisted on meat and potatoes, they were a revelation.

For the second half of high school, Brian's house became my home. No, I wasn't protesting my mom's cooking, which had tapered off since my older sister and brother went to college. I was away from home so much because Brian's house was close to the two most important things in my life: school and friends. As a proud academic nerd, school ruled most of my decisions, so being geographically adjacent was ideal. Right behind that scholastic drive was the adolescent desire to be with my friends. I'd found a group that simultaneously electrified and soothed me—wrapped me in a blanket of secure comfort but also threw me into the deep end of life.

In 2000, the counterculture “neo-hippie” movement was in full swing amongst teenagers, and those hippies and their jam band music suited me perfectly. I met my friends by going to concerts and shaking my booty to Widespread Panic and Dark Star Orchestra. We were a family—

a band of misfits whose pursuit of experience rivaled its desire for joy. We lent each other tattered copies of Vonnegut and Burroughs, travelled across the country in station wagons without air conditioning, spent the night in an abandoned house after escaping a knife fight at a Day's Inn, lit a giant bonfire that licked the thirty-foot treetops at Salmonfest, and sauntered down shakedown streets in our bare feet. We cooked dinners, played hacky sack, and smoked cigarettes. We lived and loved and danced. God we danced—late into the night, high on wet grass, moonlight, and life.

It wasn't just the music that enthralled us. The hippie lifestyle also boasted the parking lot scene. Whether it was at a single Phish show in Kansas City, a three-night String Cheese Incident extravaganza in St. Louis, or a week-long festival in Tennessee, there was always a Shakedown Street. On these makeshift commercial ways, you could get whatever your degenerate heart desired, all sold from the backs of cars and side satchels of Millennial flower children. Bags of pot. Glass pipes and bongos. Hallucinogens. Sparkly crystals. Patchwork dresses. Hand-made jewelry. Exclusive screen prints. Craft beers, one for \$3 or two for \$5. Every kind of dish that could be made on a small stove and wrapped in foil.

We loved that food. The more carefully and lovingly prepared, the better.

Grilled cheeses ranged from your basic white bread with yellow American to French baguettes with cheddar, smoked gouda, and Havarti. Wraps sometimes had chicken or pork, but often they were filled with blanched or grilled vegetables like red peppers, eggplant, mushrooms, carrots, or spinach. I discovered falafels with Brian at Schwagstock in 2001. I had no idea what a chickpea was, but I knew that I loved its fried, flattened version nestled among cold vegetables in a warmed pita. How had I been missing such an amazing world of flavors for so long?

What made this even more amazing was that the people behind those grills were my age—unwashed hippies trying to make some gas money to get to the next show. If they could whip up

something so delicious, how hard could it be? That inspiration pushed my friends and me to undertake our own culinary pursuits—to provide for ourselves, just like those vendors did. Of course, smoking copious amounts of marijuana had something to do with it as well. We were constantly hungry. But we didn't want to just eat. We wanted to curate and cook what we ate.

Dinner parties and cook-outs started with what we knew—variations on festival and camping food. There were lots of quesadillas and fajitas with mixed ingredients, breakfasts of eggs and bacon, wraps bursting with meat and lettuce, and gourmet toppings for hamburgers. I also had mashed potatoes down, which became a staple at our gatherings.

Despite the deliciousness of these early dishes, it all felt so derivative, so typical. We were hungry for *more*, for something difficult and different.

However, we didn't have it all right at our fingertips. Remember, this was 2001, before every recipe you could ever desire was available to you at the touch of a screen. It was also before the “celebrity chef” craze captivated America. If you wanted to watch a chef cook something, you needed to tune into PBS on a Saturday afternoon or pay for The Food Network on cable.

Thus, it was time to get creative and take some initiative. Different people contributed in their own ways. Greg and Megan were excellent cooks, Kirby often provided venues, and Robbie paid for groceries, which always included SPAM (that we *never* cooked). But Abby, Nils, Jamie, and I were the culinary core of every dinner party. We tried to bring something new to the table.

As a loyal Midwesterner, I wanted to upgrade my knowledge of meat and potatoes. I observed how my mom prepared meat, making sure to subtract several minutes to avoid her usually overdone final products, and learned to fry, cream, sauté, bake, and twice-bake a potato. I even bought a meat thermometer and my own potato masher.

Abby, whose parents had cable, started watching shows like *Good Eats* on Food Network. She's actually a lot like Alton Brown—meticulous, curious, and structured but also totally wacky and free-form. We'd be working methodically in an incredibly clean kitchen, when, suddenly, "Sugar Magnolia" would come on the CD player, an impromptu dance party would commence, and Abby would shimmy around to let everyone sample the food so far.

Nils was often the one who got these dance parties started—he loved to get down. But we weren't fooled by his goofy laugh and shaking hips. He knew his way around a kitchen. He worked as a line cook at the Tenderloin Room, a fancy hotel restaurant. As the most knowledgeable, he was so helpful and supportive when I fucked up the sauce or burnt the meat. And he had so many recipes stored in his head, which he would teach anyone who wanted to learn.

But Nils didn't have all the answers, so Jamie started buying cookbooks to lay a foodie foundation. As the most devoted of our group, Jamie was the stimulus behind every meal. He was the ringmaster who launched the circus of feasting and fun. Like any good MC, he encouraged costumes and theatrics at every dinner party. The endless stream of jokes and songs never stopped when Jamie was in the kitchen, and neither did the recipes.

The most notable book he exposed us to was Emeril Lagasse's *Prime Time Emeril*. Its recipes became staples in our repertoire, like Vidalia Onion Soup with Tortellini. The first time we made it, we had no clue that disturbing a hot liquid would cause it to expand. Perhaps we should've listened more in physics class. But when we poured all two quarts of the searing-hot onion, bread, broth, and cream mixture into the blender and hit puree, the lid leapt toward the ceiling and a geyser of burning liquid exploded onto Nil's arm. Since then, we've all busted this recipe out at dinner parties and potlucks to impress vegetarians, but we've learned to blend it in small batches. I still put a plastic bag and a towel over the blender lid every time I make it.

It wasn't all trial and error and seeking out recipe sources. Unlike most teenagers, we spent our meager, part-time wages on eating at unique restaurants. Before calamari was on every appetizer menu, we enjoyed it out of conical baskets at Ellie's. At Medesto, we relished communal meals of shrimp in chili oil, bacon-wrapped dates, and potato croquettes. I discovered chorizo at Guido's Pizzeria and Tapas and was pleased to find that you could eat it on a pizza. Broadway Oyster Bar proved what I'd been hearing from people in the south—alligator did indeed taste like chicken. With every meal we shared, we got more excited about applying the ideas to our own cooking.

With this new knowledge coupled with the added boost of alcohol, we were ready to soar. A few Bud Lights, a glass of Carlo Rossi, or a shot of Evan Williams provides total confidence in most of life's endeavors, including cooking. In reference to his earliest attempts at fine-dining dishes, Jamie says, "I highly recommend if you are trying to cook duck a l'orange for the first time do so inebriated. Even if it turns out a flop, you will be drunk, so it will taste good." Although I wasn't our biggest imbibor while cooking, as I didn't want to lose a finger, others definitely enjoyed the buoyant effects of alcohol.

Our creativity and confidence really exploded the summer before college when we threw a series of theme parties with accompanying feasts. What would a toga party be without grilled octopus, marinated cod, and fried squid? I was never a huge fan of seafood, but that "fish fry" at Nils' house changed me. It was also the party that saw not just fish blood spilled, but human as well. When Greg was wielding his knife in the air, Evan dared him to cut someone. So Greg did—right across Evan's right bicep. I have the pictures to prove it.

When we wanted to feel less Animal House and more adult, we crafted delicious canapes and dips to go with our fancy cocktail party. Although, smoked salmon on rye seems less fancy

when sitting next to something called stoner dip. But I guarantee you, the number of ingredients in stoner dip is much more complex than slathering a mini-rye bread with cream cheese and lox.

The coup de grace of that summer was the fiesta, for we cooked gourmet Mexican that was *actually* Mexican, as opposed to the cheddar-filled, Americanized dishes we'd made at earlier parties. The mole was probably not the best, and I cringe when I remember that we made shark fajitas—sharks are my favorite animals. But the cotija and chicken stuffed peppers with walnut sauce that Megan made looked exactly like the ones at the end of *Like Water for Chocolate*.

After tackling such sophisticated and complex dishes while savoring being together, our culinary cadre finished the summer full and happy. We had grown with each other, as had our waistlines. We pushed ourselves to learn something that was totally unrequired for most teenagers. Seriously, think about it. How many teenagers do you know would be willing to marinate an octopus? Or be able to stuff a pepper? Probably very few, and we knew it. No other kids were doing what we were doing. Our feasts made us unique, and we were fucking proud of that. This knowledge bonded us together in a way that doesn't always happen for most young people. We were a family: a chain-smoking, beer-drinking, knife-wielding family that would make Norman Rockwell or the producers of *The Great British Baking Show* cringe.

We were *Thug Kitchen*, the early years. God, it was magnificent.

Although college took some of us away that autumn, our minds were never far from our friends. Whenever we reunited in St. Louis for winter breaks and summer vacations, food was our common bond. It was how we stayed connected, especially when we were states and worlds apart. Our New Year's Eve feast embodied our celebration of food. This annual meal would become the cornerstone of our cooking gatherings for many years to come.

Every December 31st, our group of twenty to thirty people would carpool or caravan to an available location. In the days leading up to the party, Jamie, Nils, Abby, and I would undertake epic menu planning and shopping trips, often travelling to two or three different markets to obtain *all* the necessary items. We brought grocery bags filled with pre-prepped dishes or raw ingredients ready to be assembled or fired at our final destination.

For the first few years, the table was always piled high with deliciously eclectic dishes.

When we were still fledgling frosh, it was crab and corn bisque, a whole, roasted chipotle chicken, my famous mashed potatoes, and bacon-wrapped asparagus at Robbie's lake house in Cuba, Missouri. This was our first grown-up New Year's Eve—no more basement parties while the parents got drunk upstairs. Instead, we had a whole house at our disposal. We encouraged everyone to dress up and to bring a bottle of champagne, just like adults at their fancy-pants parties. The dress code was Jamie's idea. He insisted that you needed to come in a coat and tie in order to be fed. But his version of classy was to cut the cuffs and collar off a white dress shirt and to show up as a Chippendales dancer. Looking like Chris Farley rather than Patrick Swayze, Jamie put on his own "cooking show" for us. His getup epitomized our nineteen-year-old interpretation of classy. Everyone's champagne was André, and by the end of the night, we had drawn with permanent markers all over an awake Jamie's bare torso. But when we carved that chicken and popped those corks at midnight, we felt grown-up as hell.

The next year, we did the first dinner party at a place of our own—not a parent's house, but *our* house. Well, Abby and Kirby's house that they rented in Columbia, Missouri. But still, we were totally in charge and didn't need to worry about parents and what they would say. Along with this small step into adulthood came another milestone—Kirby got a dog, his own little canine life to take care of. The puppy had a white baby-face and smelled like love, so we all wanted to

shoulder such an adorable responsibility, at least for that night. We passed baby Julio around while we made mozzarella and prosciutto-stuffed eggplant rollatini, shrimp, pork, and chicken jambalaya, those mashed potatoes again, and a whole rump roast in a red-wine reduced gravy. Admittedly, Nils shouldn't have given a puppy so many table scraps, and the house was wrecked the next morning. But all the enthusiastic compliments and vigorous gratitude from the group made the chefs feel sophisticated. Even if it looked like a red solo cup factory had exploded next to the empty keg of Killian's in the backyard, we had served a super refined spread.

After an especially hard fall of 2005, which included Jamie and Brian moving to Colorado and Greg dying of a heroin overdose, not everyone was in the mood to party. But in reality, we needed a celebration more than ever, so we rallied a scaled-back gathering at Pete's parents' house. Most of us were twenty-one, so even though we were back at mom and dad's, the old rules didn't apply. We could behave and act our age, which meant eating and drinking as merrily as we wanted. Abby and I took it upon ourselves and our wallets to buy everything to make ham and pineapple kabobs with honey-glaze, the ubiquitous mashed potatoes, a mixed green salad with goat cheese and cherry tomatoes, oven-fried chicken thighs, and Portobello and ricotta stuffed shells in cream sauce. We spent way more than we should have, but we didn't ask for money. It was our gift to a crew that was craving some healing and togetherness.

At the end of the night, some of us needed a place to sleep since Pete's house was too small for us all. We decided to walk down the street to Abby's dad's house—like the responsible, non-driving drunks that we were—and crash on her various futons and rugs. Curled up on the hardwood floor in a pile of limbs and full bellies, love had never seemed warmer, easier, or truer.

With my final days of college drawing near and everyone too busy to drive far away, we had our next bash at Abby's mom's house. Poor Kelly. The Vidalia onion soup, baked brie with

tomato jam, seared sea scallops, and herb-roasted pork chops with winter squash must have fooled her into thinking we were now urbane adults. Even though she ate and celebrated with us soon-to-be graduates, she had no idea that we were still clinging to our immature and insane childhood.

It was another destructive year. At midnight, Robbie smashed his face into my annual birthday cake (I was born on January 2) and kissed everyone. Chocolate frosting was all over our cheeks and the floor—along with a lot of blood by the morning. After Robbie destroyed my cake, we declared our undying friendship and made a blood pact, slicing our arms with the cake knife. Too drunk on love and whiskey, we didn't notice that we dripped all over the kitchen mats. It didn't matter because in the morning, we found our friend Ryan passed out on the kitchen floor with his hand in the remains of a candy jar, shards of glass and crimson blood surrounding him. Like good adults, we did some serious cleaning the next morning, righting the home that Kelly had offered to us so kindly. At least she really enjoyed the food.

Although I had graduated and moved back to St. Louis the next year, many others were still finishing up their final semesters. Once again, some of us travelled to Columbia and prepared another feast. Shrimp fettuccini alfredo, a Caesar salad with homemade dressing, broccoli cheddar soup, and bacon wrapped pork tenderloin in a soy glaze. After the meal, we had an epic canine dance party, which a full-grown Julio participated in along with Abby's new dog Doney and their fellow housemate's fuzzy mutt Bear. More dogs meant more obligations, a taste of the responsibility that was just around the corner. Adulthood loomed for some, and had already arrived for others. I knew that the next morning I would have to drag my extremely hungover ass back to St. Louis so that I could go to my full-time receptionist job the next day. But for that one night, I focused on the food, the laughter, the dogs, and the fun. I got to be eighteen again, knowing that I was a dependable adult with a job and serious culinary chops.

With each New Year's meal, we felt more and more like grown-ups, despite the fact that we sometimes used parent-owned homes or destroyed our temporary venues. But the grocery receipts reflected a disposable income sort of mindset that only adults can have. Spending all that money on quality ingredients made us feel sophisticated and special. We weren't stopping at fast food drive thrus or stocking up on ramen, but we were still dancing like crazy and buying 30-racks of PBR. We were groping our way toward adulthood but celebrating like children, one feast at a time.

In the years to follow, the New Year's parties lost some of that youthful energy. People graduated college, moved away, or returned to St. Louis infrequently. But we managed to cobble together different crews and menus from year to year: homemade pizzas and fennel slaw with prosciutto and pistachios in St. Louis Hills. Over the rainbow mac and cheese at Abby's Americorps digs in Tower Grove. And the final bash in 2010 at my house in North Webster. I made a cheese board to die for, Megan whipped up her famous guacamole, and Abby scattered the artisanal meats from the charcuterie board all over my house. It was more about us being together and less about a catered spread. We were in our late twenties and didn't have to cook to make ourselves feel like adults. We *were* adults—with jobs, responsibilities, and even kids.

And then the New Year's parties ended. But the memories didn't, and neither did the food.

After college, I started to cook for my ACTUAL family. I showed my mom how to make a proper roast, how to use a meat thermometer, and how to make a white sauce. Most importantly, I am now in charge of food for the Hoeynck Christmas Eve. Last year, I embarked upon the most daunting menu of my life—miniature stuffed things from around the world. Abby and I spent a whole day prepping the hand-made spanakopita with tzatziki, chicken flautas with guacamole, Aussie “party pies” filled with slow roasted beef and topped with puff pastry, and sausage

calzones. It took two bottles of Prosecco, a twelve-pack of Natty Lite, and fourteen hours, but she and I finished them all, even after almost giving up when the goddamn phyllo dough wouldn't cooperate. That stuff's a bitch. But we pushed through because, you know, we were grown-ups. And drunk.

This mature consciousness started with those young hippies wanting to feed themselves and satisfy their munchies in a sophisticated and distinctive manner. Because, let's be honest: what could be more adult than feeding yourself, especially for a kid? When you're a child, it's (usually) not your job to make grocery lists, go to the market, or cook your own meals. But to me and all my friends, that was the height of adulting. We wanted to relish and digest that feeling.

I have so many memories of kitchen smells, sounds, and tastes. All I have to do is make the onion soup, and I'm transported back to that first explosion at Abby's house. If I smell crab, I see Jamie in that ridiculous Chippendale outfit, a goofy smile on his face and a wooden spoon in his hand. Whenever Nils prepares me a Michelin-starred meal, I remember those early cooking lessons. And every cheese blintze takes me to the Schmitt kitchen in the morning, just a sixteen-year-old girl spending the night at a boy's house and feeling oh-so grown up.

My memories are alive, rooted in recipes, food, and friends, but not in traditional "family." And yet, I wouldn't have it any other way. I'd rather have bloody messes and silly dancing in my kitchen than maternal head-pats and Grandma's apron.

We were a bunch of fuck-ups who didn't want to be served. We wanted to figure it out on our own, so we taught ourselves and learned by doing. We were rushing towards adulthood but celebrating our immaturity. Along the way, we concocted a bond that would last forever—a bond that we can conjure to this day. All we need do is cook a meal from our past and savor it. Then we are together, even if we are very far apart.