

Cooking Origin Stories: Eating Like a Person

written by Guest Contributor | September 28, 2018



I was a child of the 1990's, but you wouldn't know it by the way my family ate. While most of my friends were having canned ravioli and tie-dye yogurts, my mother was cooking meals, which we ate while sitting around the table and talking to each other. Impervious to most trends, my mom fed us through the height of the low-fat craze without buying so much as a Snackwell. At a time when every other commercial was for fat-free salad dressing or margarine whose non-butter status was its selling point, she was grilling steaks, buttering bowls of potatoes and drizzling greens with olive oil. She roasted and braised, chopped and steamed, then dished it up night after night to very little appreciation from my sister and I.

I just wanted to eat like my friends, whose meals were geared toward minimal interference with their lives. Their mothers mixed neon orange cheese powder into bowls of hot noodles, then actually allowed us to carry those bowls into the living room, where we sat on the carpet and ate in front of the TV while sipping cups of fizzy soda. I remember a friend's mom asking if I would stay for dinner, then producing a paper plate piled with corndogs and a dollop of ketchup. We didn't even come inside, but continued chasing each other around the backyard, now with ketchupy corndog swords. I thought, *this is how people should eat*.

The envy went both ways. When a friend ate with us, they'd marvel at the meals I took for granted, gobbling down homemade lasagna or pot roast and asking for seconds. For me, dinner was just time I couldn't spend playing Oregon Trail or riding my bike. I didn't think eating on a regular basis should be mandatory, and I thought I knew better than anyone else what I *should* eat when hunger struck. Ideally, I would have lived on bowls of spaghetti and grilled cheese sandwiches which appeared before me at irregular intervals. My parents thought I should eat vegetables and some kind of

protein on a daily basis. This felt to me like a great injustice.

Mom is not only oblivious to trends, she's also mostly unaffected by marketing. This made trips with her to the grocery store disappointing, as I was, like most children, an easy mark for affable tigers and trippy toucans. My sister and I whined for sugary cereals endorsed by the cartoon animals we recognized from commercials while Mom placed bags of generic Cheerios into the cart.

I remember nagging her for a frozen Kids Cuisine because I was drawn in by the box's smiling penguin, and the photo of the little square brownie in its plastic tray. She told me it would be terrible, but gave in and bought it anyway. I microwaved and ate it that night. The brownie was burned around the edges and still goopy in the center. The rest of it tasted like salt and little else. It was truly terrible. But I didn't tell her that.

It wasn't that Mom was a whole-food ideologue (which wasn't yet a common genre of person). And she wasn't obsessed with our intake of sugar, fat, or artificial ingredients. I think she simply liked to cook for her children, even when we were sullen and unappreciative, which was most of the time. She wasn't about to trade her creative outlet and language of love for convenience.

When I graduated from high school, I skipped the in-between adolescence and adulthood phase of living in a dorm and moved directly from my parents' house into a small rental house near my college's campus, which I shared with a friend. No one was there to tell me when to come home at night, where to put my things or what to eat. Every small choice seemed consequential. Would I hang curtains? Would I frame my posters or tack them up? Would I remove my shoes when I came inside? (I discovered that I would, for about a week).

The question of what to eat was complicated as well. Around fifteen, I'd started subscribing to a brand of vegetarianism which allowed me to pick pepperoni off a slice of pizza when I felt like it. At other times, I feigned strict veganism to avoid eating things I didn't want. My mom humored me, making meatless versions of my favorite foods alongside regular meals for my dad and sister. Now I had to accommodate my own dietary affectations without any cooking skills whatsoever.

I remember going to the grocery store alone and with no plan, pushing a cart through the aisles and feeling overwhelmed by options. I was an adult now, so what kind of adult would I be? The kind who ate microwavable frozen pancakes? If I bought a lot of fresh fruit, would I become the sort of person who ate a lot of fresh fruit? Exhausted, I headed to the checkout with a bag of tortilla chips and an orange.

On another early grocery trip, I bought a tub of premade cheesecake filling. I did not make a cheesecake. I didn't even have it as a dessert, but put it in the fridge and ate it one forkful at a time whenever the mood struck.

My new state of freedom didn't bring me the bliss I had expected. Instead, I had a stomach ache and the nagging sense that I couldn't go on this way. I

had to impose some sort of order over my eating habits, and I decided that to do that, I needed to learn how to cook.

I picked up a copy of *Vegetarian Times* magazine, found a recipe for coconut curry, made a list and went to the store. There, I saw that shopping for whole ingredients was a more straight forward experience. Onions and peppers made no claims for themselves. They just sat in their bins being onions and peppers. Even then, I respected that.

When I got home with my haul, I spread it out on the table. The recipe called for two cloves of garlic. I had two entire bulbs because I didn't know what a clove was. The directions said I should mince them, and I was pretty sure that meant cut them up into small pieces. I set about peeling the papery skin from the garlic, but it kept sticking to my fingers and I had to stop chopping constantly to rinse it away. I didn't know if I should leave the green shoots growing through the center of each clove or if I should remove them. And were the hard, brown ends edible? I decided the brown bits were ok, but the shoots needed to go, and dug around in each clove with my overly large chef's knife to fish them out.

I remember having a vague awareness that chopping garlic shouldn't be this hard. I charged ahead anyway, afraid of losing momentum. If I stopped to reassess my approach I might remember I had no idea what I was doing. As my neck muscles started cramping with the unfamiliar task, I thought about all the meals which had been set in front of me my entire life, and how they were all the product of my mother straining her neck over a cutting board.

After peeling and roughly chopping about a dozen actual garlic cloves, which I believed were subsections of a single clove, I gave up. I dumped the pile of garlic in with the onions, which were sizzling in the oil and already sticking to the bottom of the pot.

After the garlic, it was mostly a matter of placing things into the pot and letting heat do the rest. I sprinkled in the curry powder and my kitchen began filling with the funky fragrance. As the curry simmered, I dipped into it periodically with a wooden spoon and tasted. The flavor was decent, but unlike any curry I'd ever had. *Shouldn't have given up on the garlic*, I thought. When it was finished, I dumped the spicy stew over some rice, which was underdone and still soggy, then garnished the bowl with a little cilantro.

The finished product looked cute and colorful, sitting on the table I'd bought at the Goodwill, under the lights for which I received a monthly bill. It didn't look exactly like the *Vegetarian Times* photo, but it was undeniably a warm bowl of perfectly serviceable food which I had prepared myself. I sat and ate.

It didn't taste great, or even like curry. The pungent garlicky flavor overpowered everything else. The curry powder never quite penetrated the other ingredients, maybe because when I noticed it starting to burn on the bottom I thought that meant it was ready and removed it from the heat. But it tasted like I probably wouldn't have to live off of intermittent forkfuls of

cheesecake filling for the rest of my life. I would learn to cook and eat like a person.

Today, I know what a garlic clove is, and what mince means, and how to make a vegetarian curry which is better than decent (despite no longer being a vegetarian). I shop and cook more and more like my mother every year, falling back on staples, distrusting pre-made foods, and shrugging at brand names. When we're overwhelmed by choice, we often revert to what we know. In this case, that's a blessing.

(Better Than My First) Sweet Potato Coconut Curry

1 tablespoon coconut oil
1 medium yellow onion, diced
1 teaspoon fresh ginger, minced
2 cloves garlic, minced
2 large sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ inch cubes
1 red bell pepper, diced
1 green bell pepper, diced
1 16-ounce can coconut milk
1 16-ounce can diced tomatoes
2 tablespoons good curry powder (or more to taste)
1 teaspoon sugar
Salt to taste
Cilantro and lime for garnish

Heat a large pot over medium heat, then add the coconut oil and let it melt. Add the onions, garlic, and ginger. Stir and cook until fragrant, about two to three minutes.

Add the sweet potatoes, bell peppers, and about $\frac{1}{2}$ a tablespoon of the curry powder. Stir until everything is coated in the seasoning and oil, then let it sizzle for a couple of minutes.

Add the coconut milk, the can of diced tomatoes (juice and all), and the remaining curry powder. Bring it all up to a low boil, then reduce heat to a simmer and cook uncovered for about 15 minutes, until the curry starts to thicken.

Cover and continue to simmer for another 10 – 15 minutes. Add the sugar and salt, taste, and adjust seasoning as desired.

If you'd like the curry thicker, you can smash a few of the sweet potatoes against the side of the pot and stir them in. Serve over rice with a cilantro garnish and a squeeze of lime.



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