

Cooking Origin Stories: One Thousand Menus

written by Guest Contributor | June 13, 2018



In my grandmother's house, we find coffee and chicory on the kitchen counter, her half-consumed box of oats, her glasses on her bureau, her watch still ticking on her bedside table next to her medicines. A mug I brought her from Barcelona some years ago sits in the dishwasher, probably set there after her afternoon tea on Saturday.

Walking around the house, we survey the details of a life interrupted. My mother cleans the living room—vacuums the carpet to clear the glass shards. The police and firemen had to break a window to get in the house after receiving distress signals from my grandmother's electronic tracking bracelet after she fell fatally in her bathtub. My mother folds the plaid blanket on the couch and clears the magazine stand of mail and catalogues. She brings me a stack of old, unfamiliar magazines, dense, full-colored features titled "1000 Menus" with roasted pork loin and apples, walnut frisée salad, and caramel flan on the cover. "2,90 F", says the price, and the first insert lists January 1970.

My grandmother, Andrée Rey Lescure, was forty-five years old in 1970, a mother of six in the suburbs of Royan, France, her youngest child, my mother, only six years old. She must have subscribed to the magazine thinking it would provide inspiration and convenience: "Thirty-five menus a week", boasts the cover of the magazine—a full set for every meal, including the appetizer, a main, a dessert, and a wine pairing. A letter from the editor in the inaugural issue explains the magazine's mission: a special spinoff of *Femmes d'Aujourd'hui* (Women Today), it will help millions of mothers and women responsible for a household or 'small collectivity' answer the "complaint tirelessly repeated daily"—"But what will I feed them today?"

The first menu in every weekly issue falls under the "reception" section. The inaugural "reception" menu is oysters in butter and lemon with shallot sauce, a turbot in mousseline sauce, pigeon à la biragade, pommes allumettes, a side salad, assorted cheeses, and a frozen blackcurrant cake (to pair with entre-deux-mers or Chablis for the oysters and turbot, hermitage for the pigeon and cheese. Alternatively: "you could also drink nothing but champagne.")

I had to Google half the recipes to understand that mousseline sauce was a rich cousin of hollandaise sauce with whipped cream, that “à la bigarade” meant a gastrique with bitter oranges, and that “matchstick apples” referred to skinny fries. The menus for the rest of the week were hardly any less ostentatious: braised duck with turnips on Sunday, grilled andouillettes in mustard sauce on Monday, poached mackerel with leeks and red cabbage salad on Tuesday. I find a pink detachable booklet in the centerfold: a daily shopping list with all ingredients and empty lines on which to take notes for the supermarket. On the last page, handy tips for the shopping of the week: “the veal season begins with the arrival on the market of the first suckling veals; the price of other meats should be quieted down by this new concurrence.”

My grandmother hated cooking. But she accepted it as a duty of life: growing up as a seamstress’ daughter in Normandy in the 1920s and 30s, she married a returning soldier after WWII, moved to Gabon with him and had four children there before returning to France and settling by a bustling mining town in the Mediterranean brush of the south. She chronicled her month-long journey aboard a cargo ship to Africa as a 25 year-old newlywed in a few handwritten pages of a memoir we find deep in the burrows of her desk. That departure was, other than a stay in England as a student, her first time outside the country. “Onto unknown worlds,” she writes, “with a practically unknown man—Jacques and I met only four and a half months before we got married.”

He had been assigned to a post in Libreville, Gabon, working for a French lumber-exporting company. She writes of the immensity of blue—the sea, the sky—that surrounds them on the cargo ship as they skirt by the Canary Islands and much of the African coast, occasionally making port calls in Dakar and Abidjan. For the first time, she sees lush tropical fruit piled onto the street stalls—bananas, pineapples, avocados. In Abidjan, my grandfather and she use their last coins to eat a meal of prawns—“veritable gambas,” she writes, “not the small, grey shrimp I ate growing up in La Rochelle.” A gecko crawls by and watches them eat, head raised. “You’ll have to get used to it,” Jacques tells her. “We are in Africa now.”

In Libreville, she could not believe her luck, as a penniless young bride, when she was shown the ample colonial villa the couple was taking over. In the large backyard grew fibrous mangos and papayas, and not far from the house was a wild beach with milky waters. Its beauty was perturbed only by the logs of wood that washed ashore and framed the creek, “a reminder,” she writes, “of what the French had come to do—plunder Gabon of its natural resources.”

The French colonials relied on monthly cargo shipments to replenish reserves of ingredients from the motherland—carrots and onions, canned legumes, and what my grandmother, as a good Normande, missed most—the dairy. Unexpectedly pregnant upon arriving to Libreville, she soon worried not only about her husband’s meals but also the health and nutrition of one baby, then two, then three, and four. Back in France, she had pursued advanced studies in French language and literature, and, she writes in the memoir, “always thought she would become an educator.” The family lived in Gabon for over fifteen years, and my grandmother matured into her middle-age as a full-time mother. “This

may make women nowadays scoff," she writes, "but ultimately, after having children, I discovered that what mattered most to me was becoming an educator to them."

With six kids and a busy husband, my grandmother professed herself a kitchen martyr of her times. Though she may only have sought baseline convenience in feeding the household, the mid twentieth-century French woman was still expected, as a subscription to *1000 menus* illustrates, to roast pigeons and sturgeons, to home-cure meat jellies, to perfect a béchamel sauce, and make sure the meal comes with an appropriate assortment of salads and desserts.

Perhaps it was that level of pressure that made my grandmother raise a daughter who completely eschewed the slimmest pretense of cooking. Though my mother claims to have lived her student years subsiding on "water and baguettes," having her own child forced her make some culinary innovations: she cooked eggs in the microwave and force-fed me boiled eggplants (literally: water, eggplants, salt). Once, she tried to defrost a frozen meat pie by stir-frying it.

The years we lived with my grandparents and the summers we spent with them meant that I could escape my mother's "cooking" and gorge on salty, fatty saucisson, farm chicken, and paellas from the village fair. Twice a day, my grandmother cooked: recipes such as couscous royal, poulet à l'estragon, rabbit in black olive tapenade, tomates provençales, gratin dauphinois...amidst, for the adults, free-flowing rosé (paired with all meat, fish, cheese, dessert, fruits—anyone seeking more refinement could go buy their own bottle).

Six years ago, when my grandfather passed away, my grandma threw in the towel. She was heartbroken to lose her companion of sixty years, and, now needing to feed only herself, she resorted to simple soups and frozen pre-cooked meals. She loved feasting on oysters, champagne, and desserts as much as the next girl, but only when invited to a festive occasion. And so whenever I visited her, in what would be the last years of her life, I would search up elaborate recipes and splurge on fancy ingredients: chanterelle mushroom risottos, duck breast, cod in saffron sauce. The generational tables have turned: I love cooking, more than my mother and certainly my grandmother, and seeing them eat sumptuous meals they would not have wanted to prepare filled me with ineffable joy.

"Please, throw them away," my mother said after my grandmother's funeral, when she noticed the pile of *1000 menus* on my bed. I looked at her in shock, and stuffed the magazines in my suitcase. Who knows if one day, in my small Boston studio, I'd like to cook up a pigeon with bitter orange gastrique for visiting friends after pondering the eternally damned question:

"But what will I feed them today?"



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