

Dinnerview: Tara Betts

written by Danielle Susi | February 5, 2020



Tara Betts is the author of *Break the Habit* and *Arc & Hue* as well as the chapbooks *7 x 7: kwansabas* and *THE GREATEST!: An Homage to Muhammad Ali*. She is part of the MFA faculty at Stonecoast – University of Southern Maine and teaches a weekly poetry workshop at Stateville maximum security prison. She proudly penned a poem celebrating Illinois' bicentennial, which was published by Candor Arts in 2019. In addition to her work as the Poetry Editor at *Another Chicago Magazine* and *The Langston Hughes Review*, she recently signed on as the Lit Editor at *Newcity* and the Editor at The Silver Room's *Beautiful People*. She hosts author chats at the Seminary Co-Op bookstores and other venues in Chicago.

Here, she talks about warm chocolate chip cookies, staple comfort foods, and eating her fries first.

On her all-time favorite meal:

My all-time favorite meal is such a tough question. I feel like I grew up eating very staple foods—chicken and dumplings, corned beef and cabbage, pork chops, soups, spaghetti, chili, but I also ate what my mother could afford to get. It was a miracle to see how my mother always had full cupboards, a packed refrigerator, and a stuffed freezer with three kids, especially when a lot of our friends were going hungry. Honestly, a lot of them ate there. I also remember having very different meals at my grandmother's house and my Thanksgiving dinners at her brother's house, my great uncle. There was always a big pot of collard greens, corn bread, mac and cheese, ham, turkey, and Entenmann's Louisiana Crunch Cake. As an adult, I phased out a lot of dairy and I don't eat pork, red meat, poultry, or catfish. So, I've been doing more vegan cooking and experimenting with recipes. I also find myself looking for comfort food in Chicago, so I love diner food. Someone else bringing me a plate with scrambled eggs and wheat toast is a favorite, so is a tuna salad sandwich with fries. I love Salonica in Hyde Park for stuff like that, but

there are other places that have stuck around forever, and they hold a place in my heart. I have to split a cinnamon roll from Ann Sather's now. I am always excited when I go to Irazú in Wicker Park, and Majani in South Shore is probably my favorite vegan spot hands down. I love some samosas and chana masala from Rajun Cajun. So, I'm not so sure that I have an "all-time favorite meal" anymore. It's almost like I have phases where I come back to a meal again and again, then I want to try something new or go back to something familiar.

On what the light looks like during her favorite meal of the day:

I used to like to eat at night, just after sundown. Now, I'm starting to appreciate eating breakfast in the morning, especially with water and some coffee with cream and sugar. It feels like a time to recharge and sometimes be a little meditative.

On snacking while writing:

I vary the snacks when I write. Popcorn, grilled cheese sandwiches, potato chips, pita chips and hummus. I find that crunchy snacks are distinctly satisfying. I love fruits and veggies, but I also love string cheese right now. I also tend to step away to snack to avoid getting crumbs on the keyboard, which can be annoying. I don't know where that craving comes from! I drink a lot more water because I've been craving it when I write, and it gives me a reason to get up and walk around. None of that flavored seltzer or carbonated pretense. Just flat water, preferably filtered. Sometimes, I drink it hot like a tea.

On her go-to late-night snack:

Lately, I've been cutting down on late night snacks, but I do love to have warm chocolate chip cookies once a month. Sometimes, I have a little bit of chocolate ice cream paired with it. I sometimes hold out for two months. The idea was to cut down the sugar, and I have, but there's this thing about food that's pleasurable that makes moderation more doable than depravation.

On her food quirks:

I still love pot pies. Even though I'm vegetarian I like to break the dented edges of the outer crust all the way around, crack the top, then put pieces of crust in the warm sauce so it can soak up the savory goodness. I also tend to eat my fries first so they don't get cold, and sometimes I think of Pablo Neruda's "Ode to French Fries" while I eat them.

On her final meal request:

I think I'd like to have the Golden Opulence Sundae that originated in NYC. It's a huge \$1000 sundae festooned with edible gold leaf. If money was no object, I would bring together my closest friends so we could eat it together and have the biggest party.