

Tin Lunchbox's Food Experience Mini-Mag

www.thetinlunchbox.com

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The Tin Lunchbox

Feed Your Brain

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Reevaluating Expectations:

Buying Shrimp When You're Midwestern

Tyler Robert Sheldon

When I opened my apartment door this past Independence Day after an unusually loud knock roused me from reading, I didn't know what to expect. Here in Old South Baton Rouge, a storied neighborhood but one to which, for example, many pizza joints won't dare deliver, a knock on the door usually comes with someone interesting on the other side. I thought perhaps a fireworks salesman—that wouldn't be so unusual on the 4th of July. When the teen on the other side folded his hands and asked me if I wanted to buy shrimp, extra-large and caught just that morning, I was reminded of how just as I'm adjusting to life in the South, my Midwestern sensibilities are constantly adjusting themselves as well.

When I first met my father-in-law Jerome, who lives near the Gulf of Mexico in Mississippi, he put me to the test right away. One of his first questions—*Does this Kansas boy eat seafood?*—was laden with the expectation that I wasn't necessarily all that adventurous. We were at the Cajun Crawfish Hut in Long Beach, the first seafood restaurant I'd experienced in the South, and I was determined to prove him wrong. After slurping down half the oysters he ordered—some, following his lead, with Tabasco and butter on a captain's wafer—his perception of me began to change (these “tests” were still going on a year or so later, when I changed the brakes on his pickup truck in the unusual January cold, but that's a story for another time). Even though I had eaten these oysters, cold and salty, nutty and unlike anything I'd ever eaten before, I still hadn't learned to peel shrimp, which arrived at our table soon after. Jerome set out to teach me as my spouse, who was then my girlfriend, looked on, half hiding a smile. I wasn't good at it at all, and I fumbled my way through my first few palm-sized shrimp as Jerome chuckled good-spiritedly (Though I'm a bit better now—I'm far better at peeling crawfish, which I'm sure is all in my head—Alex still corrects me with a genial smirk whenever I say that I'm “shucking” crawfish. They're not corn ears, Alex reminds me, and this isn't the Midwest).

After unlocking the iron bars on our front door, which are standard issue for many apartments in my neighborhood, I followed the younger man out to the street, bemused—I saw no truck, no guy with a cooler. When he yelled, “Hey! Hey, over here, man!” I looked up to see a very *big* blue truck pull around the corner of our street almost too quickly. The driver, jumping down on the side opposite us, strode slightly bowlegged to the back of the truck, unbolting the big double doors to reveal three—perhaps more—huge coolers and an old metal hanging produce scale. He handed me a shrimp at my request, reaching his tattooed arm to the bottom of the front cooler and

plucking a large specimen forth. “Here,” he said, self-assured of his wares’ quality. “Inspect it.” Naturally it smelled salty and clean, just as good shrimp should, but the man seemed satisfied that I knew how to check the quality of shrimp. Perhaps he thought I would know enough to buy quite a few, a hope I quickly disabused him of.

The Kansas idea of good shrimp is a bit different from the Louisiana conception of the same. When you throw a party in the Midwest, if you’re of a mind to you might buy a shrimp cocktail ring. The black plastic dessert plate-sized container will usually hold twenty-five shrimp, give or take, with larger ones holding around forty-five. And they taste great, especially with the included cocktail sauce, which you typically have to thaw. At Kansas restaurants, especially good steak restaurants, Mexican restaurants, and Red Lobster, you’ll likely get the aforementioned palm-sized shrimp, and when you’re lucky they’ll come wrapped in bacon. Both of these, the cocktail ring type and the bacon-wrapped-oh-yes type, are “good” shrimp in Kansas. But before visiting the South, I thought most were of the former variety, and every time I saw a huge shrimp I wondered where they made the surely custom harpoons to land them.

Contrary to the driver’s probable expectations, I underestimated my seafood needs that day. Three pounds for twenty dollars, their rate, wasn’t bad—but there was no way that two people would be able to eat all that, right? When I asked, the man said that a pound—what I asked for—would be about six bucks. He weighed out the bounty and threw in an extra half-pound for good measure. I could almost hear him thinking, in my father-in-law’s voice: *Does this Kansas boy even eat seafood?* He scooped the shrimp from scale to plastic sack, handing them to me and shaking my hand. I handed him six dollars, and then shook the hand of the teen who’d showed me to the truck, and the hand of the young boy standing the trailer minding the scale, who switched a live minnow (probably bait) to his other hand. I took my shrimp and walked back to the apartment, waving as they drove away.

Inside, we placed the pale, palm-sized shrimp in a bowl of ice water. I readied a cutting board to chop up some garlic cloves. We would have sautéed shrimp for lunch. Pulling out the skillet, Alex laughed: “Maybe next time you could get a few more?”

Lentil Soup

Eilidh G. Clark

Beads of soup-sweat cling
To my arm hair as I hack a hulk of turnip. Slabs of flesh,
sculpted into yellow dice, tumble
onto a hummock of carrots. Resting

On the surface of a simmering pot, a sliced leek splays,
Its silver loops belch hoops of pungent fog.
My window is crying.

The pot hisses and pirouetting lentils rise to the surface and tumble,
Dragging sodden leek down into the rolling stock.

Fists of steam punch the air,
Burst
Then creep and crawl
Around the walls like silver ghosts. Waving.

I wipe my brow on a dishcloth; toss the root vegetables into the pot
Then open the window

The smell of autumn drifts outside.

Making Beans Thoran with Mum

Feby Joseph

How daunting and monumental it seemed, at first,
The childhood problems I brought home from school.
I would pour them over to you, as you stood
in front of an array of seemingly endless ingredients – unfazed.

After you got through the tiny rage of spitting mustard
And the curry leaves in coconut oil, you'd let me help –
Stirring in the tiny squares of onions and beans,
The hissing black non-stick pan, harmonizing our conversation.

By the time we added the chopped green chilies and turmeric
My problems had by then, softened – melted like the salt and soon
You would finish it with a generous fist of fresh grated coconut
My woes wafting like the fragrant steam off the beans thoran¹.

¹ Thoran – A South-Indian quick vegetable stir-fry.

Crumbs

Janet Bowdan

at some point I give up cleaning
it is late, I have started late and
now it is even later, the sky long dark.
I have washed the dishes and cleaned
the counters and even those plates
under the electrical coils in the stove
because when I make pasta or rice
water boils over and a little fire
starts under the coils
so I have cleaned them, and taken the toaster
down into its box in the basement
and wiped away crumbs the toaster left behind
I have swept loose grains of rice off the floor
Every time I see more crumbs I have to clean
until I give up and get the book and say
the prayer, disowning all leavened bread: not
mine, not here, nothing to see. I say,
in English and in Hebrew to be doubly effective,
may all the crumbs which I have not seen
or have not removed
or whose existence I have no knowledge of
be null and deemed of no value
like the ownerless dust of the earth.
poof! no crumbs. ha!
but I want crumbs. For the next eight days
I crave them, I crave buttered toast crumbs
and pastry crumbs and cookie crumbs,
cake crumbs and baguette crumbs with
a little cherry jam on top, pain au chocolate crumbs,
eight days of having only the promise of coffee
to draw myself out into the waking daylight.
That's the way the matzah crumbles.
The Rabbi asked, what is your favorite memory
of Passover, and I had no favorite memory, but Rabbi,
surely my bitter grieving for bread is as faithful
as the Israelites remembering their flight from slavery,
surely I share with my ancestors the bread of affliction.

Endemic

Karen Skolfield

“Kuala Lumpur” = muddy confluence, not a stunning compliment. We’ve learned to call the city “KL” and keluar means “exit,” terima kasih, “thank you.” We’re pleased with ourselves since Malaysians know a fair amount of English, so look at us, bonus great travelers. Drive on the left, really good tea, & other post-colonial indicators. “I thought ‘authorised’ was spelled with a ‘z’?” my son asks, and I must explain. We search the city park for monkeys: no luck, but a Malaysian oriole flies by. Endemic! I tell the kids, and they ask “What epidemic?” It took two days for our arms to stop hurting from the shots. Is boiling the water enough? An American plumber online says no. We ask for chicken for our daughter; out comes little squid. She’s limp and sodden from the time change. “I can’t eat things from the ocean,” she wails. I pick out squid, hide them in my mouth. Her head’s on the table. It’s 5 p.m. somewhere, but distinctly not here. So far, the children’s favorite meal was from Corn in Cup that serves only corn – a New World grain – and Belgian waffles. My daughter declares this “distinctly Malaysian.” Who taught her to talk like that? I tell her: just because the food is in Malaysia doesn’t make it Malaysian. She joyfully disagrees, spoons in more corn.

Farmer's Market of Emporia, Kansas

Lindsey Bartlett

I am a Farmer's Market convert.

I know that might sound extremely weird to some of you, but it is true. I have never had anything against Farmer's Markets, but it always seemed there were several factors that stopped me from utilizing them. The first: I grew up in a tiny map dot, blink-and-you'll-miss-it kind of town. Now, you would think that in an agricultural heavy part of Kansas surrounded by wheat fields, there would be plenty of folks with stuff to sell at a Farmer's Market. Well, you would be wrong. My hometown doesn't even try to have a market anymore.

The second reason: money. I'm an instructor at a small university, and as such I don't get paid over the summer. Therefore, I couldn't necessarily afford (or at least thought I couldn't) to buy goods from my college town's local Farmer's Market. This summer, though, things are different. Mostly, if I am honest, in that I am getting a paycheck (yay, summer class!).

The Emporia Farmer's Market is in its 35th year this summer, and for a town of Emporia's size (about 25,000) the market is exceptional. My town boasts two markets: one on Wednesday evenings and another on Saturday mornings each week from May-October. During the winter months there is an indoor market.

At many of these markets there is more going on than just the selling of fresh produce and baked goods. There is anything from activities for kids to live music and artists. A little something for everyone.

Earlier in June, I met Jason from Full Sky Farm at the market. (Visit his Facebook at Fully Sky Farm for more information.) Jason wins me over in two ways: he is super friendly. And he is selling raspberries, which are hands down my favorite. Sadly, Jason and his raspberries haven't been at the market lately. Store bought raspberries are just not the same.

As of my writing this (mid-July) we are in prime produce season. Wednesday's evening market was hopping. A line for Heck's sweet corn snaked through the parking lot. A flurry of hands grabbed large, ripe, red tomatoes. People carried sacks full of everything from honey to baked goods, sweet corn to cantaloupe.

I stopped at The Orchard's booth. The gentleman sells everything from honey to apple cider, and this day he had a selection of cantaloupe. Now, I love me some

cantaloupe. The thing is I live alone, so I'm not willing to buy a giant cantaloupe, no matter how much I love it. However, on the table were some smaller sized cantaloupes; perfect for single people like me!

"That's a good one," he says. As I lay a hand on a cantaloupe marked \$2.50.

"I'll take it." I hand him some cash, thank him, and scurry off with cantaloupe in hand.

A little while later, I arrive home with my loot: tomatoes, sweet corn, the cantaloupe, and a bouquet of beautiful flowers! Living in an era of social media and being something of an amateur photographer, I have to Instagram pictures of the flowers and the colorful produce.

It is then I realize something I'm slightly embarrassed to admit. I'm not sure how to properly cut up a cantaloupe if there is such a thing. I mean I've seen my mom do it, but I didn't pay much attention. Years of 4-H cooking never taught me this, only how to bake chiffon cakes. So, I do what any young adult with few domestic skills does I call my mom.

"Hey, mom. I have a question for you." I say, when she answers the phone. "I bought a cantaloupe at the Farmer's Market. How do I go about cutting it up?"

My Suzie home-maker, crafty to the core mother explains that I need to cut it in half starting where it came off the stem. From there it seems easy. I can do this! About half an hour later, I have officially finished the deed. I plop myself down on my couch with a bowl of fresh cantaloupe as part of my dinner. The verdict? It was delicious!

My advice: if you are lucky enough to have a Farmer's Market in your town make a point to shop there. You never know what hidden treasures and new culinary experiences you will have when you shop and eat local.

Fruitarian Foray

Ashira Malka

The man at the market looks so smart,
because he wears little round glasses
and he offers the best deal on cantaloupe.
After I buy, he offers me a seat in his stall
to sit and eat and I do sit on the plastic chair
in the shade and he cuts it open for me with a knife.
It's so unbelievably juicy inside.
I accept the ripe bright fragrant fruit and take a bite
or maybe two, even a few and ...
that's how long it takes
for the man across the dry dirt path to notice me,
white-skinned and sitting and I guess he's the one
who starts the sound
and it's picked up by everyone around,
and then of course
all that's too rotten to be sold
comes flying.
You know – red rotten tomatoes,
anything that was sitting not selling
gets flung and I get up and turn in (false) anger
(covering hurt) to the only man with glasses
and ask him:
“This is what you invited me for?!”
He says:
“No.”
and I walk off and out and the whole way,
the shrieking/ yelling, throwing rot at me is going on and ...
this is the town I grew up in.
This is the market we went to every week.
I wonder how my mom did it.
She was lucky, of course, to not have red hair
and be more darkly-complected
and not stand out nearly as much generally,
but now I get for the first time
why it is she never let me play
with the Arab children,
like I always wanted to,
why it was she was always in a hurry,
always nervous,
grabbing me away

Now I'd rather go
to the supermarket,
or some other market
where people don't act like that.
It's very hard for me to go home,
and it makes me very sick
when people assume
home or where you're from
equals comfort zone.
I've never had one.

**

I get my cantaloupe from the market
and take it across the street.
I've got a knife in my pocket
And all I need is a place
to sit and eat.
I find one over the ridge
now that I've crossed the road and descend ...
find a spot on a rock
surrounded by sand-y dirt in the sun,
cut it open,
enjoy the juice.
A man comes up.
He tells me I can't sit there.
He says this is where the escapees from 'Aza come ...
I ask him who he is,
he says police.
I say I don't believe,
and I'm not leaving.
I'm going to sit and eat my whole cantaloupe,
finish it,
I don't care who comes.
I'm not scared and why should I be?
He says alright,
sit,
eat.
When you're done
you can come
and see my car.
I do.
He is.
Oh.
Where was the uniform?
Was he in disguise?
How did he expect me to know
he was police and ...

Why can't police officers
in America
be that nice,
that human?
Why can't they be real,
person-to-person,
like him?

Durian Prohibited in This Hotel

Karen Skolfield

So says the sign by the elevators, first in Malay, then English. Durian: a fruit with a smell “considered offensive by some.” Now we’re curious, want to be the best American tourists ever. Already we’ve used the squat toilets without complaint. What can’t we do if we put our minds to it? In our pockets the currency of colorful ringgits has something to say. At the durian ice cream stand the worker hears our accent, assures us we’ll soon be fans. We want to be fans. We’re patting ourselves on the back, inventing stories: *yeah, the smell but best ice cream ever, most tourists don’t like it, wish we could get it in the States*, etc. On the counter are football-sized durians, bristled. My son can’t resist touching spiky things. “Hard, but not pokey,” he declares. Flinted Rs, the New England brass in our voices. There’s a smell but we wave away doubts, accept our cones. The worker beams and watches our faces as we take licks. We say: “Oh, wow, thank you! We’re going to enjoy our ice cream outside.” He touches his right palm to the center of his chest, both a farewell and gesture of thanks. In our hands, shame in the shape of a cone; in our mouths, the cringe of American palates. “Don’t spit it out,” I hiss at the kids. Still eating: “I am not letting this thing beat me,” my son says, but quietly, in case Malaysia is listening.

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The Reality of Potato Farming

Chris Brauer

They arrived in the mail – one large paper bag with four smaller paper bags inside, each holding a few heritage seed potatoes.

“Now what I am supposed to do?” I asked.

“Cut them up, so that each piece has an eye, and then you plant them one foot apart,” said a friend of mine.

“Seems easy enough,” I said.

That weekend I wrapped string around one post and then another fifty feet away so as to have straight rows. It didn’t work. I tried again, two more times. All three rows were wonky. It looked like I had been under the influence.

An hour later, I had 150 feet of seed potatoes planted: Russian Blue, Irish Cobbler, Banana Fingerling, and Pink Fir Apple Fingerling.

“Now what I am supposed to do?” I asked.

“Now you wait,” was the answer.

Every so often I get some random romantic notion in my head. When I was younger, I decided I would abandon society and live in the forest, until I realized that the forest was cold and dark and wet. A few years ago, I decided to learn the violin. I got discouraged when it still sounded like two cats fighting after several months of practicing. This year I had the idea to plant potatoes.

They say that ignorance is bliss. This is certainly the case with farming. I had no idea what I was doing – how long it took to grow potatoes, how these varieties might taste, or what else was required of me to get them to the kitchen counter several months later.

It was exciting to see the plants pop out of the soil, and the leaves unfurl. It was not as exciting, however, when I was told that I had to start ‘hilling’ the rows. This involved manual labor, and I’m not fond of manual labor. It’s one of the reasons I became a teacher, then a writer. Halfway down the first row, I developed blisters. “Well, this sucks,” I said to the neighborhood cat that came to say hello.

Every couple weeks, I made my way down the length of the fifty-foot rows. I had to shift the wooden handle of the hoe in my hands, so as not to open the blisters as I scraped the soil before mounting the hill, but I did learn to appreciate the rhythm of it all.

Eventually, it was time to harvest. The Russian Blue and Irish Cobbler are earlier season potatoes, compared to the fingerling varieties, and soon I was pulling up plants and sifting through the soil. I made mashed potatoes and scalloped potatoes and tried traditional recipes for *champ* and *colcannon*. Pulling up one or two plants at a time wasn’t so bad.

Late summer became early fall, and the weather wasn't as pleasant. The days got shorter and it got colder. Then it rained. A lot. And I was already getting sick of potatoes.

The phone rang last week. "You should think about harvesting them all soon," said my friend. "They'll start to rot if it gets too wet, or freeze if it gets too cold."

Harvesting half a dozen larger potatoes at a time wasn't difficult, but harvesting the remaining 125 feet of potatoes in one evening – most of the fingerling variety – in the drizzly rain and approaching darkness didn't sound like a good time.

My wife agreed to help me, but she wasn't amused that she had to scrape the mud off the shovel every few minutes as I attempted to pull up the sleeves of my wool sweater with my wrists.

"When I mentioned that we should spend more time together, this is not what I meant," I said as I tried to warm my fingers with my breath.

We filled buckets and buckets with potatoes and, the next day, laid them out to dry. Then we had to clean them. "Suddenly, I see the industrial revolution in a whole new light," I said.

My wife laughed at me. "You're probably not doing this again next year, are you?"

"No, probably not," I answered. "Actually, I was thinking about building a chicken coop – maybe getting some chickens. We could collect eggs in the morning for our breakfast. How does that sound?"

The Dalek on the Cake

Janet Bowdan

The cake was chocolate
of course,
for Noah's 9th birthday,
and the Dalek on the cake
was chocolate, too.
We planned the look:
a universe glimmering blue
frosting with a blue Tardis
and the gold-painted Dalek
waving pretzel arms
threateningly.
On top of the Tardis perched
a vanilla Tootsie Roll molded
into an endearingly chubby Adipose.
I'm not sure I actually need
to say anything else.
All this for a cake? But why not.
Okay, having said that,
let's just take it too far:
cupcakes as well, a dozen in gold foil
(vanilla, because people deserve
a choice) their pretzel arms advancing
on the cake. "Exterminate!" x 12.
And a bowl of marshmallow Adipose
for the gluten-free contingent. Here
we are at the laser-tag place celebrating
these absolutely dangerous creatures
willing to disintegrate the planet.
Or maybe this is the sort of ritual
where we diminish and eat our enemies.
The next cake will be Walt Kelly's:
a swamp and in it a possum explaining
to a porky pine "We have met the enemy
and he is us."

Mother's Day

Karen Skolfield

The media loves pitting women against women: how do you feed your baby, why don't you fit in that dress, disposable diapers last 8 billion years even in the guts of sharks, gold digger, cougar, jailbait, cat fight. On Coney Island, Miki Sudo downed 38 hot dogs in 10 minutes for the national crown. After every hot dog, Miki brushed her hands together in the universal gesture for *take that*, her eyes on Sonya "the Black Widow" Thomas, four-time champion, who for every one of Miki's hot dogs was falling a nibble behind. How might one discover she's good at eating hot dogs? Was it a meal brought to her that she tossed down like luggage into the belly of a plane? Predators may eat up to 10 percent of their body weight at a time; scavengers, up to 20. I'm picking at my breakfast in bed, wondering if champions chew before swallowing. The Heimlich: you know someone must be standing by, reviewing the steps. It's one of the few positive gestures that begins with a fist. If a woman has died eating hot dogs in a contest, Google doesn't know. My kids ask: you gonna eat all those raspberries? In the comments below the article, people have a lot to say about the bodies of women daring to eat hot dogs in public. I know what Miki and Sonya know: the food's brought to you. Then the vultures descend.

First published in *Waxwing*

Popping Popcorn Properly

Drew Prosch-Jensen

“What are you doing?” the young man asked me
A guest at my daughter's house
First words that I'd heard him say all day
Yes, he'd been quiet as a mouse

“I'm popping popcorn,” I reply
His words in my memory now saved
“But...but you can't be,” he stammered out
“You aren't using a microwave!”

I smiled at the lad, and I shared then a tale
Of when I was but a small boy
Of my Aunt Stevie teaching me this
Her gift better than any old toy

The sound of the kernels exploding
The smell of the butter ups the sensory ante
The salt, the piece de resistance
'Twas better than any ol' candy

But now I am an old man
And I reflect on my counter-top's soul
A light spot worn, when much butter I poured
While my offspring spun Aunt Stevie's bowl

Lunchbox

Janet Bowdan

Elnora slipped the strap and turned back the lid. This disclosed the knife, fork, napkin, and spoon, the milk flask, and the interior packed with dainty sandwiches wrapped in tissue paper, and the little compartments for meat, salad, and the custard cup.

--A Girl of the Limberlost, Gene Stratton-Porter

What the children are having for lunch in these old books always sounds so good, more than delicious, delicious with style; not the mac 'n' cheese in 3 easy steps shoveled into a thermos with an apple and a bag of chips, but dainty sandwiches on fresh home-baked bread cut into triangles in addition to thin slices of honey-roasted turkey, salad with greens and tomatoes, garden-fresh obviously, and egg-custard with perhaps a sugar glaze. Not that my kid would eat salad; I used to push carrots & hummus, which worked for a while, and then salsa he'd occasionally dip into, but now he's off vegetables completely and says he only has time to eat one piece of fruit--like one grape, one strawberry--if that, and sometimes no time to eat the main course the healthy part, especially if it's tuna salad because, salad, or, yesterday, ravioli, the good kind that I wouldn't mind having for lunch myself except that if I'm working, I generally have just the cheese sandwich that is what my kid wants and which I tell him isn't healthy enough. So it's okay for me and not for him because I eat salad. Salad makes everything healthy, and if you need to provide a nut-free dairy eggless lunch 5 times a day, 130 days a year, the kid ought to be willing to eat it, especially if there's a little cup in his lunchbox to put it in.

Kitchen Chronicle: The Story of My Journey with Didibhai

Aparajita De

I did not know cooking when I emigrated to the United States. As a student, the university cafeteria and the local pizza shop sustained me for a while. I had few options and fewer dollars to spend on food. Eventually, after a year and a half of procrastination, I decided to try sporting with culinary skills. It wasn't an easy transition. Initially, I did not care about the taste, so anything in the microwave with a dash of cumin and turmeric would qualify as 'Indian' food for me! I wasn't too keen on reinventing Bengali food yet, just Indian food that could be conveniently and quickly microwaved! Soon enough, a visit home after my second year, signaled that what I ate and declared to be 'Indian' food was not anything remotely close to *any* cuisine identifiable with the subcontinent. It was just plain laziness on my part and perhaps, a reluctance to admit that food recreates nostalgia. And heartache.

I did not realize then that food can connect time and people in time. That food helps to forget, remember, and recreate. Food Connects.

I started calling Maa more frequently, initially I forayed into rice, lentils, fired (*sic*) eggs, or fish. After the phase of getting the eggs out before burning them, or *firing* them completely, or frying the fish before burning myself (!), I adventurously started out with trying cutting vegetables. It wasn't easy. I had never done it, never watched anyone do it! So, getting fresh cut vegetables and later frozen ones worked for me. So, what went for vegetable kofta in my little apartment was actually mushy frozen veggies that I had planned on as a dish! I was learning, but the curve was really rather steep! I defended my sagging self-esteem by admitting it was the course work that drained me of my 'culinary skills'!

During this time, *Didibhai*, my maternal grandmother, came to stay with my family. Telephone calls got lengthier since I wanted to talk to her as well. She was a wizard in the kitchen, from Indian to Mughlai, from jellies and preserves to fritters, from dairy based desserts to flour-based ones, from cakes to kulfi, she had it all on her fingertips. I depended on this oral knowledge transfer, *you tube* had just been born and Indian recipes, videos, and blogs were few and far between at the time. For me, *Didibhai* bridged cultures of cooking while happily substituting online knowledge.

Initially, I was tutored on the various spices and when to add them whole, when to grind them fresh, and when to just use them as garnish. A summer during my third year, went by getting spice jars and spices shipped to me from Kolkata, or those that journeyed in friends' suitcases smelling of home. I remember organizing

the kitchen around spices, utensils, skillets, and pans. I was getting interested in this business. It was fun to spend time in the kitchen outside of work! I even ventured to the public library in my town and took a look at books on food. I was growing an interest in food. In my understanding of cooking, I was simultaneously developing another level of intimacy with *Didibhai*.

With her commentary, I gradually learnt how to use the knife; mincing, slicing, cubing, and chopping were words suddenly having meaning, shape, and size in my cognition. My refrigerator had fresh vegetables, fish, and meat, instead of takeout boxes, hardened pizzas waiting to be trashed, and bags of frozen vegetables that were never going to be used! I had discovered the kitchen. Outside of work, the kitchen was my space to chill out. I almost likened myself to a scientist at the lab, only my work space was slightly different! During this time, *Didibhai* gave me recipes using no spices, 1 or 2 spices, or even those that could use a variety of spices during different phases of their preparation. I learnt how to make varieties of *shuktos*. I learnt it with ground mustard and milk, or the one with celery seed (*radhuni*) and five spices (*panch phoron*), the one with fish, and the one with leftover vegetables. I processed her recipes to recreate them my way. Innovations with “how I cook Indian food” started. I actually gained enough confidence (with my cooking skills) after my 4th year here to volunteer at a food meet during International Student’s festival. I had, indeed, come some way in my culinary journey.

I kept up phone conversations with *Didibhai* long after she went back to her home. We now joked about the secret book of her recipes that I will inherit! It *was* somewhere and we chatted about it. *Didibhai*’s skills were still eons outside of my level, but in my own way, I thought I recreated her ideas in my kitchen every day.

She gained significance during the period I started to date. My fiancé, a food connoisseur and expert chef, wanted to test me on my skills. Over a restaurant meeting, I decided to invite him for a home cooked meal. Our first meal at home together started with watermelon punch—*Didibhai*’s idea for her would-be grandson-in-law. It was Memorial Day, warmer than usual, and the punch with crushed ice, lemon slices, a dash of rock salt sealed our relationship. I think *Didibhai* just knew what would work for me! Maybe, she had a story in the creation of the punch somewhere, maybe it would connect my warm Memorial Day meeting with another warm day during her youth...

Time flies. And it has been over a decade since that first meeting.

As we grow our relationship, we have continued to experiment with food and cuisine in the kitchen. Iranian spice mix, Moroccan couscous, or Spanish paella, our culinary borders keep expanding. I cannot disregard *Didibhai's* role in triggering my enthusiasm. The food plurality that binds us together made me design my first senior level class on food and identity. Maybe, I was hoping to find similar narratives like mine in the students I met and interacted with. Sure enough, I heard stories of Haitian grandmothers' stew recipes, of Jewish *cholent* recipes during Sabbath, Guyanese recipes using cumin and saffron, food narratives from all across the world seemed to have animated every class that I taught. From bridging portals of home, work, personal and professional worlds, *Didibhai* remained ever present. Her food stories and expertise could de-stress me and let me begin all over again. Our phone conversations had come under a schedule, however, a short trip back to Kolkata, always meant handmade delicacies from her kitchen—to eat and carry back.

Didibhai left us last year.

Oftentimes, after a long day at work, I remember our joke about the book of her secret recipes. I had by this time realized that the book of recipes was *Didibhai*. She was the text, the secret of all the recipes, of all the foods I will ever create in my kitchen. A jar of her last mango preserves sits in my refrigerator. I hesitate to consume it. I can feel her presence, her touch, her love in the preserves. And, I want to hold on to it. I realize that it has a limited shelf life, yet I am fiercely guarding it from time, unconsumed. As I write this, I realize *Didibhai* is in my kitchen and in the memories that my food creates of her. She is renewed through the food we discovered together, and these renewals keep the journey of food and people forever throbbing.