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AEPL Members Respond to Lynn Z. Bloom's Recipe¹

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Jeffrey Seizer, and Elizabeth Vickers

Introduction

Geri DeLuca

Lynn Z. Bloom's recently published book, Recipe (2022), is an elegant work in the Bloomsbury's Object Lesson series. It offers a wide range of reflections and information on recipes. Lynn is a scholar, teacher, prolific writer, and joyous cook. She calls our attention to recipes as cultural artifacts, as conversation, as ritual, as celebration, and as comfort that holds us close in hard times. She discusses how recipes are created, improvised, and adapted at home and worldwide. She also reminds us of the moral dilemma of some of us creating beautiful, abundant meals in a world filled with starving people. Both level-headed and extravagant, her book is a perfect text for a class centered on the economy and cultures of food. It is also a gift for cooks, would-be cooks, and those who benefit from the culinary labors of others.

Inspired by her book, AEPL held several Friday afternoon sessions on Zoom in the fall of 2022 to share our own recipes and to think about what they evoked in us: why we value them, the labor they involve, the pleasure we share with each of them.

The first recipe here is Lynn's, "handed down" as they almost always are, from someone older and from a different place.

I. Fifi's Luscious Lentil Soup

Lynn Bloom

This soup nourishes body and soul. I got this recipe fifty years ago from my Greek friend Fifi, short for Euphrosina, one of the Three Graces, and have served it with pleasure ever since. The name, meaning *gracious* and *friendly*, suits the soup as well as the source of this delectable dish, whose fragrance fills the house while it's cooking. It's a succulent centerpiece for family gatherings, such as lunch the day before Thanksgiving, or the day after Christmas, a filling but not fattening dish that people of all ages will enjoy, served with crusty bread and a green salad. The recipe aspires to be fat- and salt-free and thus heart healthy, but there will inevitably be salt in the chicken broth and the canned tomatoes.

When my children were in elementary school, they didn't like conventional breakfast food, but they loved lunch food, especially Hearty Breakfast Soup, thick enough to

1. Bloomsbury, 2022, 160 pp.

stand a spoon in. They lapped it up, but ssssh—we warned them not to tell the teacher, whose taste ran to Wheaties and Pop Tarts.

1) In a Dutch oven sauté:

2 Tbsp. oil, canola or any bland kind
2 (or more, ad lib) large chopped onions, until translucent
3 cloves chopped garlic
celery tops and the heart section with lots of leaves
6-8 oz mushrooms

2) Add to the pot:

6 cups chicken broth, preferably made from scratch
1 # (lb.) dry lentils (washed first)
¾ pound carrots, cut into chunks or rounds
2 28-oz.-cans crushed or stewed tomatoes
dribble of olive oil
dried or fresh basil (ad lib); a few rosemary sprigs are also nice
slug of dry red wine

3) Bring to a boil; turn down heat and simmer until lentils and carrots are tender (c. ½ hour).

Add water during the cooking as the lentils expand. How much depends on how thick you want the soup to be.

4) Add dashes of red wine vinegar to taste, in each bowl. The thick version may also be topped with nonfat yogurt and parsley.

My Mother Makes Leftover Turkey Gumbo, Late 1960s²

Libby Falk Jones

First you rope the okra, that's an "o" not an "a" in "rope" (remember Miz Sybil got in trouble on that tv cook show in Florida when the emcee misunderstood?). Stir the okra, it'll rope around the side of your big gumbo pot, then the strings'll begin to dry (you don't want goo in your gumbo!). Use a little Wesson oil with the okra, then add your celery (tops too) and onions and garlic (what Louisiana dish could live without them?) When that gets mushy (you'll know when), add the broth you cooked the giblets in (you saved it, right?) and the broth from when you boiled the turkey bones, add onion and celery there too (in this gumbo you get every bit of good out of that turkey). Add the leftover gravy and little neck meat bits if you didn't use them in your Friday morning turkey hash, yes, it's worth it to cook a big bird (you always loved the leftovers more than Thanksgiving dinner). With your hash be sure to make your biscuits

2. Previously published in the author's book, *Yakety Yak (Don't Talk Back): Poems* (Workhorse, 2022).

(best thing you got from your eighth grade home-ec class). Then make your roux (gumbo has to have roux), stir the flour and oil forever, go slow, if it burns it's ruined but it has to get dark, dark (get Roger to help you). Use that cast iron skillet you got for your wedding (doesn't it work well since I cured it for you?) Add a little water—watch out! it'll steam—then stir it into the pot, you can add tomatoes, tomato sauce, that makes it rich. Taste it (you could cool a little spoon for Catlet), add some salt and pepper, you and your father always wanted cayenne, maybe Tony Chachere's seasoning, but go light. Let it cook awhile. It's better the next day, like I always told you when I tucked you in each night, remember? ("Tomorrow is a *new* day.")

II. UNBAKED POEMS: A Poem as Recipe

Elizabeth Vickers

Here is a poem about writing as recipe, which she was willing to share with me, as she has shared her wonderful dishes:

It's unwise to reveal poems until they're fully baked
unless put back in the oven for a second time
—like biscotti, nicely crisped up—but sometimes
poems have been long in the mind's oven
without awareness, and, yeasty, suddenly rise,
can be slid out done well enough for the hungry.

In my pre-dinner kitchen, along with a glass of red
a not yet grilled steak, raw green beans
poems elbow into my menu almost cooked
at least the mental recipe started with intention,
—a couple of ingredients missing—and this is one
of those poems still a bit wobbly in the middle
a poem for right now, half-baked, underdone
perhaps to be reconsidered over dessert.

III. Rose DeLuca's (Nanny's) Labor-Intensive Eggplant Parmegiano

Geri DeLuca

(I, her daughter, know this recipe because I watched her make it over and over. The first time I actually made it was for this piece!)

Two really big eggplants peeled and sliced into quarter-inch slices.

In a colander (aka a "scala pasta"), lay out the pieces of eggplant, on top of one another.

Sprinkle each piece with a little salt, not too much!

When done, put a plate on top of the pile of eggplant pieces. Weigh it down with a heavy weight, preferably a large can of Luigi Vitelli whole tomatoes.

Leave the colander in the sink so that the bitter water can drip out of the eggplant: several hours.

Rinse the eggplant so that the water and the salt run off. Pat the eggplant dry.

Beat three or four eggs into a bowl. Dip the eggplant pieces in the beaten eggs

Then dip the eggplant in white flour.

Fry the eggplant slices in olive oil until the pieces are a light, even golden brown. If you walk away from the stove, you will burn them. So stay where you are. Listen to music. This process takes forever. Pay attention. If you get hungry, eat a piece or two just as they are! They are delicious.

Use your own homemade tomato sauce, which took you three hours to cook: OR, you can use a good jar sauce. Rao's Marinara is my favorite.

Slice three fat balls of good quality mozzarella cheese which melts easily.

In a 9 x 12-inch baking pan, spread a thin coating of tomato sauce over the bottom. Alternate layers of eggplant with layers of mozzarella cheese and layers of sauce. Spread a little fresh basil around as you go.

Repeat until you are done with all the ingredients. I had three layers.

Bake in a 350-degree oven until the sauce is hot and the mozzarella cheese is melted and oozy: there will be tiny bits of sauce bubbling at the top. Make sure the center is hot. About 35 – 40 minutes.

Serve with an Italian wine, a green salad, and some crusty Italian bread. If this is for a holiday, there will need to be antipasto and pasta and a roast chicken as well—or maybe a pork roast. And then Italian pastries and espresso. Then lie down and try not to think about the dishes.

IV. If Food Be the Music of Love, Cook On: A Gastronomic Romance

Bruce Novak

"Ask me to marry you!"

"What??"

"I said, 'Ask me to marry you!'"

I stammered.

"Please. You won't be sorry. I promise."

"OK. (Pause.) (Big pause.) Will you marry me, Amy?" "No. But thanks for asking!"

We had just had another one of our memorable dinners, and she had pulled to the side of the street—Michigan Avenue and Washington Street in downtown Chicago, to be exact—so I could catch my bus back to the southside. This was life with Amy. Dramatic and hilarious. And looking back, I'm pretty sure my life on the whole, maybe hers

too, would have been much happier than it has so far turned out if we had both been serious that night.

Instead I fell in love with someone who helped me sort myself out and rise in life—which was good for a while, until I had risen so far it began to scare her. *She* had asked *me* to marry *her* when my life was pretty low, but just as I was really starting to make my way up in the world, she got out, not wanting to play second fiddle, or even share first chair, in any way in anything, at least with me.

Soon afterward, I called Amy, for the first time in a decade. And then I cooked her her first birthday dinner. Her tears that night spoke to how the many meals we had shared over many years had bonded—and in some ways married—us. Every year after our first meeting, about fifteen in counting, she took me out, on my birthday in August, on her meager waitress's income, to one of the nicest places in town, and we lived for a few hours high on the proverbial hog. And almost to the day six months later I would cook her—and sometimes her boyfriend at the time—an elaborate dinner. Now we live in different cities, but we still religiously call one another twice a year, returning in memory to the scene of the feasts.

The dish that Amy remembered most clearly at our reunion was Chicken Marengo. Named after a victory of Napoleon in Northern Italy, it is a kitchen sink kind of dish, supposedly concocted to show Napoleon the bounty of everything Marengo would have to offer its new conqueror. Throw everything in and see how it melds together in exquisite and unexpected panache.

You **MUST** have a large circular platter, preferably glass. In the center, of course, is a huge mountain of sautéed chicken parts. Surrounding the chicken is a circle of the largest shrimp you can find, and around the edge of the platter are circular toast points topped with fried eggs. The circles upon circles are hypnotizing. Then everything is bound together with a rich pink sauce made with reduced chicken stock, pureed tomato, and just enough cream to make the platter glisten.

The first time I made Chicken Marengo was as the centerpiece of a major party I had for high school friends. The recipe book, which I found as a teenager, was written by the Italian count Francesco Ghedini, from recipes left by servants who had cooked for his family for generations. He compiled it as a gift to his American wife shortly before she died of cancer. And then he, out of grief, took his own life. Like Amy's and my story, this tale of love and sadness redeemed by rich and delicious food is painful but also ultimately consoling, bringing tears of both sorrow and joy to all who love eating as one of the greatest expressions of tender love that there is. I outgrew other loves. But Amy and Chicken Marengo are loves savorable for life, and eternal sweeteners of its sadness.

V. Ham, Asparagus and Cheddar Quiche

Jeffrey Seizer

"Chef Jeff" is Nanny Rose DeLuca's grandson, Geri's son (which goes to show you that sometimes the passion skips a generation.) Jeff started watching cooking shows, and

cooking from them (a round perfect omelet), when he was 10 years old. He has been making beautiful food ever since.

You will need either a Pyrex baking pan or a tart mold with a removable bottom.

For the short dough:

580 grams all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons salt
1 lb cold butter cubed into ½ inch cubes
11 grams ice water
1 whole egg

For the filling:

12 whole eggs
½ bunch asparagus, chopped
½ lb ham
½ lb cheddar cheese

To make the short dough, add flour into a mixer or bowl, add the cold cubed butter and salt. Mix or pulse until the butter is in small pieces but can still be seen. Add 1 egg and the salt. Add the ice water slowly until the dough comes into a ball. I like to finish mixing the dough on the counter by hand until it holds together but is still flaky. Wrap in plastic and chill. Once the dough is cold, roll it out to about ¼ inch thickness and place it into your desired baking pan.

Once dough is in the pan, chill again for at least an hour. When ready to bake, pre-heat oven to 350 degrees. Use a fork to poke holes in the bottom of the dough. Blind bake with dry beans and wax paper until the crust sets. Remove the beans and wax paper and set aside. Bake for another 10 minutes until the bottom is just turning golden.

Mix the eggs with the diced ham, asparagus, and cheddar and about a tablespoon of salt. Pour mixture into the baked tart shell. At this point turn your oven down to 275 degrees and put the quiche back into the oven. Bake until firm, around 45 minutes. Cool for at least 30 minutes, remove from baking pan, cut quiche into even pieces, and serve!

And there you have it, dear readers, all sorts of foods and culture, memories and language, and nourishment and pleasure.