

## I came home for lunch

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My family has always had an intense; some would say obsessive, interest in food. My earliest distinct food memory is from first grade. We were living in a small rural Indiana town and I and the other students in the elementary school used to walk home for lunch. Occasionally my mother would fix me new potatoes sautéed with salt pork. I loved it. I am sure I would still love it. My mother claims to have no memory of this dish. Perhaps she is appalled to have served a small child a dish that all current diet doctors would disapprove of, since it is high in fat, carbohydrates and salt. In truth, potatoes sautéed in salt pork is just a sensible regional adaptation of the classic French dish *pommes de terre à la landaise* in which potatoes, onions and ham are cooked in goose fat.

The food at home was almost always good, the occasional dish of Brussels sprouts notwithstanding. I noticed early on that I ate an entirely different diet than any of my friends. For instance, my mother made all of the bread that we ate. Mixes and other convenience foods had no place in our house.

Snacking between meals was forbidden, at least for us children. Forbidden, but not unheard of. My mother used to make a particularly delicious cinnamon bread and I used to sneak into the kitchen and cut a thin piece. After all such a small sliver wouldn't be noticed. My brother and sister would do the same thing. Sometimes more than once a day. By the end of the day the loaf would be a shadow of its former self and my mother would demand to know who had been eating the bread. Her demands were always met with blank looks and denials. Homemade English muffins and donuts suffered the same fate, under the theory that just one would hardly be noticed.

There were of course, dark years. When I was twelve we spent the year in England while my father finished a book. I was a first former at an English grammar school, Rickmanworth Grammar. My commute to school involved taking two trains and a bus, I did not come home for lunch. The less said about the horrors of English public school food the better. Suffice it to say its bad reputation is deserved.

Then there was college. Dorm food at Indiana University was better than English grammar school food but still dreadful. There were occasional highlights. Once a semester IU had parent's weekends when parents were encouraged to visit and eat in the dining room. The food during these weekends was always much better, the meat even recognizable. This led more than one parent to turn to their child and say, "I don't know why you complain about the food. I thought it was quite good." The two weeks after parent's weekend were always culinary low points as the food service economized to compensate for money recklessly spent on the food for parent's weekend.

When I went to graduate school I moved off campus at the first opportunity. I moved into a house with several other graduate students' and faced a choice: learn to cook or eat bad food. Bad food might have been acceptable for a few years in college, but was not an acceptable permanent condition.

So, I had to learn to cook. Now even though my mother was a good cook, I had never actually cooked anything more complicated than a pan of brownies. What my mother had taught me was what good food tasted like.

So, I began to cook. My mother, delighted that I was interested in cooking, sent me cookbooks at irregular intervals. The first was *Joy of Cooking*, a good comprehensive book for the novice cook. Despite this there were some early disasters. Most memorable is a stuffed pepper dish. This dish was so simple that almost anybody could pull it off. You simply stuffed green peppers with a rice based stuffing and baked them until done. The recipe called for a couple cups of rice and did not mention that it should be *cooked* rice. I don't believe it ever crossed the author's mind that anyone would be dumb enough to use raw rice. But I did. Needless to say raw rice does not soften when baked. Next my mother sent me Marcella Hazan's *Classic Italian Cooking* and Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. These books were revelations. Over time my failures grew further apart, more sophisticated, and at least usually edible. I recall a succession of failed génoise and soufflés before I mastered the proper handling of egg whites. A génoise is a cake that depends on the careful treatment of egg whites to rise. It is one of the foundations of French pastry and one cannot hope to master French pastry without mastering the génoise. I made a succession of bad ones. Instead of being light and airy, mine were thin, doughy and heavy. I inflicted these on my fellow graduate students. Fortunately graduate students will eat anything. Since none of them had ever had a génoise, this prevented them from realizing just how bad mine were.

After graduate school I got a two-year postdoc at Purdue in Lafayette, Indiana. I grew up in West Lafayette and one of my life's goals was to never return. However, Purdue had the one thing I needed most, a job. My mother was still living in West Lafayette and I would sometimes help her with the cooking when she gave parties. One day, shortly before a large party, she suggested that I should do a boned and stuffed turkey. The recipe called for the turkey to be boned, stuffed with forcemeat and then reformed and sewn-up to resemble a whole turkey. The bird would then be decorated with flower shapes cut from various vegetables and finally glazed with clear aspic made from clarified turkey stock.

I had learned to bone and stuff a chicken from watching Julia Child on television and had successfully done a number of boned and stuffed chickens. I had even refined my technique. I learned to get all the bones out through the neck cavity without making any additional holes in the skin. When my mother broached the idea of a turkey I confidently asserted that it would be no problem. Turkeys, I said were easier to bone than chickens. There was more room to work. Not that I had ever boned a turkey. The dish I was sure would be a masterpiece. I could see it in my mind's eye.

Let me assure you that turkeys are not easier to bone than chickens. They are larger, have stronger tendons, which must be removed, and the joints are much more difficult to separate. The turkey took forever to bone and stuff with forcemeat. Then, there was the matter of cooking it. The turkey was supposed to be submerged in broth and poached. The average kitchen does not possess a pot large enough to submerge a whole turkey and neither did we. We had to settle for a roasting pan. Since the pan was not deep enough to completely submerge the turkey we had to turn it in the poaching liquid every few minutes. This increased the already long cooking time considerably. As

for when it was done, well who could say? Cook it too long and it would be dry and tasteless. Too little and the forcemeat stuffing would be raw in the center. We gave it our best guess. The turkey then had to be cooled. The recipe was explicit. Due to the large mass of the turkey and cooking stock, both had to be cooled to room temperature before they were refrigerated. By this time it was midnight. It looked like the turkey would take hours to cool. In desperation my mother and I filled the bathtub with cold water and dumped in every ice cube we had. We put the roasting pan into the tub and took turns stirring until the stock and turkey were more or less cool.

The next morning I set out to finish the dish. I cut flowers out of vegetables, using thin slices of carrots and radishes for the flowers and scallion greens for the stems. Cutting flower petals out of slices of carrots requires some artistic skill and is probably best learned as an apprentice in a classical French kitchen. Thus, I was in trouble. At last however, I had passable looking flowers artfully arranged on the turkey. The final step was to coat the turkey with clarified aspic. The trick is to pour cold, barely liquid aspic over the cold turkey. If all goes well, a thin layer of aspic will solidify over the turkey. You then re-chill the turkey, and repeat the process several times until you have built up an aspic layer of the proper thickness. This too took longer than I had anticipated. Finally, the turkey was finished. It looked beautiful, much as I had imagined it.

The party was a buffet. When the guests arrived there was the turkey on a handsome platter, gleaming under a coating of aspic. I remember that none of the guests remarked on the turkey's looks. When the time came I carved the bird and saw to my relief that it was perfectly cooked. Eagerly, I tasted a slice. Well, you couldn't say it was bad. In fact you couldn't say it was much of anything. It was bland, almost completely tasteless. The texture was uninteresting as well. I heard one guest remark that he thought it was a turkey roll, from the deli.

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