
WHEN NOTHING SEEMS SAFE: HOW MY LIFE AND PALATE WERE SHAPED BY ILLNESS

BY DK CRAWFORD



Author and her mom; Vintage family photo

When my mother got sick, everything in our household went topsy-turvy, including what came in and out of our kitchen. Certain forms of cancer are so severe and quick that it's like waking up one day on fire—you drop and start to roll as fast as you can, hoping to gain on it.

The brilliant team of doctors had no idea what caused my mother to get pancreatic cancer. When I questioned its origin one day, the surgeon and gastroenterologist shrugged in harmony and said, “The water?”

There was some speculation about a zone that went from Lafayette to New Orleans to Houston and within that zone, there was a higher incident rate of pancreatic cancer than other geographical areas. Everyone was looking for the common link in what could be causing this horrible disease.

Illness tends to lead to rampant, immediate education and our entire family started devouring books and tapes to find alternative cures for this nasty beast of a disease. We altered our lives in a wide shotgun pattern, hoping to stop its progress.

One of the items to leave our world first was a microwave oven, as we were told it both leaked radiation and took all the nutrients from our food. Then we started filtering our water

in specific ways: Was spring OK? Or charcoal-filtered? Or did it have to go through reverse-osmosis and be distilled?

We formed a relationship with the only organic farm in our area. They would drop off baskets of fresh veggies and herbs and we'd create dinners around those ingredients. We started to eat less or even no meat, only whole grains, and eschewed things like dairy products, sugar and caffeine.

Strange ingredients began to inhabit our pantry like Umboshi plums, Shitake mushrooms that grew on a log in our greenhouse and Essiac tea. Almost silently the afternoon ritual of sipping fermented Kombucha mushroom tea from dainty crystal goblets and downing shots of fresh wheat grass juice took the place of our evening cocktail hour. We invited friends over to join us in our new ritual and Kombucha became the “it” drink of the neighborhood.

Every now and then in the madness of that frenetic year, there would be a hint of normalcy and often it involved rare moments of culinary comfort. Once I remember my mother being fed up with the stark, often tasteless diet she was eating. She took all the veggies that were dropped off for that week and prepared them in less overtly healthy, but absolutely delicious, familiar ways.

The fresh sweet corn fritters were divine and the collards sautéed in olive oil, garlic and tomato, hit a spot we all needed scratched. She made cornbread sticks in the oven-warmed sizzling cast-iron mold, to accompany the pot of black-eyed peas cooked with nitrate-free bacon. We sat around the table and oooh'd and ahhh'd as we mopped up the sauce with our cornbread.

In that moment my mother had taken control of her circumstance and commanded the kitchen, as was her forte. In doing so she'd also managed to marry her newfound knowledge of vegetarian cuisine with updated recipes from her past. At the time she still thought she'd recover and she vowed with particular zeal to do more of this style of cooking for us. We were all eager for that promise to hold true.

My final fond, almost normal, memory with my mother

was also spent in the kitchen. I'd been given a Thai cuisine cookbook for Christmas. Mom and I had a slumber party at her house and decided to make a Thai omelet and a green bean dish.

It took a whole day for me to find the obscure ingredients listed in the cookbook as I drove around becoming familiar with the few Asian markets we had in town. Until I began shopping I had no clue how complex the recipes in this cookbook really were.

I got home and she and I put on a CD of piano solos and began chopping, stirring and cooking together. It took almost two hours for us to get the ingredients assembled and ready to cook. We laughed at our folly, grabbed a glass of wine and vowed to see this experiment through to the end, no matter what!

Finally we managed to turn out the omelet, just like it looked in the book and the green bean dish shortly followed. The flavors were simply amazing and we relished every hard-won bite! That evening, exhausted after our culinary challenge, my mother and I drew with chalk pastels and painted in watercolors in the dark, silent sunroom and listened to the frogs singing in the pond. Finally full, content and exhausted we tumbled into our beds for the night.

I learned so many things from my mother's illness, even unexpected things like how to judge cookbooks and their complexity. I also learned to value health and time spent with loved ones when you have it.

My mother passed away a year after her diagnosis, shortly after we took her to an alternative hospital in Tijuana for further treatments—and yes, alternative nutrition was also highlighted. I was left with grief, confusion and loss. I was also left with love and memories (many of them culinary ones) that flooded my psyche.

Culinarily I was confused about how to continue. I'd supported her in alternative ways of eating and chosen to walk the path with her in most cases. I came home to her house filled with teas, veggies, herbs and supplements. For a while I found myself having a hard time eating at all, as though food had betrayed us both. I adamantly continued avoiding microwaves and encouraged others to do so. I kept my allegiance to what we'd learned and felt guilt about enjoying things that might possibly have contributed to her illness.

I was left somewhere between the ritual of science on how to heal through nutrition and our former familial love of food that had filled our house most of my life. It took years for me to try to incorporate both concepts, but now I think I've found a happy medium.

I still tend to shy away from microwaves although I don't find myself abducting other people's, as I once did just for the sake of their health! Matter of fact, I managed to live successfully for two years in a home that regularly used a microwave and I don't think I'm worse for the wear!

I still tend to look for organic vegetables and use whole

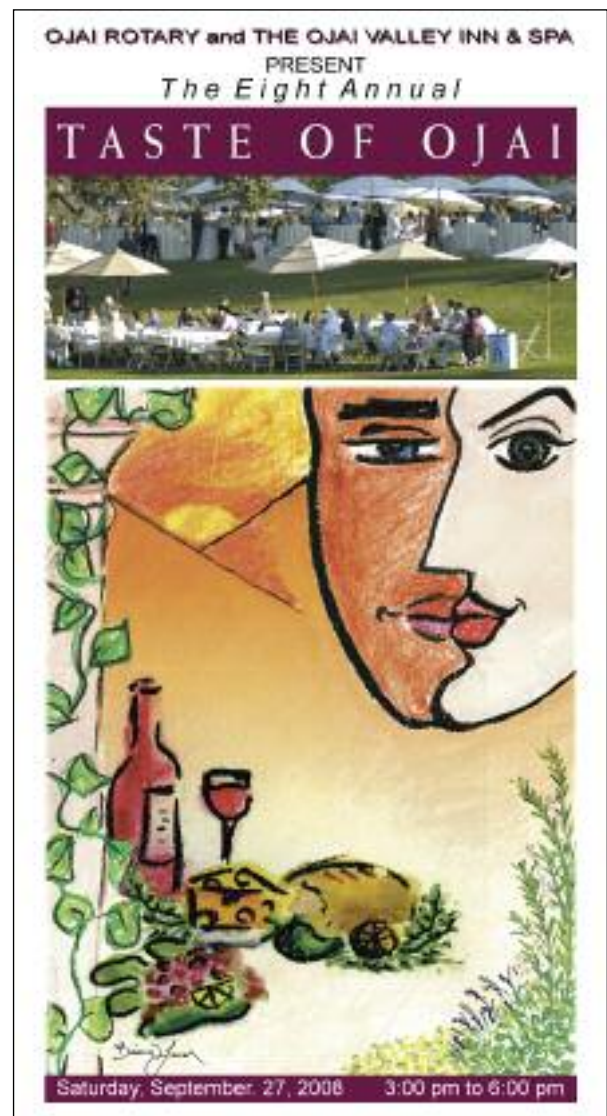
grains. I try to not eat much red meat and buy the highest quality, purest ingredients I can. But I also make sure what I cook doesn't taste sparse, bare and solely healthy.

I slowly regained my joy for food and its preparation. One of my favorite things to do again is prepare meals with friends and loved ones and, in turn, create more of the type of memories I still hold dear.

Cancer and the battle we fought certainly changed me but I eventually had to decide if it would take away my joy and alter me to the point where I didn't feel the same pleasure about food and ultimately about life.

For me, and for the memory of my mother, with regard to food, I do my best to marry both health and joy.

DK Crawford is a restaurant critic, freelance writer and photographer originally from the bayou country of Southwestern Louisiana. She is deeply passionate about all things food-related, her dog Noop, Southern fiction and her wildly wonderful family. She believes she could solve many of the world's problems if only she could feed everyone a bowl of her homemade chicken soup.



SUMMERTIME SWEET CORN FRITTERS

2 cups fresh sweet corn (approximately 3 ears)*
¼ cup chopped spring onions
2 tablespoons flour
¼ teaspoon salt
⅛ teaspoon pepper
¼ teaspoon paprika
⅛ teaspoon cayenne red pepper flakes
2 eggs
2 tablespoons butter

Use a large knife to cut fresh corn off the ears. Cut deep so you get most of the kernel, then run the knife back over ear to get some of the corn milk. Separate egg yolks and whites. Beat egg whites until they form stiff peaks. Add egg yolks to corn kernels and spring onions; mix. Add spices. Fold egg whites into corn mixture. Melt butter in pan and drop tablespoon-sized dollops of fritter mix into pan. Cook mixture 2–3 minutes on medium high, flip and let other side brown. Serve with broiled tomatoes and a chopped avocado, mango, lime and cilantro salsa.



* I love to eat some of the fresh sweet corn raw; if you haven't tried it, you're missing out!



GARDEN TOMATOES BROILED

Fresh, ripe tomatoes
Olive Oil
Sea Salt
Pepper
Parmesan Cheese

Slice tomatoes in half and place sliced side up in baking dish. Drizzle with olive oil and add fresh ground pepper and sea salt. Bake tomatoes in oven at 350* for 30 minutes or until soft. Sprinkle Parmesan cheese on top and place under broiler for 3-4 minutes or until melted and lightly browned.