
THE SENSUAL ARTS OF THE TABLE: GETTING DOWN AND DIRTY WITH DINNER

BY DK CRAWFORD

*"... food is, delightfully, an area of licensed sensuality, of physical delight which will, with luck and enduring taste buds, last our life long."—Antonia Till, *Loaves & Wishes**

It is not only taste that draws people to write about and study the art of food; it is all the senses that are enticed and titillated by this complex aspect of life.

When I watch a seasoned chef prepare his signature dish I see him poke his finger into a filet to check for doneness, listen for the hiss as he throws chopped onions into his sauté pan and wave his hand over a pot of sauce to draw its steamy aroma into his nostrils. If someone is truly experiencing the art of cooking, they are letting the ingredients penetrate and infuse every cell of their body. It is an addictive occupation that fills the senses and conjures embedded memories. It is a form of worship and ritual—this church of culinary wonder.

I grew up in a world that recognized where food comes from; hunting, fishing and gardening were a way of life. My brothers and father would come home from their hunting excursions half frozen. They'd awakened before dawn, sat in a hunting stand in often-freezing weather and traipsed through a muddy marsh, sometimes up to their waists, with the hope of getting one good shot.

If they were lucky they'd bring home ducks or geese with heads hanging akimbo, or a deer with its angular antlers poking from the back of a truck. Still cold and filthy, the men would sit outside together, share a hot beverage from a thermos or a snort from a flask and go about the hard work of dressing the kill. Finally they'd come inside—exhausted from the damp cold, unshaven, smelling of iron and gunpowder, crusted in feathers—and deliver the goods to us in the kitchen. After a long hot shower, shave and change of clothes, they became pristine and new as they joined us at the dinner table.

As a child I never questioned these rituals—they were what I knew. We never took animals' lives for granted. In fact,



there was an almost spiritual reverence we had with our wild dinners. We always gave thanks for God's bounty and consciously embraced the details of cooking what the men had worked hard to bring to the table. We discussed what environment the animals came from and what they ate. One deer that grazed only on alfalfa fields in Texas burned a flavor memory into my palate as the sweetest meat I've ever eaten.

We also grew vegetables and fruit trees, harvested honey from our own beehives and on occasion raised chickens and cattle. Being a part of the process of growing your own ingredients and harvesting them creates a strong

connection to the natural world and yields layers of depth to the dining experience. Having the olfactory memory of how the earth smelled when you turned it to place seeds, or of fruit tree blossoms' perfumed smells of delight that mature into juicy orbs we'd climb a ladder to pick, created a symbiosis with our food. As in the world of wine, where one smells the wooden barrel that nurtured the grapes on the nose of the wine or how flavors open as it oxidizes, being with your dinner from its inception creates layers of depth from stored, sensual body memories.

Sometimes being a food sensualist teaches less pleasant lessons. I remember when we first grew soybeans and my earth goddess of a mother and I set out into the verdant field to pick them while Dad went to feed the horses. My mother couldn't resist opening a pod and letting the beans fall into her mouth. I tried it and in no time we'd eaten half of what we picked. What joy we took a-eatin' and a-pickin', thinking we'd discovered the best thing on earth! Until suddenly we both doubled over in the field with stomachaches from overindulging.

In spite of the mishaps bound to befall the culinarily exuberant among us, it's the corporeal memories that contin-

ue to draw me to food. I still hear the ping of fresh peas falling from their pods into a silver mixing bowl and the rocking chairs sawing back and forth on the wooden porch as we shucked fresh corn while watching the sun set. I smell the yeast of rising bread nested in a mixing bowl like a swaddled infant and see and smell scalded raw milk skims we'd pull off the fresh milk and toss to the cat when we made yogurt. For me these experiences are the mothers' milk of the culinary world that call me home.

As our economy has started to reel like a drunk ambling down Bourbon Street, I find myself craving those real earthy connections even more. When the ground feels unsure beneath our feet, a natural inclination is to dig in! I started gardening again and trying to learn where my food comes from. Not only is it healthier to eat produce fresh from the earth, it also helps a person feel more grounded in an ever-changing world. Nurturing my own food spawns in me the desire to feed my soil, to learn all the insects that visit my lawn, to foster an environment so helpful that animals and insects want to stay around and to look for people who are taking the time to grow heritage seeds.

With this rebirth, I am also hearing lessons from my childhood I'd have thought long forgotten. I hear my late mother whispering Latin names of plants and telling me how to pinch off the top of a vine, my father's early wisdom about the necessity of eating organic meats and that I shouldn't pick blackberries just anywhere because crop dusters might have sprayed them. "Aww, Dad!" (I remember kicking off in a huff, frustrated that I couldn't just grab any old handful of purple sweetness that grew before me!)

Like many in our society, I had turned my back on the basics of the table for a while. I'd succumbed to packaged convenience foods or produce from anywhere in the world. I also started working in fancy restaurants where chefs were more apt to impress clients with culinary chemistry and exotic ingredients flown in from faraway locales. I disconnected from the reality of how food is grown and its origin.

But I've come back home in my soul, and find delight in planting and nurturing my own food. I am devastated when some rogue beetle threatens my seedlings or, even worse, when my bounty is almost ready for harvest and Godzilla the Caterpillar shows up looking like the dragon of Chinese New Year to eat half of my plants overnight!





It's Not Just a Festival....It's an Experience
Great Stories to Inspire and Entertain.

"The Ojai festival is to storytelling what Sundance is to film. If it's rare and magical and quirky... you'll find it at this wondrous gem of a festival."- Carmen Deedy, author and storyteller

Come Celebrate
the 10th Annual Ojai Storytelling Festival
April 30-May 3 @Libbey Bowl
ojaistoryfest.org, 805-646-8907





I feel like I am negotiating real worlds now rather than fabricated ones. If it what I try to grow works, I get to eat it; if it doesn't, I don't. In practicing the basics of gardening and watching the seasons of sprouting, growing and lying fallow, I also feel more peace with life and the rhythms of the world. I am integrating things I didn't understand in my youth and learning lessons about how life and death function. I feel blessed that in the dirt I am finding wisdom and solace.

There is nothing more intoxicating than having a meal from just-picked ingredients you nurtured and grew yourself. I am exhausted yet fulfilled when I come in muddy from a day in the garden. And similar to my brothers and father, after I bring in the harvest I take a long hot soak, dress for dinner and feel almost reborn!

DK Crawford specializes in food writing and food photography. Originally from the bayou country of Southwestern Louisiana, DK now lives in Ventura, Ca. Her most recent work can be seen in the VC Reporter, Ventana Monthly, www.ojai-post.com, and online at her food blog: www.thefoodsavantblogspot.com. She is a longtime member of Slow Food and the Southern Foodways Alliance and received two special mentions in 2008 from the Symposium for Professional Food Writers.

A BOOK WORTH DIGGING IN TO

“This is the story of a year in which we made every attempt to feed ourselves animals and vegetables whose provenance we really knew ... and of how our family was changed...”—Barbara Kingsolver

One of the most helpful things a person can do when they want to change their lives or learn a new skill is to acquire a mentor. I have inadvertently done just that by inviting the words of Barbara Kingsolver’s book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* into my life.

It is the story of her family committing to eating locally for one year. As I am listening to the book on tape, I am swept away listening to her Kentucky lilt as she reads her descriptive words. Her husband, Steve, and daughter, Camille, also read aloud chapters they wrote.

The triumphs and adversities they face on their farm feel like my own. They reschedule a family vacation because the fruit tree ripens and they must bring in a harvest. They negotiate having hordes of family in for a large celebration and how to feed the masses with only local foods before the real ripening season has come to their gardens.

The book also teaches lessons of raising one’s own poultry and what happens if you dare to name and become attached to dinner. Kingsolver’s husband writes chapters about how much oil is involved in the shipping of produce and the history of the genetic modification of food in our country.

If you are looking for support in eating more locally and/or growing your own food or just want to be delighted by someone who has done it, I highly recommend this book—particularly on tape. I’d be surprised if it didn’t tempt you to go poke some seeds into soil but if nothing else you will find yourself laughing out loud and espousing food wisdom to your neighbors.

Ojai House

2nd Weekend * Local Artists Show & Sale
 Noon - 5 PM 2nd Saturday & Sunday of Each Month
 Fine Arts & Crafts • Intuitive Readers • WI-FI
 Join us on the Patio - It's Fun! It's Free!

American Made - Fair Trade - Functional Art
 For Your House & Garden. Beads, Jewelry Supplies & Classes
 We're 2 Blocks Off Ojai Avenue & A World Apart!
 304 N. Montgomery Street • (805)640-1656
 Open Mon.- Fri. 10.30 - 6.30 • Sun. 11 - 6 • Closed Tuesday

CERTIFIED ORGANIC WINERY AND VINEYARD ONE OF
CASA BARRANCA
 A GREENE & GREENE DESIGNED NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK

2006 Pinot Noir
 Double Gold &
 Best of Class
 Long Beach
 Grand Cru

2004 Bungalow Red
 Best of Class &
 Double Gold
 San Francisco Chronicle
 Wine Competition

2006 Cabernet
 Double Gold &
 Best of Class
 San Francisco
 International

VISIT OUR TASTING ROOM
 In Ojai's Historic Downtown Arcade
 208 E. Ojai Ave. • 805.640.1255
 Tastings from 12pm - 6pm
 Wednesday through Sunday

WINE TASTING FINE GIFT ART GALLERY
 Visit us online at www.casabarranca.com