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Culinary Alchemy

Christine Stewart-Nunez

South Dakota State University, christine.stewart@sdstate.edu

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CULINARY ALCHEMY

When my new sweetheart's parents arrive in town, I cook. At midnight on Friday, I roll out egg noodles to dry, the chicken already boiled and deboned. Saturday morning, I bake rolls and select the apple cake recipe. By late afternoon, I've baked that cake and I've cut carrots and green beans for a side dish. Two of these recipes are my mother's staples, but two are new, concoctions I've snipped from magazines along with thousands of others. I cut lists of ingredients for Provençale Kebabs and Tomato Basil Soup; directions to mix, spread, and layer for Pumpkin Lasagna, Enchiladas Florentine and Chocolate Banana Loaf; substitution suggestions for Wild Mushroom Ravioli; preparation details for Braised Tofu and Quinoa-Stuffed Squash. *A bit of this, a dash of that, grate and scrape, slice and separate* become incantations that bind the sensuality of food to memory. As other collectors seek rare books, elephant figurines, and vintage photographs, I treasure hunt for recipes so I may reproduce their power, so I'll know what they know—how to dazzle, nurture, sustain.

Initiation

I knock on the kitchen door, fumbling over “recipe, borscht, please.” In the soup served by my Polish host, Mrs. Gebala, beets spoke the soil's language of mineral and rain, not the familiar tongue of tin can. Mellow, magenta medallions floated in broth, slices of hard-earth hearts sweetened with cream. I felt as though I spoke the sound of zippers, but Mrs. Gebala understood.

Kitchen witches rarely perform for an audience; culinary spells work best when a person yields to the mystery of taste. Perhaps Mrs. Gebala felt sorry for me, the professor so far from home. She held two crimson beets in the air, pretended to slice them, scribbled “30” in my journal, and pointed to a pot. From the refrigerator to the stove, Mrs. Gebala strode with a lemon, carrot, and clove of garlic in hand. She added fresh-churned butter and cream, charade-style, to the empty pot. Sprigs of dill

sprung like a bouquet from her sleeve. With a pinch of salt sprinkled in, she cast another spell—I believed I could mimic her magic.

Seduction

“For the salad, select two *domates*—firm, red,” Sezen Hanım said. *Domates*, I whispered, repeating the Turkish word. I pushed into the smooth skin, unsure how it would respond to the arrow-tipped blade. The tomato opened with little pressure and I arranged the heart-shaped slices on a plate.

“What’s the word for ‘heart?’” I asked.

“*Kalp*,” she replied. *Kalp, kalp*. I committed it to memory. Sezen Hanım described those close to her own. I knew her husband from work, but she also had a son, Sunkar, my age.

“Sunkar is a doctor,” Sezen Hanım said. “His job leaves him little time for social engagements. May I invite my family over for dinner after your next language lesson?”

“Sure,” I replied. *Sunkar, Sunkar, Sunkar*. “And what’s next?”

“*Salatalık*,” she said, as she pulled three cucumbers out of a bag. “Peel like this.” Her knife flashed; ribbons fell into the sink. While I diced them, Sezen Hanım minced parsley.

“Toss the vegetables with lemon juice,” she said. I handed her a nipple-tipped lemon and she rolled it back and forth across the countertop before slicing it in half and squeezing four tablespoons into the salad. We added olive oil and salt. At my table, we took eager first bites, crunching the crisp vegetables. Fresh bread added chewiness to the meal. We ate slowly, the conversation ranging from our favorite books to our favorite food. We both pushed our plates away with satisfaction.

The next day Sunkar called. “Hi,” he said. “I want to introduce myself. My mother was happy to meet you. She says you like to cook?” The spell of Turkish salad: seduction by proxy.

Apprenticing

Sometimes recipes rely on a cook’s experience, such as understanding the shade of green steamed broccoli achieves before turning mushy. Sometimes they assume a working knowledge, such as the difference between “chop” and “dice.” The most experienced spell-casters, like my Grandma Welby, perfect spells over time and make it seem easy. On any given Sunday afternoon of my childhood, I would scour her kitchen for

peanut butter cups and milk; there wasn't much more besides jars of pickled pig's feet and Miracle Whip. Yet in a kitchen the size of an ample closet, she made meals: butter and bread, dill pickles, mashed potatoes and gravy, roast beef or pork, green beans, and pie. It seemed she could always make something from nothing.

To understand how she summoned all that food, I consumed recipes. At age eight, I labeled *Strawberry Shortcake's Cooking Fun* with days of the week for a menu; thirty-two years later, I'm still collecting. I tape recipes onto index cards and gather food into albums of feasts: Heavenly Earth Burgers, Sesame Soba Noodle Salad, and Ratatouille in "Vegetarian Dishes;" Yellow Pepper, Egg Drop, Golden Winter, and Harvest Minestrone in "Soups;" Lemon Ginger Muffins and Scottish Oat Scones in "Breads." A recipe may ask me to coat a sauté pan with olive oil, apply heat, add onions and garlic, and cook until tender. Will I add peppers or celery next? Fennel or cumin? At each step, a recipe can move toward alchemy. Possibilities unfold when I blend one-fourth cup sugar with two-thirds cup butter and beat until fluffy, when three-quarters cup bittersweet cocoa is measured out and stirred in.

The best alchemists learn from their mistakes. My sophomore year of high school, I picked through my mother's index cards until I selected a proper meal for a boyfriend: Shrimp and Wild Rice Casserole. I thawed the frozen shrimp, diced the onion, and cubed the Velveeta. To that I added Campbell's Condensed Mushroom Soup, butter, lemon juice, wild rice, and two tablespoons of ground pepper. That's right. Two. Tablespoons. Anyone with an appreciation for basic seasoning would know that "gr" in front of "pepper" meant something else. Sometimes kitchen witches muck up something, but the intention makes the recipe work anyway; sometimes, even the best spell-casting fails.

Bait-and-Switch

My mother used to can food on the stove, the overhead vent sucking up steam, the steel pressure cooker shaking and whistling like a living cauldron. She canned homegrown tomatoes for spaghetti sauce and she canned salmon that my father brought back from Canadian fishing trips. As a table sorceress who cooks from scratch, she uses time-tested—or friend-tested—spells to distract my father from his other loves.

Once, my mother believed that if she plated the pot roast, potatoes, and carrots the second my father walked through the door after work,

the aroma would make him forget about the Wild Turkey in the liquor cabinet. Or maybe a tender steak procured from the East Side Locker would be too filling—less space for a six-pack. Maybe the food would arrest an alcoholic's starvation. Maybe it would satisfy his roving hunger, a hunger so sharp his words become blades and so democratic that a simple phrase or facial expression can spark its urgency.

Now, with my father's retirement, my mother creatively adapts to vodka—so easy to hide and sip throughout the day. Perhaps even the most potent spells lose their power; perhaps they don't always manifest in the ways a woman intends.

Safety

In the mountain village of Çamlıyayla, Turkey, Feyza simmered tea in a samovar. Her brother, Ahmet, and I visited her to escape the sweltering city heat. On the table, she'd arranged a bowl of cherries, turning any blemish on a piece of fruit inward. I imagine her up high on the orchard ladder. Cherries tip the wrists of green-leafed branches, the twinned bulbs close to bursting. Thud, thud, thud. Pairs drop into the bucket. She plucks by touching the stems, not the fruit, so her hands won't look bruised. And they weren't when she served us tea. So where did I expect to see the marks her husband left? Everyone suspected. Ahmet's father had invited Feyza and her children back into his home, but she hadn't gone.

Feyza appeared to do everything right. Around the wooden table, she tiptoed. Her hands didn't waver as she poured boiling tea into her husband's hourglass cup. Her four-year-old son grasped her hand when his father's gruff voice demanded cubes of sugar, but she didn't flinch. Plunk, plunk, plunk. With a baby secured to her hip by one hand, she stirred until the sugar dissolved with the other. Not a strand of hair escaped her headscarf.

Two years later, when I learned that Feyza had died at age twenty-six, I wondered when the spell failed to work. How can the magic of care and order dissipate bleeding in a brain?

Glamour

My former mother-in-law violated all spell-casting principles except one: the illusion. She'd unbox *pollo francesca*, *bistec a la parilla*, and *pernil* from Styrofoam boxes that she'd brought home from Estrella del Caribe,

a restaurant she owned. Her brother-in-law, Jesus, did the actual cooking. Millie might sprinkle slices of mozzarella and tomato with vinaigrette, but otherwise she ironed a linen tablecloth and set the dining-room table for her four children and husband. In the kitchen, she'd scoop out *arroz blanco*, *arroz amarillo*, *moro*, *tostones*, *maduros* and *ceviche* onto her best china, bowls we traded around the candle-lit table. I always thought her spells lacked sparkle and strength because I knew her stovetop and counters were clean, her refrigerator packed with leftovers, not ingredients. I changed my mind when she died; her children never gathered around that table together again.

Transmutation

In a Polish farmhouse, Kasha dazzled me by transforming flowers into an elixir that conjured a long-forgotten memory. She stuffed a pot with twenty clusters of elderflower blossoms clipped from a bramble of asters, clover, purple comfrey, buttercups and roadside grasses. Like a forest sprite bent on mischief, Kasha swiveled between the stove and table of supplies: canisters of flour lined up against wrinkled wallpaper, fresh cream in a vase, eggs nestled in a basket. She tore open a paper bag and dumped in two kilos of sugar, grains cascading over the wire-thin stems like sand sliding from a plastic pail. Stirring with a wooden spoon, she poured in two liters of boiling water. The sugar and blossoms pinwheeled in the pot, heat extracting the tangy flavor. Was Kasha's bubbling laughter the key element in the transmutation? After it cooled, she strained the elderflower-infused syrup and stirred in lemon juice. When its perfume wafted into my nose, I recalled plucking petals from purple thistles and sucking the sweetness from the white-tipped ends. When had I forgotten the recipe of wild simplicity? Kasha offered a brief toast to elderflower and we gulped summer into our throats.

Effects

What makes cooking alchemy is the possibility of transforming common ingredients into valuable experiences. And the possibilities for surprise, for failure. As I survey the empty plates after my sweetheart's parents leave, I wonder about the effects of my spell-casting. I've practiced recipes long enough to know that I usually forego "dazzle" in favor of "nurture." For this meal, I intended comfort, welcome—the essential atmosphere for good conversation. I planned for ease, eliminating recipes with

distracting, pungent ingredients. Did I accomplish this? They smiled at the presentation. Between storytelling and jokes, we took second helpings of chicken-and-noodles, sopping broth up with buttered rolls. We left only crumbs of the generous pieces of cake. Over cups of tea, we laughed. I heard sighs of satisfaction as the meal concluded. This was one successful spell. Yet power can fall from the cook's hands as easily as spilled salt. The complex chemistries of vegetable and mineral mirror those of social interaction, and both can alter tastes and textures. So I'll continue to collect recipes and continue to cook, even though I'll never be able to completely account for what slips in the experience of food moving between plate and lips.