

## FIRST PERSON

## A (REDISCOVERED) JOY OF COOKING

As a 12-year-old, *Christina Baker Kline* cooked family dinner every night—and relished the responsibility. Decades later, she was lucky enough to cook for her sisters again.



HEADSHOT COURTESY OF BEOWULF SHEEHAN

Illustration by Ana Jarén

W

HEN I WAS 12, my mother went back to work teaching at a community college affiliated with the university where my dad taught history. The oldest of four girls, I'd been helping in the kitchen since I could remember:

peeling carrots, sifting flour, separating eggs. I knew how to make an omelet, whoopie pies from scratch, and tacos from a kit. But now, my mom announced to the family, I would be responsible for planning and preparing dinner four nights a week.

I wasn't the only kid Mom put to work. Though Clara and Catherine were, at 3 and 5, too young to help, 10-year-old Cynthia was assigned the daunting task of the family laundry. For years she kept the giant box of dry detergent with its plastic scoop on the floor, where she could reach it, and stood on tiptoes on a wooden box to load the washer.

My parents' attitude toward child-rearing was unusual even for the freewheeling 1970s. Native Southerners, they'd taken a years-long detour to England for grad school before moving to a small town in Maine at the height of the back-to-the-land movement. Their parenting philosophy was an inconsistent hybrid of Southern propriety, British strictness, and hippie neglect. They gave us a lot of freedom, but also expected us to participate in running the household.

The food we ate was also a mashup of different cultures: grits and black-eyed peas, Yorkshire pudding and mint jelly, wheat germ and homemade yogurt. Using soil from our compost heap (the only one around, eyed with horror by the neighbors), Mom created an eccentric garden beside the garage that included 12-foot sunflowers with faces the size of dinner plates. The garden yielded truckloads of zucchini one year, huge mutant carrots the next. Trips to the grocery store were few and far between.

Though feeding the family by myself was terrifying at first, I grew to love the challenge of creating meals out of a motley collection of ingredients. Mom encouraged me to experiment, and I did, bringing barely edible concoctions to the table with pride. In school, I daydreamed about what I'd make for dinner using whatever was in the fridge: a turnip, a few limp celery stalks, some onions and ground beef, bouillon cubes. In addition to my own quirky creations,

In school, I'd daydream about what I would make for dinner using whatever was in the fridge.

I relied on recipes from the newspaper, our trusty *Joy of Cooking* and *Moosewood* cookbooks, and a dog-eared stack of recipes handed down from my grandmother. Through trial and error, I learned that nutmeg is a lousy substitute for cinnamon, and that if you don't mix cornstarch with a liquid it'll separate into clumps. The time I mashed potatoes with a hand mixer and ended up with a gluey mess is part of our family lore. But despite the occasional disaster, my sisters were tolerant and even enthusiastic about my attempts. (To be fair, they had little alternative.)

All the years I spent experimenting out of necessity made me a fairly decent home cook. In college, and then in grad school, I continued to hone my skills: during an idyllic summer on Martha's Vineyard, as a live-in cook for a prominent writer and his wife; at a wellness retreat on the coast of Maine; with a high-octane caterer in Virginia whose menus consisted mainly of lobster tails, caviar, and foie gras. My boyfriend, David, and I hosted long, leisurely dinner parties on the rooftop of the converted warehouse where we lived in Charlottesville; after we married and moved to New York City, we balanced plates of coq au vin on our knees with half a dozen friends in our tiny apartment.

And then we had three boys in five years and moved to the suburbs. David commuted to the city by train; he was often gone for 12 hours a day. And my love of cooking waned. My young kids refused to eat anything that swam unless it was a fish stick, and insisted that ketchup was a vegetable. When the boys began playing sports, the sole purpose of dinner was to shovel enough fuel into them to keep them going through homework. They consumed a gallon of milk and a box of cereal a day. Endless practices and games required eat-on-the-fly food like quesadillas and chicken nuggets, or hearty fare like lasagna and stuffed shells. Those years were so busy, I didn't have the energy to entertain. Cooking anything more adventurous than burgers on the grill felt like punishment.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Christina Baker Kline is the author of eight novels, including *Orphan Train* and *The Exiles*. She has long since perfected her mashed potatoes.

As soon as our youngest went off to college, David and I sold our house and moved back to the city, and it felt like a second honeymoon. We spent hours wandering far-flung neighborhoods, stopping for the perfect bowl of ramen, or biking to Midtown for Korean barbecue.

But then the pandemic struck, and everything ground to a halt. We decamped to Maine, where my sisters and I each have a house not far from where we grew up. (Sadly, our mother died eight years ago, and our dad died in October.) Immediately we formed an extended-family Covid bubble. With a bounty of time and no options for dining out, I was thrown back into my familiar role from childhood. Making do with limited ingredients from the local grocer, I rediscovered a long-lost sense of play and a feeling of adventure. I'd forgotten the thrill of experimenting in the kitchen, getting by with what's on hand, reading recipes as if they're short stories, each one following a specific and thrilling arc. I'd forgotten that once, long ago, I loved to cook.

As the months passed, I became bolder, ordering hard-to-find ingredients online and making complicated rubs, sauces, and marinades. Deprived of my favorite New York takeout, I bought things like Chinkiang vinegar, gochujang chili paste, and white miso and attempted to re-create my favorite dishes, from mapo tofu (Chinese) to khao soi (Thai) to tantanmen ramen (Japanese). It's no coincidence, I think, that I was once again making dinner for my sisters. As they had in our childhood, they encouraged innovation, shrugged off my failures, and cheered my successes. They may not have done my laundry, but they brought wine and herbs from their gardens, and they never left until every last dish had been put away.

As adults, we also love cooking together. The idea of making sushi had always intimidated me, but over the course of half a dozen sessions, my sisters and I taught ourselves to perfect the rice-to-filling ratio, to layer lobster and scallops with avocado and cucumber, to julienne and pickle vegetables. We learned to roll the maki tightly and slice the rolls with a warm knife. These sessions—along with daily hikes—undoubtedly brought us closer. For me, hanging out with my sisters on afternoons in my Maine kitchen was a lovely way to extend and expand the joy I took in feeding them when I was 12.

Eventually we all got vaccinated and ventured back into the wider world. But that 18-month period changed me. Even as David and I resume the pleasures of our old life in New York, we are eating out less and cooking more. And bonus: My 20-something boys now live in the city too, with broader palates and interests. Cooking for them is actually enjoyable now, and sometimes, these days, they even cook for me. ■