
SOULFUL EATING

BY LAURIE NILES

WATERCOLOR BY TESSA VAN DER MEIJDEN

Sour came back today, or least it seems so. Equally so, the desire to combine foods and create a new kind of taste came through me. I write “through me” because presently I am not able to distinguish individual flavors. For now, taste and scent are not part of my existence. Instead, my dining experience is evolving aided by my imagination and my vicarious enjoyment of food. I register neither taste nor scent, yet my soul has reconnected with preparing food and sharing meals. I realize I am nourished both physically and soulfully by these processes. Knowing the story supporting my food—who grows it and where it comes from—is a “flavor” I savor.

In part, I call upon my memory when I consider what I want to eat. My imagination enters to design what would taste good and, more so, which food textures to blend to interest my palate. Now I have a new recipe collection of meals based upon which “farm story” blends with which other “farm story.” For this “Taste Less, Experience More” recipe collection, I rely on knowing particular farmers or purveyors of food and their farm or food craft. Knowledge of the farmer and craft allows me those hints of descriptive flavors that currently nourish me and add to my imaginative way of eating. Let me describe such a recipe for dining.

My mind wonders and wanders: what would make a Welcoming Salad? I consider the way Bruce from the Riparian Farmland falls to his knees as if to find a treasure in the beach’s dunes when he is harvesting his row crops. I think that riparian treasure hunter’s spicy arugula will match well with Allen Hawthorne’s grace-filled ways of growing organic oranges and avocados. To dress the welcoming salad, why not blend the Bangor beauty of Towani Organic Farms’ garlic and olive oil with fresh (sour) pomegranates, juiced with friends? Lightly toasted in the aforementioned olive oil, Skinner Ranch pecans’ textured accent would add to the ensemble. Welcoming Salad: from riparian waterways, sandy loam soil, the rolling hills of Bangor, and family steward ranch land.

Spicy for me is the black pepper cheese from Pedrozo Dairy! I bought it knowing I wouldn’t necessarily taste the spiced sensation that Mandy Johnson has created, yet it was beautiful to glance at and I considered it to be a grand marriage of flavors. Most of all I would taste that bright brown-eyed smile of the cheese maker blended in.

Sweet, you betcha, I cannot distinguish, as I have in the past among honey, sugar, brown rice syrup and molasses. Yet noshing on a Pyramid Farm carrot I am filled with Matt Martin’s sweet tender care and commitment to organic farming. Amazing! Or is it?

Walking the 40 acres of Towani Organic Farm in Bangor under a skyscape like no other, I witness the grand beauty that Sharon Casey and Guy Baldwin have created in this rough and rolling terrain. Theirs is no I-5 flat row crop of ease. Theirs is the art-filled bedspring of support for potted plants that woo and whoa the crowds at the Chico Farmers’ Market in the early spring planting season. While I assist at the farm, Sharon’s seasoned strong hands lightly teach how to transplant a seedling. Each touch to the new growth comes with a colon: why she particularly likes this heirloom seed or Seed Company and how she envisions it will grow in her new recipe for potting mix.

Eating soulfully is not that complicated, though it has at times been difficult to communicate to others who seem distraught for me, knowing I am not currently tasting food as they do. Somehow it is unfathomable for others to understand how I can enjoy food if I do not taste it.

This winter I was tickled with the surprise delight of spray from an orange being peeled. Someone gave me an orange slice and said, “There is no way you won’t be able to taste how sweet it is.” That is when my mouth responded to sour. Though the posse of anticipators thought the orange was sweet and ready, I “tasted” clearly that it wasn’t quite ready for consuming. My tongue curled inward at the tinge of sourness. Some were convinced but I couldn’t be that it *was* the season and that therefore the citrus of anticipation *was* ready. Instead, that splash of citrus on my cheek filled me for days considering Mother Nature’s cycles and her lasting effects upon what we have available to eat.

I recall the first time I attended a barter faire, in the northeastern corner of Washington state. There I met folks who lived off the land, putting up food and blending the seasons and the gleam of each other’s bounties. I was gently reminded not to let food go to waste. With the exception of some homemade wine, there was no jarred or canned food dated more than a year old. The community commented

that food not enjoyed close to the time of its harvest and preparation lost vitality. More so, having extra food was wasteful. Food grown was meant to be shared (or traded). If Mother Nature had rained down heavily and the cherry season was not as sweet as one desired, then the magic of imagination could blend in another season's fruit that had the sweet advantage of heavy rains and create a new food sauce or wine. As meals were prepared and consumed, story after story described the wind-whipped hills of Idaho corn, tall and gangly old peach and cherry orchards, and the benefits of root cellars for storing food. I fell in love with the food gypsy storytellers. My belly was filled from the connection and kinship these people cultivated from their food and their caring respect for food sources.

Food is an integral part of our existence. I have recently dined with others without realizing I do not taste the food passing my lips. The dining itself was flavored as a friend described in a bedtime prose way the flavors and sensations SHE was experiencing. (Truly, there is nothing better than being "read to" while eating.) Another time, in the early morning, I witnessed the mouth-watering explosion of flavor from a blueberry spreading a blossoming smile across the face of a dear one, as if an angel's soft kiss were fluttering near: a true, shared form of enjoyment. I have sat near others as they slurp soups and crunch their way through a meal, the meal a backdrop to an exchange of the delights and disappointments of life. We share much of our lives growing, preparing, and consuming food. It is simply the shared time, honoring a day, ourselves, and each other, which now brings nourishment to my soul.

Whenever I am asked what food would I desire to taste first (assuming my physiological taste sensation comes back into my awareness), I am shy to remark. I am a seasonal gal. To say I wish a strawberry to be the first food I distinguish and taste puts me in a seasonal taste lock. What happens if I don't regain taste during this year's strawberry season? Will I have to wait till next year's spring to taste anything? This is possibly superstitious and a bit over the seasonal top, yet I have much to gain from appreciating the local growing season. I consider this level of appreciation to be the respectful seasoning that adds more flavor to my food. 🌿

Laurie Niles has been in love with providing food to others since forever. Whether she is helping a peach tree bear fruit, caressing the peach in its journey to someone's enjoyment, or designing ever new ways for the peach to be enjoyed, Laurie bonds with the "act of food." Grateful restaurant customers from Cafe Sandino, Upper Crust, Kramore Inn, and Red Tavern have enjoyed her presence and sincerity. She also co-hosts Two Penny Opera, commutes by bicycle, appreciates music, and enjoys being a good friend.



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