

cheryl strayed



old-fashioned tapioca pudding

- 1 cup tapioca pearls
- 3 cups milk
- 3 cups heavy whipping cream
- 1 1/2 vanilla extract
- 1 cup sugar
- 4 egg yolks
- 4 egg whites
- dash of salt

Cover the tapioca with water and soak at least four hours. Drain. Mix milk, cream, vanilla extract, and softened tapioca in a large pot. Cook over low heat, stirring every five minutes, until tapioca pearls are transparent, approximately one hour. Beat the egg yolks. Combine egg yolks, sugar, and salt, then add to the tapioca mixture slowly. Simmer, stirring constantly until the mixture is well combined and begins to thicken, five to ten minutes. Remove from heat. Beat the egg whites stiff and then fold them into the tapioca mixture. Pour into a bowl to cool. Chill in refrigerator before serving.



the way to a woman's heart

{ STEPHANIE SUSNJARA }

"I saw him even now going the way of all flesh, that is to say towards the kitchen."

—JOHN WEBSTER

A YOUNG WOMAN and a young man sit side by side on the edge of a rocky cliff. The sun has begun its descent, slipping behind distant mountain peaks, coloring the sky with ribbons of pink, purple, and gold. The woman cups the man's face in her hands, drawing him close. She takes her fingers and places something soft and creamy on his tongue. His eyes widen, but, before he can speak, the young woman presses her fingers against his lips.

"It's Montrachet—a goat cheese from France," she says.

The seduction continues. She feeds him baguette rounds topped with warm tarragon chicken salad, and strawberries dipped in chocolate. They wash it all down with a bottle of Gallo red table

wine (although the woman considers herself a budding gourmet at twenty-one, she is still oblivious to fine vintages).

The sky is now dark and dusted with stars. Warmed by the food and wine, the two melt into each other's arms. The feasting has only just begun.



THE YOUNG MAN at that picnic eventually became my husband, and that is how I remember our first date. Between bites, I know we had intense, soul-baring conversation, but I can't remember a word of it. Instead, the seduction of taste buds—a wooing technique I inherited from my father—remains my most potent memory. Back then I fancied myself a food connoisseur, gently guiding this culinary virgin into a pleasure zone he had never even imagined.

Fifteen years later, it strokes my ego to remember the scene this way. Especially since my husband, Randy, has evolved into a passionate home chef who threatens to topple my long-held reign as the resident food goddess. Now he woos *me* by bathing jumbo shrimp in a honey-tangerine marinade, drizzling white truffle oil on mashed potatoes, and massaging ribeyes with cracked peppercorns, fresh rosemary, and garlic. On Friday nights, after we've put our three-year-old son to bed, Randy dims the lights, takes my hand, and leads me to the dining room. He disappears into the kitchen, leaving me at the table to relax and sip wine. Moments later he presents two plates. The other night it was roast duck in ginger sauce. Thin slices of the rich, juicy meat were fanned out around a perfect pyramid of jasmine-scented rice. A delicate mound of snow peas, glistening with sesame oil, provided a colorful balance. This artful presentation, known as "plating" in the restaurant biz, is a trick Randy picked up watching Food Network.

I'm still an avid cook, but I must admit, Randy has surpassed me when it comes to striving toward new culinary heights. I guess

I shouldn't complain about this role reversal. Until two generations ago, the men in my family never dreamed of donning aprons. Take my maternal grandfather Tony, a first-generation Sicilian-American doctor who ran a busy practice out of the first floor of the family brownstone in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. He couldn't make toast and had no desire to try. The task of cooking was a domestic chore that belonged to my grandmother, a fact that became evident to me in my youth, on a hot afternoon in late July.

It was the summer of 1973. *American Graffiti* was playing at the box office and George Harrison was crooning "Give Me Love" on the radio. And like many Italian-American families, we never missed the ritual of Sunday dinner at my grandparents'. My grandfather, clad in plaid shorts and a white fishing hat, strolled into the dining room and took his place at the head of the table.

"Rose, get in here and sit down," he barked toward the kitchen.

My grandmother appeared in the doorway. She wiped her hands on a dishtowel. Her face was flushed with heat. Wisps of reddish brown hair had come unloose from her beehive hairdo. A floral-patterned sundress peeked out beneath her full-length apron. Her green eyes were fixed on my grandfather. "How's the sauce, Tony?"

Everyone turned toward my grandfather, who lifted a forkful of pasta. He paused a moment, savoring his power, before the fork disappeared inside his mouth.

"Too salty," he growled. My grandmother's smile was replaced with a look of defeat. She burst into tears, and ran into the kitchen.

The sauce didn't taste salty to me. It tasted perfect—thick and tomato-y, the best sauce in the world. Even at a young age, my grandmother's sauce filled me with pity for my non-Italian friends who thought spaghetti sauce came out of a jar.

Aunt Roseanne and my mother glared across the table at my grandfather. These sisters had grown weary of my grandfather's Old

World values and the oppression my grandmother put up with in her marriage. Across the country, women were bolting from the confines of the kitchen and entering the workforce. Aunt Roseanne worked full-time as an interior decorator. She wore strands of beads and platform shoes, strummed folk songs on the guitar, and dated guys with long hair. To my grandparents' dismay, she was thirty and *still* single. A suburban housewife, my mother wasn't quite as hip as Aunt Roseanne, but she didn't just tend the hearth, either. Mom spent countless hours fundraising for the local hospital and was working on her master's degree in volunteer management. Unlike her daughters, my grandmother never had the opportunity to pursue an identity beyond wife and mother.

"What?" my grandfather asked. He shrugged his shoulders and began attacking his plate. "Let's eat before this gets cold."

"You know, you're unbelievable," Aunt Roseanne said, slamming down her napkin. "Ma's been in there all day cooking for you."

My grandfather didn't even look up. Except for the clanking of silverware, we ate the remainder of the meal in silence.

My grandmother's tears startled me. By the age of nine I'd already spent many hours in her kitchen, elbows propped on her speckled linoleum table, watching as she stuffed spiky artichoke leaves with herbs and bread crumbs or rolled out fresh pizza dough. My grandmother made cooking seem effortless. She never relied on cookbooks. She always spoke with authority as she revealed her culinary secrets. "It's the Pecorino Romano," she'd say whenever I asked what gave her meatballs their savory flavor. She knew she was a great cook. I was shocked that my grandfather's little comment could bring her to tears, undermine the confidence I'd seen.

That Sunday afternoon in my grandparents' dining room, the politics of the home kitchen were revealed. For a woman of my grandmother's generation, cooking comprised a hefty portion of her marriage contract. She was simply expected to cook well. Every

day of her married life, she was to have breakfast, lunch, and dinner on the table. My grandfather, who usually ate with his nose buried inside the newspaper, hurried complaints.

In my grandfather's eyes, cooking and serving food embodied the fundamental role of the housewife, and he wanted nothing to do with it. The only exception was barbecuing. Every Fourth of July he charred burgers, hot dogs, and long links of Italian sausage. My uncles and cousins would surround him in a football huddle, drinking beer and holding out slices of Italian bread for him to slap meat on. Outdoor cooking was the only acceptable form of home cooking for men of my grandfather's generation. Culinary icon James Beard helped fuel this macho American trend with the publication of *Cook It Outdoors* in 1941. All that fire and smoke made cooking a manly adventure, reminiscent of camping or combat.

I believe it was my grandfather's cold, unromantic attitude toward the home kitchen that attracted my mother to my father, a man who equated food with poetry. As a young man, Dad was a little ahead of his time when it came to taking his place in the kitchen.



MY PARENTS MET in 1959 while they were away at college on Philadelphia's Main Line. Dad was attending Villanova, a Catholic college for young men. A mile down the road, mom was cloistered with 500 other young girls at Rosemont College, another Catholic enclave. Early in their courtship, Dad invited my mother over for Sunday dinner. He lived with six other guys in a dilapidated row house on Lancaster Avenue, Villanova's main drag. Household responsibilities were divvied up, and my father volunteered to do all the cooking.

A first-generation American of Croatian and Czechoslovakian descent, Dad grew up in New York's Hell's Kitchen. He came from a long line of fabulous cooks—all women, of course. Nan Coric,

his maternal grandmother from Bratislava, had fed him fork-tender pot roast, plump apple fritters, and the best fried chicken on earth. His Croatian Aunt Jenny made him smoked kielbasa with sauerkraut and homemade gnocchi—potato dumplings smothered in rich meat sauce. Dad loved to eat. He knew that if he wanted to continue eating well on his student budget, he'd have to cook himself.

Before he left for college, Dad began closely observing his female relatives in their kitchens. At school, he continued his culinary education, making trips to the library and used bookstores. He picked up volumes ranging from American housewife bibles *The Joy of Cooking* and *Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book* to Brillat-Savarin's 1825 classic *The Physiology of Taste*, a book regarded as the first "food memoir," and *Larousse Gastronomique*, the vast encyclopedia of French and European cooking techniques, all of which he kept at his bedside and read late into the night. Every morning, while still lying in bed, Dad would stare up at the ceiling, smoking a cigarette and planning the evening menu, a habit he never lost.

When my mother arrived for that first dinner, she froze at the kitchen doorway. A mound of dirty bowls and utensils lay in the sink. Food was splattered on the counters, the walls, the ceiling. Tacked onto a kitchen cabinet was a note: Roaches Beware! My father's six-foot-three-inch frame was bent over the stove. His crew-cut shone with sweat and a Lucky Strike with a long ash hung from his lips. Pots were going on all four burners. Dad was making gravy for a prime roast of beef, furiously stirring flour into a pan of meat drippings. Mom toyed with her pearl necklace until he looked up. The thick lenses of his black-rimmed glasses were fogged over with steam. "I hope you brought your appetite," he grinned, wiping his hands on the shirttails that hung out of his Bermuda shorts.

After they had drained the last glass of wine, my father took my mother's hand and led her to his bedroom. My mother expected

to find his room plastered with posters of Marilyn Monroe, or Jane Russell. Instead, there was a large picture of a black-and-white collie hanging over his bed. He noticed her looking. "My dog Cindy," he said with pride. In the corner of the room, my mother noted large provolone cheeses, salamis, and prosciutto dangling from ceiling hooks. She breathed in their rich, smoky scent and was transported back to her Neapolitan grandmother's basement in Washington, D.C., where similar delicacies were stored along with bell jars of tomatoes, beans, eggplant, and vinegar peppers. What was this half-Croatian, half-Czechoslovakian guy doing with Italian goodies stashed in his room? Little did my mother realize that on the island of Olib off Croatia's Adriatic coast—where some of my father's ancestors originated—aged hams and cheeses are dietary staples. At the time, my mother only knew that a man who slept beneath a picture of his dog and kept hams and cheeses by his bedside possessed an innocent charm.

Four years and many prosciutto and provolone sandwiches later—in the spring of 1963—my parents were married. A year later, I was born.



LOOKING BACK, MY childhood was one big banquet. Almost every Saturday night, my parents threw dinner parties, get-out-the-wedding-silver events that allowed my father to indulge in trying new recipes, his favorite way to unwind after a stressful week working as a Madison Avenue advertising executive. My mom, a highly social creature, loved having an excuse to invite her friends over. Many Saturday mornings, I'd wake up and pad down the hall to my parents' room where I'd find Dad sitting cross-legged on the bed, surrounded by open cookbooks.

One morning he was busy studying Marcella Hazan's *The Classic Italian Cook Book*. Hazan is credited with changing America's

clichéd notion of Italian food. Italian cooking, she instructed, is not overcooked spaghetti drowned in a pool of red sauce, but rather a cuisine that varies greatly from region to region, yet is bound together by a reliance on fresh, local ingredients and simple preparation.

Dad was smoking a cigarette and scribbling down a list of needed ingredients.

"Morning, sweetheart," he said. "How does *bucatini all'Amatriciana* sound to you? We'll have to make a stop at Russo's to get some pancetta."

Every Saturday after breakfast, Dad and I would drive all over western Long Island, looking for hard-to-find ingredients: saffron for *paella Valenciana*, garlic sausage for Alsatian *charcroute*, or phyllo dough for Greek *spanakopita*. In addition to Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and Craig Claiborne's *The New York Times International Cook Book*, Dad was delving into Diana Kennedy's *The Cuisines of Mexico* and Madhur Jaffrey's *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, two titles at the forefront of America's growing interest in authentic ethnic cooking.

During those dinner parties, I'd sneak downstairs just so I could peer into the dining room. The chandelier lights would be dimmed, bathing the diners in a halo of warm light. If it were winter, Dad might have prepared a hearty menu to stamp out the chill—for instance, *osso buco*, regal veal shanks resting on a golden throne of risotto Milanese with cremini mushrooms. I'd watch the blue-eyed-shadowed and sideburned couples at work on their plates, their eyes glazing over. "Good God, Gary, where did you learn to cook like this?" his friend Bob would exclaim.

"Gary taught himself to cook," Mom would respond proudly. Mom's friend Pat would turn to her and whisper, "Do you have any idea how lucky you are? My Lester can't even boil an egg."

At the end of the main course, mom and the other women

would clear the table and retire to the kitchen to wash dishes and make coffee. Dad would pull out decanters and pour brandy and other gold liquids. The men puffed on cigarettes and talked sports, waiting for their wives to bring in dessert. Even though Dad was more at home in the kitchen than any other Garden City father I knew, he still wasn't willing to assume the less glamorous aspects of meal preparation. He considered himself exempt from doing any of the pots or dishes and always left a huge mess. For him, cooking had become an exalted hobby, not a dull chore that included plunging his hands in dirty dishwater. On weeknights, it was Mom who hustled to get dinner on the table. She stuck to food that was nourishing and easy to prepare—pork chops with applesauce, or a big pot of split peas and ham. There simply wasn't enough time for the fancier approach my father employed on the weekends.

Dad would never have described himself as a home cook. Instead, he would have said he was a serious student of gastronomy, a devotee of Auguste Escoffier. In the 1970s, the world of professional kitchens was still dominated by men, and this was the world my father aligned himself with—not the world of Betty Crocker.

Although women have been the primary food providers since the beginning of recorded time, they have been unwelcome in professional kitchens until very recently. In 1971, the *Random House Dictionary* defined the word "chef" as "a cook, especially a male head cook." In that same year, however, a restaurant revolution was under way. Alice Waters was busy birthing California cuisine at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, paving the way for female chefs to gain serious recognition in the coming decades.

Ten years before Alice there was Julia, and it was mainly Julia who allowed Dad to play the role of home chef without receiving any crap from his male peers. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, by Julia Child, Simone Beck, and Loïsette Berthole, published in 1961, inspired legions of serious home cooks. Appearing that same

year was *The New York Times Cook Book*, written by Craig Claiborne, the paper's high-profile restaurant critic and food editor. Both books had enormous influence, making haute cuisine accessible to the American home cook. The vast majority of these gourmets-in-training were homemakers of the female persuasion. Yet, because these cookbooks introduced Americans to food they had previously only experienced in restaurants—extraordinary cuisine as opposed to ordinary everyday food—home cooking could be elevated from a domestic duty to an art form. This was cooking previously reserved for the male domain of professional cooking, and thus, men could finally feel safe entering the home kitchen.

In 1965, Julia Child appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with the cover line “Everyone’s in the Kitchen.” The article included captioned photographs of Vice President Hubert Humphrey and August Busch III of Anheuser-Busch, among other men, all busy chopping, dicing, and stirring in their home kitchens.

Whether he was aware of it or not, by whipping up *boeuf bourguignon* as opposed to Hamburger Helper, Dad kept his masculinity intact.



IN 1986, WHEN I met my future husband, Randy, at school in Boulder, he was a culinary neophyte with a tumble of curly dark hair and deep-set blue eyes. He came from Greeley, Colorado, home of one of the largest cattle feed lots in the world—true meat-and-potatoes country. Luckily, he was ready and willing to experiment. I fed him tangles of fresh pasta held together with melted Brie and garnished with chopped tomatoes and strands of fresh basil, as well as pencil-thin asparagus wrapped in prosciutto, favorites of mine from *The Silver Palate Cookbook*. Created by successful New York City caterers Julee Rosso and Sheila Lukins, Silver Palate recipes

oozed with '80s excess—from new potatoes with black caviar to twice-baked potatoes stuffed with lobster.

After graduation, I packed up my Cuisinart and headed east with Randy. We settled into a one-bedroom apartment with a tiny kitchen on Manhattan's Upper West Side. No longer supported by my parents, I had to reduce my recipe repertoire to budget-conscious items like brown rice and steamed vegetables. It didn't matter. The excitement of new love made up for the temporary blandness in our diets. Our biggest indulgence was having friends over for weekend brunch, the one meal Randy always prepared. In college, Randy did time as a dishwasher in a large chain restaurant specializing in greasy griddle items. When Randy hit a home run for the restaurant's baseball team, the manager promoted him to line cook. On the line, Randy worked under the tutelage of an ex-army cook who taught him the fine art of short-order cooking. On those weekend mornings in NYC, I'd sip Bloody Marys with our friends as Randy whipped up perfectly folded omelets, crisp hash browns, and tall stacks of buttermilk pancakes—pure comfort food that nourished the hangovers we'd acquired after bar-hopping in the East Village the night before.

The ritual of Sunday dinner at my grandparents ended with the death of Grandfather. We began eating with my parents, who had traded their suburban home for an apartment on the Upper East Side, a cross-town bus trip away. One Sunday afternoon Randy joined Dad on his traditional grocery ride. He told me later their journey began on the Upper West Side at Citarella, where they purchased jumbo shrimp, then they sped downtown to the Sullivan Street Bakery in SoHo for semolina bread, the East Village cheese shop for Gorgonzola and Asiago, and Veniero's for cannolis and other Italian pastries. In between, they checked four different gourmet groceries looking for fennel, but alas, turned up empty-handed.

Dad marched through the front door with a grim expression. "We'll have to settle for spinach risotto," he said.

Randy followed in line behind him, saddled with all the grocery bags. "I think your dad is completely nuts," he whispered.

"Randy, my boy, help me peel the shrimp," Dad called from the kitchen.

Over the years, Dad had become more and more authoritarian in the kitchen. Not surprisingly, his power trip as a chef coincided with his rise to CEO at the ad agency. At home, he behaved as executive chef, recruiting whoever was on hand to wash baby lettuces, julienne beets, shell peas, and, of course, do all the dishes. It was the late 1980s, and more and more chefs were moving into the realm of celebrity. Dad believed he had attained star status like Cajun king Paul Prudhomme, trendy pizza guru Wolfgang Puck, and ultra stylist Martha Stewart, to name a few of the decade's heavy hitters. He needed to be pampered with support staff. We didn't mind indulging him as long as we could enjoy the meals he put forth.



IN 1993 MY father was diagnosed with lung cancer. He was fifty-three years old. As the disease rapidly progressed, the feasting at home came to an end. When Dad started to lose weight, my mother, my sister Rosemary, Randy, and I ran to the kitchen to make his favorite foods. Night after night, we brought trays weighed down with rich, caloric dishes to his bedside: meatloaf and mashed potatoes, fettuccine Alfredo, and chocolate mousse. But the food went untouched. The man who had woken up every morning of his adult life and mapped out what he was going to eat that day had been robbed of his appetite.

The cancer altered Dad's well-fed appearance, too. His swarthy Mediterranean skin became sallow and gray, his cheeks hollowed, his ribs protruded. Eight weeks after the diagnosis, he was dead.

I stopped cooking. Randy and I began ordering takeout from mediocre Chinese restaurants and pizza places. It was impossible to enjoy food without thinking of Dad.

Then at the end of that first year of mourning, my mother decided to host a barbecue at her summerhouse on Long Island. She invited thirty people and asked Randy and me to pitch in.

"Randy, do you think you can grill this?" Mom asked, tossing him a couple hundred dollars worth of beef tenderloin.

He gulped. "No problem."

I volunteered to make cheese puffs, a foolproof appetizer handed down from my paternal grandmother, Marge. I was too intimidated to try something more ambitious. The friends my mother had invited over were all accustomed to Dad's flawless cooking.

That night, as Randy nervously manned the grill, a family friend named Tom swung his arm over Randy's shoulder. "Um, I think you better put the grill cover on if you want the meat to be ready before midnight," he advised, realizing Randy was in over his head. Dad must have been looking down on us because the meat turned out perfectly medium rare, and the guests raved.

A change occurred in Randy after that night. Perhaps it was the buzz he experienced from the adulation of the dinner guests. Or maybe it was the pressure to fill Dad's shoes. But Randy began tuning into Food Network, the cable-television network launched in November 1993—four months after Dad's death—that now reaches over 71 million households. Mario Batali showed Randy how to make risotto; Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken, the Too Hot Tamales, taught him about mole; hunky Bobby Flay introduced him to dry rubs; and that boisterous Emeril Lagasse told him not to be afraid to "kick it up a notch" with bold seasonings. Before long, Randy was making polenta triangles topped with wild mushrooms; grilled tuna steaks marinated in ginger, lime, and soy; and rock shrimp quesadillas topped with mango salsa. On Saturday nights,

we began to throw serious dinner parties. We got into the habit of running all over the city, searching for the best ingredients: the Union Square Greenmarket for the freshest produce, Florence Meat Market for the best steaks, the Gourmet Garage for great olives.

After the parties we kick off our shoes and pour each other a glass of port. Then we take turns washing and drying the dishes.

Randy has evolved into a "foodie," though no one seems to find Randy's interest in cooking that unusual. Today, a man hunkered down over a cutting board in the kitchen isn't such a rarity as it was when my dad first started cooking. As we begin the twenty-first century, men seem as comfortable in the home kitchen as women have become in professional kitchens.



RANDY AND I have a three-year-old son, Gary, whom we named after my father. On Saturday mornings Gary runs into our bedroom and tugs Randy's arm.

"Dad, it's time to make pancakes," he says. Then he turns to me. "You stay here, Mom."

I sink back under the covers as the men head to the kitchen.



gary's risotto milanese with cremini mushrooms

1 cup dry white wine
1/2 cup cremini mushrooms
1/4 cup olive oil
1/2 cup chopped onion
2 cups Arborio rice
5-7 cups chicken or beef broth (if you use canned,
mix 1/2 can of water with every 2 parts of broth)
1/2 tsp saffron threads dissolved in a few teaspoons of hot water
1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
salt and pepper to taste

In a sauté pan, sauté mushrooms in one tablespoon of olive oil for five minutes, until mushrooms render their juices. Set aside. In another heavy pot, sauté onion in remaining olive oil over medium flame. Meanwhile, bring broth to boil in a saucepan, reduce heat, and keep at a lively simmer. When onion is soft, add rice and cook another three minutes until rice is translucent. Slowly add the wine to the rice and stir occasionally until the liquid has been absorbed, then add a cup of broth, stir, and simmer until the liquid is absorbed. Add the mushrooms and their juices, the saffron, and about half a cup of broth, stirring constantly until the liquid is absorbed. Add the remaining broth about a half-cup at a time, stirring until the rice is slightly creamy, tender but firm to the bite (about twenty minutes total cooking time). Remove from heat. Stir in Parmesan cheese, salt, and pepper to taste. Serve immediately with extra grated Parmesan.

omen both in and out of the culinary profession share their stories about the many ways food shapes and enhances their lives.

New York Times columnist Amanda Hesser praises the joys of simple food, and *Food & Wine* editor Kate Sekules discusses the importance of having a restaurant that feels like home. Theresa Lust vividly recalls her fondness for humble sauerkraut, while Michelle Tea describes her working-class Polish family's meals as "tripe, kielbasa, shellfish, and beer." Elizabeth Nunez links her passion for Carvel soft-serve ice cream to her childhood in Trinidad. One woman owns up to her culinary ineptitude in an era when being a gourmet cook is all the rage; another details the rigors of baking school at the Culinary Institute of America.

Brimming over with generous helpings of great prose, this rich array of essays and recipes will whet your appetite and inspire you to pull out your pots and pans. Bon appétit!

"I wanted to devour all of these story-gems in one sitting, but wisely, I think ended up treating them like a box of chocolates and making the pleasure last by rationing myself to one perfect story a day, which made for a very satisfying spate of reading. I highly recommend this book."

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"Many cooks have contributed essays to *Women Who Eat*, but far from spoiling the broth, they've stirred together a beguiling mix of textures and tastes. Food as seduction, food as heritage, food as self-expression, food as love—it's all here. Every woman who eats (which, face it, is all of us) will find a bit of herself somewhere in these pages."

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