

all the things that could never be seen and all the things that we would never want to lose. The impulse we had to carry Strega Nona with us was not unlike lighting a candle, or praying to a figurine, or using the potions and amulets that guarded our family from the evil eye. She was our reinvention of that ancient impulse, and a sign that the old ways were still alive in us and always would be no matter where we lived in the world or how different our lives became from those who came before us.

I sighed. My mother smiled at me, seeming to know what I was thinking. "Let's hit the gift shop," she said.

We loaded up on rosary beads, prayer cards, and ceramic statues of Saint Francis. Wandering the aisles, I passed by thermometers, ashtrays, dishcloths, calendars, all ablaze with brightly colored images of the saint. Behind an overstock of Saint Francis snow globes, I found a tiny wooden figure, green, shaped like two arches and hinged in the middle like a locker, one inch high. On the left side was a picture of Saint Francis, and on the right, in tiny print, on a sticker fastened to the wood, were the words,

*"Due cose al mondo non ti abbandono mai: l'occhio di Dio che dovunque ti vede e il cuore della mamma che sempre ti segue."*

"There are two things in the world that never abandon you: the eye of God which always sees you and the heart of a mother which always follows you."

I sat close to my mother as we got back in the taxi. With my grandmother, her mother, watching over us, my mother took me to see the place where she was born.

## Allium Longicuspis

.....  
STEPHANIE SUSNJARA

The ancient roots of the garlic bulb and the ever-unfurling roots of my family tree are so intertwined they're impossible to separate. Grounded in the past and stretching into the future, these roots are braided together in solidarity, keeping the branches of identity alive and intact.

I feel a special kinship with garlic, one that transcends bodily nourishment. However, my relationship with garlic has not always been so rapturous. At one point I hated garlic and thought I would have to banish it from my life.

Garlic's ascent from second-class citizenry to comfortable bohemian chic mirrors my own family's twentieth-century immigrant experience. Between 1880 and 1920, over four million Italians, including my maternal relatives, migrated to the United States. Language barriers, cultural differences, and relative poverty placed them toward the bottom echelon of society along with other recent immigrants. To worsen their plight, the Italians were garlic eaters at a time when garlic was hardly in

.....  
**STEPHANIE SUSNJARA**'s essays have appeared in *Brain, Child* and *Women Who Eat: A New Generation on the Glory of Food*. A graduate of the MFA program in Creative Nonfiction at Goucher College, she lives in Katonah, New York, and is currently working on a collection of essays about food.

vogue. In those days, the smell of garlic on one's breath was like the Scarlet Letter pinned to Hester Prynne's chest, the mark of a pariah.

If my Neapolitan great-grandmother were alive today, the mainstreaming of garlic would surprise her, considering the prejudices she encountered when she emigrated from her rural village of Calitrie to Washington, D.C. She'd recall how her son and daughter (my grandmother), the only Italians at their school, were chased home daily with the kids shouting at them "guinea" and "wop."

Despite the cruel taunting of her classmates, my grandmother never betrayed her culinary roots. When I was a young girl in the early '70s, I'd stand on a stepstool beside her stove and watch as she tossed whole garlic cloves into a pot of crushed tomatoes, basil, and olive oil. The sauce would simmer all day until the cloves dissolved, their richness creating a fragrant potion. As I helped my grandmother prepare Sunday family dinner, garlic showed up in every dish. We'd chop garlic coarsely and add it to roasted red peppers that had been doused with extra virgin olive oil for the *antipasti*. We'd mince garlic and mix it with bread-crumbs and Parmesan for stuffed artichokes. We'd slice thin garlic slivers and press them into veal roast. As the garlic's papery skins crackled in my hands and the spicy scent tickled my nostrils, I realized that garlic imparts sensuality to a dish, satisfying a deeper hunger within.

My mother, a second generation, assimilated Italian American, was the first to rebel. In the late '50s she left her hometown of Brooklyn for Rosemont College outside of Philadelphia. The all-girl student body at Rosemont was predominantly White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, a culture far removed from my mother's earthy Italian roots. Whenever she brought friends home from school, she asked my grandmother to omit the garlic. Cook without garlic? My grandmother was stung by this request, which brought back all the painful, taunting memories of her childhood.

But Mom's rebellion was short-lived. Toward the end of college—to the joy of my grandmother—she met a man of Slavic heritage and mar-

ried him. My father was a serious food lover who was raised on garlic-laden cuisine.

Garlic's association with the lower classes extends beyond my great-grandmother's day. Americans inherited their dislike for garlic from the British, whose disdain can be traced back over 2,000 years to the Roman Empire. Aristocratic Romans abstained from eating garlic, detesting its powerful odor. In Elizabethan times (1558–1603) the word "garlic-eater" signified low social class, and later become a derogatory term used to label foreigners. On December 22, 1818, the poet Percy Shelley wrote from Naples: "There are two Italies . . . The one is the most sublime and lovely contemplation that can be conceived by the imagination of man; the other is the most degraded, disgusting, and odious. What do you think? Young women of rank actually eat . . . you will never guess what . . . garlick!"

Contempt for garlic reverberated into the twentieth century, swooping down upon my mother's WASPy college campus and extending into my teenage life. In the late 1970s I was attending seventh grade at Garden City Junior High School on Long Island. One day I received an anonymous phone call.

"Susnjara, everybody hates you," a voice cackled at the other end of the line. "You're ugly and skinny, you have bushy eyebrows, and you smell." I recognized that high-pitched, whiny voice. It belonged to the female leader of the most popular clique in junior high, a group I had been trying to nudge my way into. I was too stunned to respond before the ringleader hung up.

"Who was that, honey?" asked my mother.

"Wrong number," I said, slipping out of the room. I couldn't possibly tell my mother what had transpired on the phone. I didn't want her to know her daughter was a loser, washed up at thirteen.

That night I curled up on my bed like a frightened snail of a girl, tucked within her shell. Safe and warm, coiled within white sheets, I wondered why God allowed the most powerful clique in junior high to

direct their collective hatred toward me. It was true. I was skinny and had thick eyebrows. But smelly, too? What my enemies could be referring to, I had no idea. As a dedicated reader of *Seventeen* magazine, I was well aware of all the beauty products targeted at young girls. Didn't I shampoo every day with Herbal Essence shampoo, sprinkle my body with Shower to Shower bath powder, dab Love's Babysoft behind my ears, and slick my lips with Lipsmacker strawberry-flavored lip gloss? I was dousing myself with so many scents—fruity, floral, spicy, and herbal—there was no way an offensive smell could have been emanating from my pores. I drifted off to sleep, wondering how the hell I would survive seventh grade.

The next day in the cafeteria, I passed by the popular crowd's table and heard someone snicker, "There goes stinky breath."

My cheeks burned. I scurried over to the designated nerd table and hid my head in my lunch box. A strong whiff of garlicky salami, piled on a hard Italian roll, accosted my nostrils.

From then on, I had my mom pack peanut butter and jelly or domestic ham on squishy Wonder Bread—the same stuff the other kids had. Still, I didn't win favor with the popular crowd. On weekends, I slept late and lazed around in my pajamas watching TV. My mother would beg me to call a friend. How could I tell her I didn't have any?

Halfway through the school year, I developed chronic body aches and a low-grade temperature. My mother took me to our family doctor. He believed my illness was psychosomatic, but he wrote a note excusing me from the remaining three months of school. The teachers sent work home, and I earned all A's. They offered little solace. I wanted to be popular, not smart, and at my school the two were mutually exclusive.

The loneliness was unbearable. In the fall of the ninth grade, I reached out to other misfits, those deemed too quirky or brainy or unattractive by the cheerleaders, football players, and other members of the junior high elite. We gathered in each other's basements to smoke pot, read hipster novels by Kurt Vonnegut or Tom Wolfe, and listen to

the Grateful Dead. We romanticized our outsider status, and my broken teen spirit began to mend.

In the eleventh grade I fell in love with Larry, an artist who dressed in black, smoked Gitanes, and carried a copy of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* in his back pocket. While our classmates were hanging out at McDonald's and the Roosevelt Field mall, Larry and I would take the Long Island railroad into Manhattan. In the shade of Washington Square Park, we read each other poems by William Blake and listened to musicians strum guitars. At night, we wandered the narrow streets of Greenwich Village chasing down Jack Kerouac's ghost and dined on falafel, humus, and tabouleh at the Middle Eastern cafes that lined MacDougal Street. Sometimes we'd meander down to Chinatown for heaping platters of crabs drowned in black bean sauce.

Eating my way through the cheap joints of Manhattan, I regained respect for garlic, a star ingredient in all those ethnic dishes we were discovering. Like the Indian print blouses that billowed on racks outside the boutiques on Bleecker, garlic now struck me as bold and spirited. Empowered by my new identity as a bohemian refugee, I began walking the high school corridors with my shoulders thrust back, my head held high, puffing garlic's exotic scent over the "in" crowd and their homogenous suburban values. It was a grand moment in my coming of age, with both crises, over garlic and identity, finally resolved.

Throughout my twenties and thirties, I considered myself a genuine garlic lover as well as an enthusiastic connoisseur of its delights. In reality I was a fraud, living in ignorance on generic garlic from my local supermarket. The most common garlic found in supermarkets today, a variety known as Italian, the progenitor of California Early and California Late, was introduced to the United States at the turn of the century. At this time, the influence of Victorian manners on American high society, coupled with the wave of Italian immigration, smashed garlic to an all-time low level of repute. My grandmother's upbringing coincided with this dark period in garlic's history.

One late August morning at the outdoor Greenmarket in New York City's Union Square, I was initiated into the extraordinary gourmet garlic world, populated by a sect beholden to the herb for its many powers over mind, body, and soul. A hazy sun beat down on a throng of early risers who bustled about the stands, gathering the last bounty of summer: succulent corn, spicy-sweet bouquets of basil, and just-picked tomatoes heaving with juice. I pushed through the crowd, past barrels overflowing with eggplant and squash, and past shelves laden with homemade pies, their cross-hatched crusts stretched over mounds of blueberries and other sweet fruit. Soon I found myself standing in front of a table piled high with garlic bulbs still attached to their stiff, ruler-length stems. Unlike the bulbous supermarket variety, these heads were small and uniform, ivory-colored and streaked with pale violet. Scraggly roots hung from their bottoms, coarse and kinky.

"Excuse me," I said. "What kind of garlic is this?" The woman behind the garlic-filled cart wore her silvery hair tied back in a ponytail. She had a clear complexion and a glowing tan.

"*Allium longicuspis*," she answered, as she picked up a wand of garlic and swirled it in the air like a magician. "It's the most ancient garlic in the world, the only one that hasn't been genetically altered." The woman handed me a tiny sliver of raw garlic. "Taste," she commanded. I examined the wafer of garlic glittering in my palm, then closed my eyes and placed it on my tongue. It was hot and spicy but quickly mellowed, leaving a strong but pleasant aftertaste, not at all bitter. The flavor danced in my mouth. It was as if I were tasting garlic for the first time. At that moment rays of sun zeroed in on the bulbs, igniting them with a supernatural glow.

"I'll take two," I said.

"Wait," said the garlic woman. "Let me get you some better looking ones." She turned on the heels of her Teva sandals and disappeared into the back of her black minivan. A moment later she returned clutching garlic stalks.

I tucked the wands of garlic underneath my arm, toting them the

way Parisians carry their beloved baguettes. I practically ran home, eager to get cooking. That night my husband and I dined on *spaghetti con aglio e olio* (spaghetti with garlic and oil). The fresh garlic, with its toothsome bite, transformed this basic dish into a dazzling feast.

I became obsessed, scouring the library bookshelves for garlic history, garlic recipes, and garlic lore. After reading about garlic's origins in Chester Aaron's *The Great Garlic Book*, I began to daydream about the woman at the Greenmarket, with her piercing blue eyes and bright purple flannel shirt flapping in the early morning breeze. I imagined that she was an apparition I'd conjured up out of garlic's very ancient past. Perhaps she was really a 6,000-year-old Kirghiz nomad who, long ago, gathered *allium longicuspis* bulbs as she and her tribe roamed across the mountains of central Asia where food historians pinpoint garlic's origins. Maybe she was a spice trader who transported garlic along the trade routes, spreading it east through China and west through Egypt, eventually bringing it to Europe and then on to North America. Or might she have been among the day laborers who built the Great Pyramid, receiving payment in the form of onions, parsley, and *allium longicuspis*?

I also learned how garlic eventually broke through the class barriers. Thanks must be paid to culinary icons James Beard, who in the 1950s proclaimed that a good cook could not live without garlic, and Julia Child, whose traditional French recipes often featured garlic. By the 1970s, Alice Waters, chef and owner of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, began slathering roasted garlic paste on bread as if it were butter and creating unlikely desserts like figs poached in wine and garlic, signaling that the garlic revolution was in full swing. Over the next few decades, the American palate became more and more accustomed to other garlic-laden cuisines as immigrants from Southeast Asia, Mexico, and Latin America settled here. The red-checked tablecloth period of Italian dining, with its southern Italian derivatives such as spaghetti and meatballs and chicken Parmesan, made room for new regional Italian restaurants that featured the foods of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany. In

2002, Italian chef Mario Batali, of Food Network fame, appeared on the cover of *Gourmet* magazine, his fists bulging with garlic bulbs.

Today garlic is a common staple in the pantries of America's most celebrated chefs. In serious food circles, the growers of high-end specialty garlic become famous. There are garlic magazines such as *Mostly Garlic* and the *Garlic Times*, garlic newsletters such as the *Garlic Press*, garlic restaurants such as San Francisco's *Stinking Rose*, and dozens of nationwide garlic festivals. The story of garlic, its struggles and its successes, echoes the American Dream.

My quest for garlic knowledge culminated with the annual Hudson Valley Garlic Festival. The event is held in Saugerties, New York, in late September—the time to enjoy East Coast garlic at its prime. (Garlic is harvested here in July and August, then cured for two months.) I remember my heart pounding with excitement as I entered the festival gates. Many others had made this same trip, and the unabashed crowd displayed their devotion, with garlic logo T-shirts, 18-carat gold *allium sativum* necklaces, drop-style earrings shaped like delicate white bulbs, and tattoos of fading gray bulbs on forearms. Hobnobbing with garlic growers, garlic chefs, and garlic experts, checking out endless tables groaning with exotic garlic, I quickly grew familiar with names such as Music, Italian Rocambole, Porcelain, Killarney Red, Creole, Red Toch, Georgian, Siberian, and Spanish Roja. I moved from stand to stand sampling raw cloves, filling my backpack with dozens of bulbs.

The heady scent of frying garlic lured me further and further into this Shangri-la. Suddenly, I felt ravenous. The food concession area presented a smorgasbord of garlic delights; I chowed down on corn on the cob slathered with garlic herb butter, tortilla chips blanketed with warm garlic salsa, and string beans blackened in a garlic dry rub.

Licking a shockingly tasty garlic ice-cream cone, I continued my stroll until I came upon a small crowd surrounding a man wearing a black cowboy hat festooned with garlic bulbs, an "I Love Garlic" T-shirt, and boxer shorts with bold garlic-bulb print. With scraggly white

hair and skin crinkled by age and sun, he actually resembled a head of garlic. He looked at me and reached out his hand.

"Hello there," he said. "I'm Mr. Garlic."

Suddenly a camera crew from a local news station was on the scene, and Mr. Garlic was on his mission, enthusiastically proclaiming, "I have been growing garlic for over 25 years, and I travel all over, telling people about the health benefits of garlic. Garlic lowers blood pressure and cholesterol, prevents cancer, improves circulation, and can even enhance your sex life."

During my research, I had unearthed a Middle Eastern folk belief that a bridegroom who pins a clove of garlic to his lapel ensures a happy wedding night. I'd also come across a Web site for the Garlic Centre of Sussex, England, which touted garlic as a cure for penile dysfunction. Garlic, it seems, can improve blood circulation and stimulate the enzyme nitric oxide synthase, two essentials for obtaining and maintaining an erection. Why take Viagra when there's garlic, a less expensive, over-the-counter drug?

My thoughts drifted back to Mr. Garlic, who still held the media in rapt attention. I wondered what kind of sacrifices Mr. Garlic had made in order to spend so much time on the road, touring North America as an apostle for garlic. Did he have family? Was there a Mrs. Garlic? My own passion seemed quite pale in comparison. At that moment, I realized that I simply don't have what it takes to renounce all else in the name of garlic. My journey would have a different climax.

In bed that night, I tossed and turned, unable to stop thinking about my new garlic stash. Careful not to wake my husband, I crept out of bed. At the dining room table, I set up my own private taste test, laying out slivers of each bulb, along with water and crackers to cleanse the palate. Like wine experts, garlic growers use a specific vocabulary to describe the taste of garlic, defining it in terms of hotness and aftertaste. Is the garlic hot or mild or bitter at the back of the throat? Does the clove's spiciness mellow, linger, or clear?

Until recently, it was believed that over 200 varieties of garlic existed. However, new studies involving DNA tests confirm just six: rocambole, porcelain, Asiatic, purple stripe, marble purple stripe, and artichoke. The endless taste variations of exotic garlic have more to do with environmental factors such as soil and climate than true genetic differences.

I broke open a bulb of Spanish Roja, chose a plump clove, and peeled back the papery skin to reveal flesh shining with juice. I nibbled on it, savoring its sharp tang. The Killarney Red left a warming aftertaste that lingered on my tongue like a fine Cognac, and the Palermo tasted mellow and smooth, like sweet butter.

I carefully labeled each bag of garlic and jotted down some cooking notes. I constructed a small shrine, lining up the small paper bags of garlic on the middle shelf of my dining room hutch, a cool, dark place that would keep the bulbs fresh for months. I fell asleep dreaming of steak with chimmichurri, shrimp with garlic sauce, bouillabaisse, and chicken stewed with forty cloves of garlic.

The next night I made garlic soup by simmering a whole bulb of spicy German-White in chicken broth. I crushed a handful of *longicuspis* cloves underneath the broad side of a knife—a technique that heightens garlic's potency by breaking down its sulfur-rich cells—and stuffed them into the cavity of a roasting chicken, along with lemon and rosemary, and nestled the bird into a 425 degree oven. Then I sautéed minced Spanish Roja cloves in olive oil, watching to make sure they didn't burn and turn bitter. I folded baby spinach leaves into the garlicky oil, wilting them until they glistened an emerald green.

When my husband walked through the door, a strong, seductive aroma pervaded our apartment. Sulfur compounds in garlic release endorphins, which may have been the reason behind our heightened sense of well-being. Before he could speak, I handed him a thick slab of *bruschetta*, toasted bread rubbed with the Palermo, then dipped in a mixture of olive oil and coarse salt. He took a bite and sighed with pleasure.

We proceeded to the candlelit table, took our seats, and bowed our heads over the bowls of steaming soup. The flavor was rich yet mellow, bewitchingly good for such a simple dish. The chicken had beautiful crisp skin, tangy with garlic, and meat that fell off the bone. The savory whipped potatoes dissolved on the tongue, and the spinach tasted lush in its silky bath of garlic and oil.

After dinner we moved to the living room, both reeling with happiness. We sank into the couch. My husband brought my hand to his lips. "That was one of the best meals I've ever eaten," he said, then slowly nibbled his way up my arm. His lips trailed across my shoulders, sending a sweet rush of desire through my core. We undressed each other, slowly peeling off each layer of clothing. I pushed his naked body down on the couch and climbed on top. We pressed into each other, finding the perfect fit. He buried his face in my neck. "You smell terrific," he whispered.

"You, too," I replied, running my fingers through his hair.

Our bodies rocked back and forth, and we fell to the floor. Both breathing hard, we continued making love, lost in time and enveloped in garlic's celestial perfume.

## Lovers' Garlic Feast

### *Garlic Soup*

INGREDIENTS: 1 head of garlic, 1½ quarts chicken broth, four slices toasted Italian bread, salt and freshly ground pepper, Italian parsley, and extra virgin olive oil.

DIRECTIONS: Peel the garlic. Poach the cloves in simmering broth for ten minutes. Add salt and pepper. Ladle the soup into four bowls, top each with a slice of toasted bread. Sprinkle with parsley. Serve hot.

*Perfect Roast Chicken*

Adapted from a recipe that appeared in the *New York Times*, this is a perfect Sunday supper dish. The secret to roasting chicken is to start roasting the bird at a high temperature—this makes for crispy skin and seals in the juices.

**INGREDIENTS:** 4-pound roasting chicken, 4 lemons, 1 head garlic, fresh rosemary sprigs, and olive oil.

**DIRECTIONS:** Heat oven to 425 degrees. Wash chicken thoroughly under cold running water. Pat dry inside and out with paper towels. Cut lemons into quarters. Roll garlic on hard surface to separate cloves. With flat side of a heavy knife, smash garlic cloves (skin need not be removed). Stuff lemons and garlic inside the body cavity. Tie legs together. Tuck rosemary between thighs and breast. Rub chicken lightly with olive oil. Place in roasting pan and bake 30 minutes; reduce heat to 375 degrees and cook about 45 minutes longer or until juices run clear when chicken is pricked with a fork. Serves 6 (or 2, with plenty of leftovers).

*Best-Ever Garlic Mashed Potatoes*

**INGREDIENTS:** 4 pounds russet potatoes, peeled and quartered, 5–7 peeled garlic cloves, 3 tablespoons unsalted butter,  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup milk, salt, and freshly ground pepper.

**DIRECTIONS:** Place potatoes and garlic in a large saucepan and cover them with cold, salted water. Bring to a boil. Lower the heat and cook until potatoes are tender. Drain. Return potatoes to the pot and mash along with the garlic. Stir in milk and butter. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

## Jealousy, or The Autobiography of an Italian Woman

.....  
GINA BARRECA

I

I was born jealous.

Just as some people know how to sing from the moment they open their mouths, I was able, from the first breath I took, to wonder why somebody else had it better than me. Why was somebody else's layette set more frilly? Why did their mothers get more flowers? Why did the nurse coo more frequently over the bundle in the next crib than over me?

I'm sure I kept track. Somewhere in my infant brain was inscribed a primitive cry at—and for—injustice: "Ignore them; choose me!"

It's still there, that cry, indelible as a tattoo. It was woven into my DNA, right there alongside the love of opera, the distrust of government officials, and sixteen recipes for eggplant.

Maybe I was my mother's favorite, my family's favorite, maybe even my doctor's favorite, but what did they know? Those foolish enough to prefer me did not count—that was automatic. I am certain that what I wanted was to be valued by those who saw no particular difference

.....

**GINA BARRECA** is a professor of English at the University of Connecticut. She is the author of *Babes in Boyland*, *They Used to Call Me Snow White but I Drifted*, and *Too Much of a Good Thing Is Wonderful*, as well as the editor of *Don't Tell Mama: The Penguin Book of Italian American Writing*.