

SPOTLIGHT

June 2007



**Osher Lifelong Learning Institute
at TUFTS UNIVERSITY**

Volume 1



Salt and Pepper to Taste

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For most of my life, the kitchen remained an unknown and feared corner of my soul. It was the only place in the world where I did not know how to trust my instincts, where I was incapable of solving problems. One day a trusted friend of mine told me that he was sure there was an ancient Chinese saying that "if you learn how to cook, everything will fall into place". I decided he was right. Cooking was the one thing I was terrified of and I knew that conquering this fear was an essential part of fully understanding who I was and the possibilities of who I could become.

Sometimes, when you put your mind to something, life hands you the perfect situation. I moved to London for a job and shared an apartment which had a large kitchen, a dishwasher and was conveniently located two minutes away from a large supermarket. I brought along a file of recipes I had collected from friends over the years and "meant to learn to cook", thinking that maybe London, as one of the most expensive places to live in the world, would be the perfect scene for the new role I was about to play. I had always been a devoted "sous chef" when my friends cooked, and would help chop, peel and stir while madly scribbling down every detail of what they did in the kitchen, but this file of notes was truly as far as I had progressed on my own culinary path.

But first, I had to learn to get over a basic childhood fear I realize still haunted me - I was afraid of cracking an egg. I did not spend much time in the kitchen while growing up but I do have certain flashbacks. I remember that no matter how much my mother taught me her expert one handed technique, I always ended up with egg yolk everywhere except the bowl I was trying to put it in. I was a neat child and did not like the mess that I seemed to always create. As an adult, I had learned that imperfection was a part of life and so armed with this knowledge I knew I was ready to risk again. I had spent most of my childhood and adolescence exploring the far corners of the world and not enough of it exploring the basic ingredients of what makes each life flourish in its own space.

As luck would have it, right around the time I mastered the art of scrambled eggs, I also lost my job. I took this as a sign and became determined to find my way in this room that everyone else I knew seemed to understand and yet remained completely foreign to me. I made lists of which recipes which I committed myself to make each week and did my shopping accordingly. I had a strict "nothing will go to waste policy" and adhered to it so religiously that it was not unlikely to find an email

in my inbox from friends entitled "the what to do with my asparagus, tomatoes and zucchini" recipe dish.

I am told that I live my life like an artist but you would never guess this if you watched me in the kitchen. I was terrified of doing something wrong and guarded against potential errors by treating a recipe like a scientific experiment. I measured everything precisely and did everything in the order in which it was listed. If I did not understand something in the recipe in terms of getting from step A to B, I freely used my kitchen 911 hotline - friends who knew how to cook well and had enough sympathy with my efforts to learn that I could call them at any time of day or night with the most ridiculous of questions. And believe me, no question was too embarrassing or too detailed for me to ask!

It has been my absolute surprise to discover that nothing has given me more pleasure than being able to take raw ingredients and end up with something tasty for my friends and I to enjoy. Each dish I managed to make became a stepping stone to my discovering my own sense of flavor and my acceptance that it was ok to make mistakes. I learned that I could trust myself in an entirely new way and that when I was able to peel back the layers of uncertainty, I did in fact know what it meant when the recipe said "add salt and pepper to taste".