

WHY DO I WRITE: "Not that much ..."

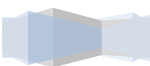
The [James Beard Award](#) in the United States' food industry has been referenced as the Oscars of the food world. "The award recognizes chefs, restaurateurs, authors and journalists each year, scheduled around James Beard's May 5th birthday." For the unfamiliar, James Beard is recognized as the Dean of American Cookery. I believe Beard's contribution to the food world was his third eye. Beard's book [American Cookery](#) is a prime example; translating taste, cultures; secrets handed down, cataloged in an elder's head, while giving readers and exact measurements. Beard made the rest of us appreciate the dance we saw done primarily by our mothers, aunts, grandmothers over the years. In [Beard on Breads](#) he permitted us to taste others' breads; reading, exploring their secrets, permitting us to translate on top of his translations, making the receipts our own. Making it simple, appreciating good food need not be a chemical formulation, appreciating the art, permitting us to pay homage to those in our lives who feed us – sometimes with little or nothing, creating gastronomical treats – every day, every day, every blessed day.

Over the years, the Beard Awards have been dominated by those who make decisions in our society. The common routine: creating a committee structure, establishing rules, inviting, friends to make decisions, people they are willing to bestow trust. Blessing the status quo, never looking around and questioning why everyone has the same hue, of similar backgrounds, of the same gender, with little semblance to the rest of the society. Awarded the best awards, while telling the rest ... "they are not, they are not".



I probably possess as many cookbooks as the next person. I feel a tad bit hypocritical however. Feeling in one sense I am misusing them; using the recipes as reference points, ideas. Sight, taste, and the combination of ingredients, not necessarily followed with exactness, much like life's journey. Treating cookbooks as novels; recognizing the limitations of this practice: the inability to assign a genre, the general absence of a protagonist, the absence of the person who openly opposes the way the recipe was interpreted (an antagonist if I may). Entering into another's kitchen, positioning the sight line to obtain a bird-eyes view; peering over the cook's shoulder, watching. Evaluating – from spine to spine - whether the author can actually cook or whether the book is instead the byproduct of creativity in design. This has been my ell-worn practice of venturing to another's world - without buying a ticket, driving, or knocking on a stranger's door. Admiring silverware, pottery, table settings, and attire – no, not necessarily serving as picture books - I feel more comfortable using the language of my elders, “Sears & Roebuck catalogs – wish books”, a more apt description. Recognizing which kitchen I have more readily accepted the invitation to visit, during the moon's many revolutions. Flicking flour now the composition of the homemade paste used days, months, year's before. Working around stains, seeing a diversity of colors; making a stab at what ingredient is which/what. Nothing like a psychologist's [Rorschach test](#), at least I hope not. God I hope not, even though defined strange, otherworldly images look back each time I return.

Why do I write? The world seems different, changing; seems everyone wants life to be a recipe. The expectation of exactitude; forgetting life is not necessarily exact. This was the art of survival preached by elders. “A little bit”, “a pinch”, “a cup, or two cups, you decide”, “feel and touch, until the texture is right” - a persistent reminder not to be slavish recipes; to life's



unpredictable and unanticipated course. Its clear, temperatures, the quality of life's ingredients, altitudes and attitudes change.

“Not that much.”

No, no, no, don't hear me to say recipes – read this as life - doesn't have call for some particular ingredients; exactitude, societal customs and norms. Food like life comes in degrees of quality, quantity, oft-times compelling an adjustment. We can't move too far afield, too fast – varying the recipe, upsetting the norms – to do so will cause a predictable reaction of ones elder, recoiling in disgust, not patient enough to hear an explanation, horrified at the changes wrought.

“You said use my discretion, I did.”

Mine were babies born during the depression, living lives through a World War, moving to the back of the bus after migrating to the cities - the proverbial search for a better life – bringing with them taste, smell, memories. Cooking other peoples' food, waiting tables, taking care of other peoples' babies, before moving back across the invisible and visible lines to take care of their own and prepare meals not prepared on the other side.

“Can I have your recipe for cornbread dressing?”

“I wrote down the ingredients a while ago. You have to make a pan of cornbread ... you need celery, chopped...”

“Can I write this down?”

“You know how to write don't you...”

“How big a pan of cornbread are you talking about?”

“If you are making it for the holidays, make three pans of cornbread.”

“What are the other ingredients...?”



“1/2 cup of finely chopped onion, sage, lightly beaten eggs (2), approximately a quarter stick of butter, chicken stock, white bread (3 slices), salt and pepper to taste. Of course, season according to the number of pans of cornbread you are making; the number of people are serving.”

“Amount of celery?”

“One cup of chopped celery... should be enough.”

“Amount of chicken stock?”

“A little, not too much, enough to obtain the same consistency of bread pudding. You know baby, I hate when people beat the lumps out and make the mixture too smooth, makes a horrible dressing.” I knew what she meant about beating a pudding too much, causing the pudding to take on a gelatin texture. I responded appropriately, while knowing I was obtaining secrets told in approximates, allowing discretion, invoking memories, sights, taste – just like life. ... “Yes ma’am.”

“You need anything else?”

“No ma’am. I think I got it. ... I think I got it.”

Secrets secreted on pieces of paper, others hidden in the recesses, moving further away, daily, months – the rights of passage to playing out in a different manner and mode.

Familiar textures, smells, ingredients, as they fell in love; navigating an inchworm culture - moving slowing from slavery – [Black Codes](#) – institutional segregation – apartheid, with all deliberate speed indeed. I never permitted myself to be shocked when refused, “I don’t want to give it to you; I want you to come and visit more and eat mine”, as was her/his right.

The smell of fresh turkey removed from the cooker, after the pressure was released. Fresh preserves made from the pears, plums, peaches, berries picked from the gardens, bushes

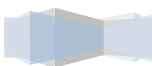
and trees surrounding the house, the neighboring fields, from the side of the road. Recipe formed over time – generations - crossing fields, state lines, rivers, oceans; an elders’ survival, in an oft-hostile world, recognizing the familiar sustains history.

Nowadays people laugh at the idea of cooking beans for an hour or more, but in the old days, before all the chemical fertilizers, beans were slower growing and tougher skinned and needed to be simmered on the back of the stove for a long time. Everybody cooked this way and I still do when I find the right kind of string bean. What is more, I have never really liked undercooked vegetables. If you want to try cooking beans this way, or if you grow your own beans, looked for Kentucky Wonder beans, which are a little longer and have thicker skin than other string beans.

[In Pursuit of Flavor](#), Edna Lewis, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1988, p. 20.

Saying the recipe was written down. Somewhere, some place, remembering, not remembering. Laughter preceding another admission, “maybe not”; prepared thousands of times over the years, staying true to methods used when adapting and improving; changes occurring because of migration, climate, quality of life - remembering, remembering, remembering – the meals served at death, celebrations, the birth of the first born; ingrained in the recesses of ones’ mental fiber.

The taste of filo dough flaking off in ones’ hand, falling onto ones’ chest; picked up and placed immediately in the mouth while the spinach never escapes. Captivated by thoughts, not wanting to admit how many more times you made the same dough and failed. Comparing the texture to other breads - from around the world; adapting, visiting, appreciating the interconnection of people; cultures, foods – life.



Never able to hit a curve ball, not able to run as fast as your cousin, failing to defeat a persistent opponent, never good at this, good at that; forever readjusting, adapting, changing, recognizing niches, individual talents, creating your adapted version of world. Hearing the wisdom bestowed by elders in one ear, past the point of trying to determine whether you were sleep or not, when hearing the voices last.

“You don’t fail unless you try. No, no, no, I believe you don’t succeed unless you try. Remember there are multiple views through this prism: you will never succeed unless you conquer your fear of succeeding.” Not wanting to hear the pity-party, substituting words, “failure” for “success”, begetting the same advice given by their ghosts.

In 2018, the James Beard Foundation for the first time invited others into the room. This seems logical and consistent with James Beard’s writings. This of course is a reminder: after we die we have little control over how and what others say or do in our names.

[In all, 15 chefs got recognized by the Beard Foundation for their individual skills. Of these, more than two-thirds — 11 — were female or minority.](#) ... That marks a considerable pivot from past years, in which the awards went mostly to white men. (At 2017’s awards, for example, only three culinary categories didn’t honor a man.).

Over the years, I have railed internally at the chefs who appear on television with them being presented as the testaments to cooking gods; celebrated as the best of the best. Hearing their stories and seeing a woman somewhere who was preparing most of the meals in the household, with these men never paying homage. Of course the last statement is not something which is true in every case. My observation is a societal one, something we need not assign to social scientist to test, a societal truism.



Why do I write? Perusing the cookbook sections in the bookstore; seeing the contributions of my heirs related to an undefined, piddling section, never hearing her/him say “soul food” once. What is that? Relegating food in the same manner history has been controlled; cheapening, rewriting, wiping the area clean, the same as a good cook controls her/his kitchen.

Absolutely, the journeys are never the same. The recipes (life experiences) can be written down, interpreted, recreated as time changes. Time moves on, time always moves on, conditions change. Lessons of life, of cooking; seeing and tasting the final product in your head, seeing what they said; envisioning the possible, the impossible. They forever remain over our shoulders, in the room; in another room, part of our psyche, pointing – hinting – providing suggestions, ways to adapt, modify, and move forward. Adding another egg, a little more water, adapting foods because of age, illness, weight, religion, culture – seeing his/her/their smiles, knowing you heard their voices even though others remain deaf, assuming your reference to voices are mere literary, and abstract statements.

“A little more” ... “looks right” ... Never saying how much – life, living - loving a little too much, telling you to back away – a pinch, only a pinch. “Not that much.”

