The Culinary Pharmacy
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Book Excerpt 800 Words:

My father laced on his ancient hiking boots and headed to the south-facing hillsides in our local forests to forage for chanterelle mushrooms. After a bountiful harvest one summer, he and I cooked an immune-boosting lunch of risotto, an Italian staple that defines itself by its regional variations. In the south of Italy, risotto may be prepared with fresh tomatoes and seafood. A traditional northern recipe is made with minced onions, carrots, and celery sautéed in butter—a combination known as *soffritto*—with white wine and mixed with chanterelles. As we sat before the steaming bowls, we paused, and my father shared the prayer that his mother taught her children and grandchildren. Engaging with ancestral rituals and foods to reconnect to the place that defines our identity can feel grounding, calming, and nurturing, just a like a warm bowl of risotto.

Chanterelle Risotto

6 cups chicken stock

3 tablespoons butter

1 yellow onion, minced (about 1 cup)

1/2 teaspoon salt

2 stalks celery, minced

2 medium carrots, minced

½ pound fresh chanterelle mushrooms, diced

2 cups risotto rice (Arborio or Carnaroli)

½ cup white wine

¼ cup grated Parmigiano Reggiano (optional)

Another way to measure the rice is to put a handful per person into the skillet. Brush any dirt off the chanterelles before chopping them; do not wash them to maintain their flavor.

Bring the chicken stock to a gentle simmer in a pot.

Heat the butter in a deep skillet and add the onion. Cook over medium heat until it starts to brown, about 5 minutes. Add the salt as it cooks.

Add the celery and carrots and cook for a few more minutes.

Add the diced chanterelles and turn the heat to medium-high. Cook for 5 more minutes.

Smell the earthy fragrance that rises from the cooking mushrooms. Offer a moment of praise for the endless network of mycelium that spans the forest, informing trees and ferns about woodland activity from miles away.

Stir in the rice and cook until it becomes translucent, about another 2 minutes. Add an extra handful for rice for an unexpected guest.

Pour in the white wine. Reduce the heat to medium-low.

At this point, stop stirring. I know that many people talk about stirring risotto constantly. I grew up never stirring it. I love the risotto my family prepares. Try it. It will work out.

Once the wine has been absorbed, start adding the hot stock, a ladle or two at a time. When you see bubble rising to the surface of the rice, add another ladle or two of stock—just enough so that the stock barely covers the rice. Keep adding stock until the rice is cooked. My father swears it takes exactly 18 minutes.

Add the Parmigiano (if using), stir well, and serve a ladle or two to each person at the table. Eat steaming hot.

Every traditional culture weaves food as medicine into daily life. Over time, with modernization, migration, and globalization, these daily food practices have changed or been forgotten. After my family moved from Italy to Kansas City, we found ourselves praying over hot dogs with supermarket pickled relish served on white buns. “God bless this food which now we take, and do us good for Jesus’s sake. Amen.” I remember glancing sidelong at my mom as my grandfather recited these words every evening at dinner. How could we be praying over this mass-market, industrially produced food that had no roots—no local provenance, no seasonality, no farmer or forager or maker to thank? I started trying to bring the same degree of quality and mindfulness I’d been accustomed to in Italy to the foods my American grandparents enjoyed. I started taking some of foods that they ate to places like Loose Park, the local nature spot. It helped me restore my connection to myself as a member of the natural world and gave me solace in a world of denatured foods.

Late-Night Grilled Cheese

2 tablespoons (or more) pastured butter

2 slices good bread, preferably sourdough rye

3 slices Fontina cheese, or whatever variety is your favorite

Spread butter on each slice of bread.

Heat a skillet on the stove, preferably one that is cast iron or stainless steel. Turn the heat down to medium-low and place one slice of bread on it, butter side down. Hear it sizzle.

Place the cheese on top of the sizzling bread.

Then place the second slice of bread on top of the cheese, butter side up.

Cook over low heat for a couple of minutes.

Flip the sandwich with a wide spatula. Press it down gently.

Listen to the butter melting. Breathe in the aroma of spring cow pastures, if you remember them.

Rip off a sheet of aluminum foil and lay it flat on the counter.

Check the bottom of the sandwich. When it is crisped to your liking, place it on the foil.

Wrap it up and take it to Loose Park after midnight. Tomorrow, Mom will chide you for leaving the dirty skillet on the stove.

Book Excerpt 1,000 Words:

The sense of timelessness is what first drew me to cooking. I remember standing on a chair at my grandmother's stove, tending a pot of freshly picked apricots. I could have been stirring for minutes or hours. It didn't matter. I watched, enraptured, as the sweet-tart fruit bubbled into jam. This summer ritual of making preserves has followed me in my travels. After I moved to my mom's hometown, Kansas City, as a pre-teen, I continued to find ways to cook traditional foods. I would invite new friends over for homemade pasta or crostata, an Italian fruit pie, which I always nostalgically filled with apricot jam.

Both during and after college, I had the great fortune of living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a place where food—especially corn and indigenous red and green chile—is considered sacred. My partner and I lived in an old, two-story adobe house with a fireplace and views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. An apricot tree reigned in our small courtyard. Its branches drooped heavy with fruit each July. I made so many jars of the delectable amber spread one summer that we gifted some to each of our neighbors.

It may have taken me three days to complete the canning project, but I did not care. I was transported by the love of working in partnership with nature in order to create an offering for others to enjoy. Not only does food bridge personal experiences, it also connects people. We share food to remember what's most vital, which is our connection to the earth. We come from and return to the same earth in which our food grows.

As author Barbara Kingsolver so aptly put it, "living takes life." We are a small part of the eternal cycle of death, rebirth, and everything in between. A song of the Yoruba tribe, "Hunger," hails, "There is no god like one's stomach. / We must sacrifice to it every day." The word *hunger* is so ancient that it appears to have co-arisen in Anatolia, the Black Sea steppes, and the Indian subcontinent centuries ago—and the original form of this word sounds much like the modern English version. Hunger drives development. First, a child cries as it takes a breath, its first source of nourishment. Then, it cries for food. Once human beings learn how to feed themselves, they learn how to interact with their environment, which changes according to season and location.

I remember the first time I watched, mystified, as my uncle fried zucchini slices on a scorching dolomitic limestone boulder under which he had built a fire. We were spending one of our many summers in the high mountains where Italy meets Austria, wandering the woods in search of mushrooms and returning to a farmhouse with red-checkered curtains, a wood cookstove, candles for nighttime light, and a hand pump for well water.

My uncle, preparing the zucchini, was unhurried, tending the fire, slicing the zucchini, and talking as he worked. The important part of the process was not how long it took but the alchemy of fire and the flavor imparted by the calcium-rich stone. After many rounds of vegetables had cooked and we had slowly feasted on them, my uncle or father

would pull a pot out of the fire, and we would enjoy a mushroom and tomato stew called goulash. These vegetable-intensive feasts would be peppered with slices of hardtack rye bread, chunks of Fontina cheese, and thin rounds of summer sausage that we had hiked up in backpacks from our hometown of Bressanone.

This Austrian-Italian town where my relatives still live is just as settled in its Tyrolean ways as the majestic mountains that stood here since before human settlement. Many of the elders in this area do not quite grasp the concept of email. They prefer landlines to cell phones. During a visit with our Italian family, my father and I took a morning drive to Maso Pineto, an old farmhouse-turned-rest-stop for hikers. We passed many local dairy farmers waiting by the narrow, twisting roads for the daily milk pickup.

Instead of building technological infrastructure like cell phone towers, this region has advanced through agricultural product subsidies, which include twenty-gallon stainless-steel containers with wheels for temporary milk storage and large milk trucks to visit each village and collect the precious liquid. I was struck by the intersection of traditional methods and modern conveniences—by the wrinkled old men and women with their blue aprons, felted hats, and wool coats, patiently standing next to brand-new stainless-steel milk transport containers. Instead of looking to the outside world to define its standards, this region stands firm in valuing the land itself as its most precious asset.

Though this mind-set framed the traditions in which I was raised, I lost touch with this simple way of life. Assimilation is a powerful force. I came to Kansas City for eighth grade because my mother, a native, needed to care for her aging parents. I saw that people here drove instead of walking, did not grow vegetables, and ate primarily brown food. I could

see that I would need to participate in this new way of life or else risk being shut out, isolated, and judged by the kids around me. So, I did.

Food became a thread that linked me both to Italy, where I'd spent my childhood, and to the States, where I now lived as a teenager. I could make espresso and froth the milk for a cappuccino by shaking it up in an empty bottle. I knew how to bake elegant tortes and roll out homemade puff pastry. I was a novelty. I cooked to hide my pain. I ate to hide my longing for home. I prepared traditional Italian dishes to impress others while filling my own body with Pop-Tarts, Twix, and Mountain Dew. I ate many dishes for the first time: grilled cheese with ketchup, hamburgers, French fries, toaster waffles, and pancakes drenched in imitation maple syrup. I watched Saturday-morning cartoons while mindlessly devouring ready-bake cinnamon rolls from a can. Eating suddenly felt like an urgent, unpleasant act, with no time for timelessness. In Italy, food had been nourishment and medicine. In Kansas City, it became poison. I abandoned the practice of cooking and eating local, seasonal food for the sake of emotional survival at that time. However, it set up my digestive system for disaster when I spent time on the Indonesian island of Bali as a college student a few years later.

Book Excerpt 1,200 Words:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.

Control over land and seeds is an essential part of food sovereignty. The transnational agrarian movement of small-scale, indigenous farmers known as La Vìa Campesina first spoke of food sovereignty at their second international conference in 1996 in Tlaxcala, Mexico. Peasant farmers gathered there proposed food sovereignty—returning control of land, seeds, water, and natural resources to the indigenous people who grow food—as an alternative to national programs for “food security.”

Food sovereignty has been an implicit understanding for people across the globe who live in indigenous foodsheds that have survived for centuries. In the northern Italian region where my family lives, for example, both Austrian and Italian traditions exist, coming together to form a uniquely regional foodshed. .

Before World War I, this area was part of the Hapsburg Empire, and though it became part of Italy more than a hundred years ago, it remains ethnically majority Austrian even today. Here, the alpine geography offers only small valleys for habitation, so towns are small and center around churches and farms. Farms feature expansive hay barns with attached stone houses, which hold massive masonry stoves.

Most local people have a working relationship with a few of the farmers in their area. A favorite autumnal pilgrimage involves visiting these farmers for a community meal, with

everyone seated at long wooden tables adorned with red-and-white checkered tablecloths. This is such a popular tradition that the name for it, *torgelen,* has become a verb, meaning "to cook and eat together with neighboring farmers." All the shared food is as local as possible. The farmers provide most of it, but the guests bring some too. For a recent farm visit, since the farmer had not collected any berries that season, my aunt Rita made a buttermilk blueberry cake for all to share. Others brought wine from another farmer or a new sausage they had tried while visiting relatives in the Apennine Mountains.

But this is not the end of the community's contribution. When neighbors arrive at the farm in the afternoon, it is time to start cooking. They may be set to work over an open fire, stirring cornmeal, salt, and water in a copper pot with a wooden stick until it thickens into polenta. A farmer might ask for help with slicing thick blocks of speck, a salted and smoked sausage, and displaying them for all to enjoy as appetizers. Some might like to try their hand at rolling out disks of buckwheat flour dough, filling it with steamed spinach and sauerkraut, and folding it into a half-moon shape to make *tirtlen,* large dumplings that are fried and served with plenty of freshly churned butter and Fontina cheese.

Children will run outside, chasing chickens or collecting fallen walnuts to feed to the pigs. Someone in the household might hand out blue aprons embroidered with edelweiss flowers or checkered aprons embroidered with hearts. Guests and farmers alike may tie one on and get to work, tasting wine, roasted chestnuts, speck, and the trademark *schuettelbrot,* a hard rye bread with fennel, fenugreek, and caraway, as the afternoon moves on.

Schuettelbrot

1 teaspoon dry yeast

2 cups water

3 cups rye flour

1 cup whole-wheat bread flour, plus a bit for sprinkling hands and work surfaces

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon caraway seeds

¼ teaspoon fennel seeds

¼ teaspoon fenugreek seeds

Mix the yeast into ½ cup of the water, stirring to dissolve it. Add 1 cup of the rye flour. Mix until a thick batter forms. Find out where your rye berries came from and who ground them into the flour that will make your bread.

Cover the batter to keep it from drying out and leave it for 30 minutes at room temperature.

Step outside and breathe today's air. There is a lightness to waiting. Perhaps through the clouds you will glimpse the ancestor whose bread baking lives in your deep memories.

Mix the batter with the remaining 1½ cups of water, the remaining 2 cups rye flour, and the whole-wheat flour, salt, and seeds. Cover the dough and allow it to rise until doubled, at least 2 hours, during which my grandmother would boil the soup beans for dinner, walk through the woods for mushrooms, or close her eyes in the pink velvet chair in a dark corner of the living room.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. If you have a bread stone, use it. You can place it on a baking rack in the oven to preheat. If not, bake on a baking sheet.

Divide the dough into two portions. Place them on a well-floured work bench. Flour your hands before handling the dough so that it doesn't stick to you. Coat the dough pieces with flour and let them rest while the oven is heating.

Sprinkle a wooden cutting board (or a baking sheet, if you don't have a board) with flour. Transfer the dough pieces to the board. Shake the board in a circular fashion to make the dough relax and go flat. Imagine a Roma woman, bells jangling from her belt as she dances with the runny dough.

Let the dough pieces rest for 10 minutes.

The loaves will look like circles of dough dotted with healing seeds. Bake them for 15 to 20 minutes, depending on their size.

Once they're done baking, let the loaves cool. Store in a dry place. We wrap ours in brown paper and keep them in the pantry for up to 2 weeks.

By the time the feast is ready, the farmhouse is warm with conversation and the smells of delicious food. From goulash souppe to a winter salad of pickled beets and braised green cabbage to pears poached in red wine, the colors on the table are phenomenal. There is always plenty of bread and wine to go around: baskets and carafes find their way to the table at frequent intervals, heartily refilled by anyone who notices a shortage. By the end of the meal, it is dark. Children are asked to wash a dish or two before all depart, full and satisfied.

Goulash Souppe

¼ cup olive oil

1 pound grass-fed beef, stew meat, or kebab meat

2 yellow onions, diced

½ cup red wine

1 head garlic, cloves separated, peeled, and chopped

4 stalks celery, chopped

4 carrots, diced

½ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 tablespoon Hungarian paprika

1 teaspoon dried thyme

½ teaspoon caraway seeds

½ teaspoon cumin seeds

½ teaspoon fenugreek seeds

1 bay leaf

¼ cup tomato paste

4 cups beef broth

Minced fresh parsley, for garnish

Heat the oil in a stock pot over medium heat. Add the beef and onions and sauté until the beef is cooked through, about 5 minutes.

Add the red wine and reduce the heat to low. Add the garlic, celery, and carrots. Add the salt and pepper and stir well. Cook for 15 minutes more. Stretch, read, talk with a loved one, or feed the chickens while you wait. Add a bit of broth if vegetables are sticking to the bottom of the pot.

Add the paprika, thyme, seeds, bay leaf, and tomato paste and stir to incorporate.

Add the broth. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for at least 1 hour and up to 3 hours, depending on the thickness you desire and the chores that might need your attention.

Serve the goulash in bowls while it's still steaming. Sprinkle each bowl with minced parsley. Enjoy with schuettelbrot and good company.