

Cookbook

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In my husband's ancestral village, a depressed and depressing failed factory town in the heartland, a woman's worth is traditionally measured by her performance in the kitchen. Competition is fierce, and culinary secrets are zealously guarded. Special recipes are never shared, even among close friends and relatives. This "don't ask, don't tell" ethic is hard-wired into the culture, and heaven help the outlander who, innocent of tribal custom, comes right out and asks for a recipe. As a very young bride, I asked my new husband's mother, Nettie, how to make the special crepes he raved about. The handwritten "receipt" she mailed back called for two tablespoons of salt.

Dutiful eldest daughters might be the lucky beneficiaries of whispered deathbed recipe revelations. Daughters-in-law, never. And so, because her daughter Judy preceded her in death, the real recipe for Nettie's crepes died along with Nettie. Judy, having left no children, was assumed also to have left no recipes, but that assumption turned out to be wrong.

Judy was the kind of cook whose style is sensitive to milieu. During her first marriage to an alcoholic car salesman in the '60s, she staked out major turf on the Creative Use of Mixes playing field. Her specialties included cake made from a can of tomato soup, and chicken napped with a bottle of Russian dressing, an envelope of dehydrated onion soup and a jar of apricot jam.

In a giant leap of faith after her divorce, she moved to San Francisco, abandoning the peculiar culinary practices of her hometown along the way. It was the '70s, everyone had a subscription to Gourmet Magazine, nobody cooked American, and recipe hoarding was considered a crime against sisterhood. Judy and I bonded in the kitchen, snickering over the bogus crepes recipe and compulsively swapping back issues of Bon Appetit. Her wedding-gift chafing dish, which on former festive occasions had held cocktail wieners in her secret-ingredient ketchup sauce, was now used for bagna cauda.

Shared assets to be divided after her second "divorce" (they hadn't actually married) included a condo on the flight path to SFO and a library of Time-Life cookbooks. Judy moved in with us and didn't cook at all. She went to the Midwest to spend a week with her mother, where she had dinner one night with Hurley, a hometown acquaintance in the throes of his third divorce. She returned to our home in San Francisco, shuddering over the culinary hardships she had endured on her visit (a salad of iceberg lettuce and canned beets at the town's finest restaurant!) but by the end of the month, after a series of long, late-night phone calls, she agreed to move back to La Salle as the fourth Mrs. Hurley.

Her new fiancé was an attorney, ostensibly a big fish in a small pond, and Judy was looking forward to retiring from her career as a private secretary. Her boss

in the financial district gave her a fortune in Cuisinart cookware, but as she dug in for domesticity it occurred to her that many of the ingredients she took for granted in San Francisco were going to be unobtainable in La Salle.

Lack of the foodstuffs to which she had become accustomed was the least of the foreseeable challenges ahead in her role as the latest Mrs. Hurley, but it was the only misgiving permissible to articulate. Thus, while one could not say, "Whatever are you thinking? You hardly know the man, he lives in a place you hate, and he's a drunk," one could, and many did, say things like, "Whatever are you thinking? You'll have to go all the way to Chicago for sun-dried tomatoes and pine nuts."

It was for these culinary deprivations that I helped her prepare. A week before her wedding at the Highlands Inn in Carmel, we went shopping and packed boxes of survival rations, like balsamic vinegar and capers and couscous. And I bought a little blank book, into which I copied the recipes for dishes Judy had enjoyed with us during her years in San Francisco: pate, and pesto, and chicken in pomegranate sauce. Foolproof Hollandaise, so she could re-create her favorite Eggs Blackstone from the brunch menu at Perry's. Tomatillo sauce for enchiladas. Apricot soufflé. Chestnut torte, and more.

On the cover, I pasted a snapshot taken during a holiday dinner at our house. Everyone is grinning like mad, and everyone, including the children, is hoisting a wine glass, toasting the surety of joy. "Libiamo, Auntie Judy," I wrote on the inside cover, "To life, to love, to the pleasures of the table." I gave her the book when she left for SFO, both of us sobbing like mad things.

Her first year back in La Salle was filled with urgent phone calls to San Francisco, bemoaning the lack of such things as cilantro and artichoke hearts. I sent survival packages of staples from Andronico's and Williams-Sonoma. As it became apparent that artichoke-heart availability was not the salient issue, she circled warily around the question of whether to move back to the West Coast. I told her she'd be welcome to stay with us while she got back on her feet, and promised to support her in any decision she made. Then new problems emerged.

Hurley lost his only client, a woman whose wealth, derived from a settlement made when her husband died in a plane crash, had been entrusted to his care. Shocked to see the huge losses her portfolio had sustained over the years, she fired him. This professional misfortune was complicated by the fact the ex-client was also Judy's aunt. There was talk of disbarment; lawsuits and countersuits were filed. Judy cut off contact with every local member of her family, save Nettie. My husband and I tried to stay out of the fray, watching in mute horror from across the country as the list of people to whom Judy was not speaking swelled to include distant cousins, most of her friends, and, ultimately, us.

The break was absolute. She resisted, strenuously, all attempts at rapprochement, even after she was diagnosed with cancer. She refused to have any contact with my husband, our children, or me ever again.

The grudge lived on even after her death. A public funeral was staged, and when Judy's aunts and uncles and cousins arrived to pay their respects, Hurley, waited until they were all assembled and then had them thrown out. But my husband and I were allowed to stay for Nettie's sake, and were then invited to a post-funeral luncheon at La Salle's finest restaurant.

The salad course was iceberg lettuce and canned beets. As the waitress set my plate before me, I remembered Judy's half-joking horror at encountering this dish on her fateful visit. The jagged grief that I had carefully sublimated into irritation about the lunatic events of the day broke through in a torrent of sudden, copious tears and a strong desire to knock some heads together. I went to the ladies loo to get a grip, and ran into one of Hurley's adult daughters from his first marriage.

This young woman was much nicer than could be anticipated from her gene pool, and seemed as appalled as I by the ugly dynamic of the mourning party. We stayed in the loo for a long time, sniffing and reminiscing about the deceased.

She told me that Judy had cut quite a glamorous figure when she returned to La Salle, sweeping in with tales of the big city and, before she stopped speaking to everybody, throwing legendary dinner parties, the likes of which had not been seen before or since.

Hurley's daughter marveled over Judy's signature dishes: the best pate on the planet. Incredible chicken with a pomegranate glaze. Mexican food in a spicy green sauce. Creamy apricot soufflé, and a fancy cake made with chestnut puree, imported from France. For brunch, a wonderful egg dish, covered in real Hollandaise sauce and served with Champagne, just like at a famous San Francisco restaurant. All lost and gone, she sighed, along with Judy, who, ever responsive to milieu, would not share her recipes.

I didn't tell Hurley's daughter about the provenance of those recipes, or that the handwritten book containing them might still exist somewhere in Judy's things. Whatever dismay I felt at the prospect of the fifth Mrs. Hurley, who was already warmed up and waiting in the wings, stumbling upon the book and appropriating the contents as her own was bundled into much larger issues of sorrow and regret.

There were more practical matters surround the death that demanded attention. Nettie had lived with Hurley and Judy for years, after closing her own home at their insistence when Hurley first filed suit against her family. With his case long since thrown out of court and Judy gone, how much longer would she be welcome in Hurley's house? Not long at all, as it turned out. Three months after the funeral, she was given one afternoon to pack up her things and get out. She lived alone, in her old house, until she followed Judy in death two years later.

Nettie left behind very little: a dozen or so boxes of family heirlooms, photographs and old greeting cards. We found several cookbooks, slender

volumes of the church-fundraiser genre, bound together with a thick rubber band. In the center of this little stack was the handwritten book I had made for Judy 20 years ago.

I am ashamed to admit my first reaction was relief. I was glad that Judy's gift had not fallen into the clutches of the hasty fifth or desperate sixth (he'd married twice since Judy's death) Mrs. Hurley.

My second reaction was puzzlement. How did Nettie wind up with the book? She hadn't cooked in years. Judy had been paralyzed and unable to speak for a month before she died, and left no instructions for the disposition of her possessions. Nettie's departure from the house she had shared with her daughter and son-in-law was quite abrupt, and Hurley had refused to let her have any of Judy's things. On her way out the door, grieving and denied any significant mementoes of her dead daughter, Nettie must have snapped up the little cookbook and taken it with her: this, at least, the new wife would not have.

Now, unexpectedly, the book has come back to me, opening a tiny window into a corner of the past. Through this window, I can glimpse two giddy women, shopping for a culinary trousseau. I can watch as one of these women opens a blank book and uncaps a pen. I can see a family, happily sitting down to a celebratory dinner, glancing over their shoulders at a fast-moving shadow. And I can see now that what they had mistaken for a passing cloud, far off on the horizon, was in fact a gathering storm of terrible power and that it was very close. It hit hard, knocking the members of the family flat to the ground. One of them did not get up.

Much has changed in 20 years. The recipes in the cookbook are artifacts of a vanished era in which it was possible to serve, in blissful ignorance, a pate containing nearly a pound of unsalted butter. The children beaming out from its cover are grown, and Judy is dead. By her own unwavering, inexplicable choice she was absent from the lives of her only nieces and nephew during their childhoods, and they do not remember her. I do. And while I will never know why things turned out they way they did, I do know this: I loved Judy.

This homely little cookbook, given with high hopes and quiet misgivings on the eve of her departure for a new life, bears witness to the unalterable truth that we were once sisters, and that is how I will always remember her: Seated at the family table, surrounded by people who love her, wine glass raised in the surety of joy. *Libiamo, Judy.*