

Journey Home

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Preface

I recently saw a t-shirt that said "California: not a native, but got here as soon as I could." When I arrived in Hollywood from Wisconsin in 1972 I was instantly, and at last, as far from home as I could possibly be. Hours after my arrival I was photographed in a rock club. Two weeks later the Los Angeles Times ran the photo with the caption "This is Los Angeles." As my brother said of my departure, "It was pretty clear you weren't cut out for country living."

After five years in Los Angeles as what I referred to as a Conceptual Correspondence and Performance Life Artist, my partner dropped acid on a mountain north of San Francisco, and "a little voice" told him to move there. We bought a house in west Marin county, and for the first time I planted my own vegetable garden. Deep in a chilly redwood grove and under the increasingly insistent pull of my past, I began to teach myself to cook.

The thing I most craved from my garden that first fall was a condiment my Grandmother Follstad had called Indian relish. When Mother sent me the recipe, I saw it had more to do with the Asian sub-continent than the Native Americans I'd always imagined. As the carefully chopped ingredients began to simmer, the scent of the odd yet somehow logical balance of 12 apples, 12 tomatoes, 9 onions and the spices bobbing in their cheesecloth bag evoked a revelation of deep warmth and comfort.

I studied Joy of Cooking. I got recipes and advice from home, and daily fed someone who could detect the slightest taint of burnt onion. Soon I was involved in food professionally, first as a pastry chef, then caterer, stylist and writer at the dawn of the so-called California food revolution.

I took Grandma Follstad's Indian relish to a San Francisco catering firm always looking for accompaniments to cold buffets. It became a society sensation. Grandma would have been proud of the way the opera crowd worked their way through her relish, then her pickles and jelly, her cookies and cakes.

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As a food professional I'm now often able to blur work and play. Most important to me are the friends I have found with whom I share the true spirit of family– all of them great storytellers, gardeners and cooks. Over the years I have come to realize that all my greatest pleasures and rewards derive from having known the peculiar mix of poverty and luxury at my grandparents farm during my childhood.

My great-grandparents sacrificed everything known and familiar for the idea of a home in America. To them this meant a place to perform basic human acts with dignity, to nurture ourselves with the food and stories that tell us who we are. In that, they succeeded. From a hard and common place they created a life full of quality, beauty and pride– the daily rewards of hard work, resourcefulness and self-sufficiency.

When I was asked as a child what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said without hesitation "I want to take care of the garden and cook." I drink tea because my Grandmother did, and with it each morning I drink in these memories and renew my identity. I am grateful I know of a life that values domestic culture as the ultimate source and true seat of civilization.

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