



Sustenance A to Z

Susan Knox

The table is a meeting place, a gathering ground, the source of sustenance and nourishment, safety and satisfaction.

—Laurie Colwin

ASPARAGUS I moved across the country because of asparagus. My husband, Weldon, and I were in our late forties and had always lived in Ohio when we decided to shake up our lives and try something new. I envisioned moving to a city larger than Columbus, but Weldon received a job offer in Eugene, Oregon, and I could see that he was interested. I didn't want to live in a small town, but I agreed to take a look. It was springtime when we visited, and the city was resplendent with blooming rhododendron, green-forested hills, and the Willamette River edging the town as it flowed to the Columbia. Eugene is a university town and home to a symphony, a ballet company, theaters, and the annual Bach Festival—types of entertainment we enjoy. But I was not completely convinced about living in Eugene until I walked into a Safeway grocery store and saw asparagus standing in a tray filled with an inch of water like soldiers at attention on the parade ground. I'd never seen asparagus displayed this way in Columbus, but my cooking magazines suggested this is the proper way to store it. Asparagus sealed the deal—we moved to Eugene.



BABETTE'S FEAST One of the lessons I took from "Babette's Feast," a short story by Isak Dinesen, is the magical effect good food can have on the consumer. The twelve dinner guests that gather around the table to eat Babette's sumptuous meal are elevated in thought and speech by the superb cuisine. Old wounds are healed, unrequited love is acknowledged, petty gossip is forgotten. Good food affects my psyche too—like a sunbreak after days of gray skies. A simple preparation of asparagus mimosa elevates my mood. A rich dish like osso buco satisfies my soul. A perfect risotto makes me incredibly happy. I don't know why. I only know it is so.



COOKING CLASSES I was part of a cooking class that *Bon Appetit* magazine featured with Betty Rosbottom, director of La Belle Pomme, a cooking school in Columbus. A friend took me to one of Betty's early classes. I always suspected she took pity on my cooking skill after I fixed lunch for her and several coworkers. I thought I was a pretty good cook, but in retrospect I realize I relied on Campbell's condensed mushroom soup, frozen vegetables, and Velveeta cheese. I became a fan of Betty's classes and I learned a lot about food and wine. I find cooking rewarding. After all, the cook gets to eat her creations.





DANDELIONS Every spring, Mom sent me out to the front yard to pick dandelion greens—dark, deeply notched leaves that seemed to appear overnight. She fashioned a warm dressing of bacon, salad oil, and vinegar and used it to wilt the washed dandelions as a supper side dish. I loved eating them, and for some reason, I was always tickled to think we were eating a weed. It seemed daring.



EMOTIONS I can get maudlin about a meal. The first time I noticed this was when I was on my maiden date for a high school formal dance with Rich. I wore a pink formal, pink shoes, and pink flowers in my hair, and we double-dated with Gary and Carole. We went to the Embers after the dance for a nice meal. I'd had no experience eating in fine restaurants, and for some reason I ordered red snapper. When it arrived, I said, "This is fish. I don't like fish." And I burst into tears and cried throughout the dinner.



FAILURE As the oldest child, I was elected to cook for the family when I was fifteen. My father was bedridden with rheumatoid arthritis, and my mother was overburdened with the farm work. I enjoyed cooking, and I used my mother's recipes, but now and then I liked to try new entrees. One night, I decided to make Swiss steak from the *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook*. Sure this would be a special meal, I decided the family would eat in the dining room instead of the kitchen. I placed my mother's white damask tablecloth on the table, got out the good china, found the silver candlestick holders and folded linen napkins. I asked everyone to be seated, and I brought in the meal: Swiss steak, mashed potatoes, and green peas. A pretty meal. But the meat was tough and inedible. My younger brothers mercilessly teased me about this dinner for years. I still remember my mother's sweet smile telling me she admired my new venture and not to worry about the failure. I never made Swiss steak again, but I still like to try new recipes. When I give a dinner party, I always include one dish I've never made before. It usually works.

GOURMET After I began taking cooking classes, I subscribed to *Gourmet*. I enjoyed the magazine's food photos and articles, and especially the recipes and menu suggestions. But in 2009, Condé Nast ceased publication of the magazine. Readers were devastated. My friend Jill said, "I'm so glad my mother didn't live to see *Gourmet* shuttered."





HUNTING Every once in a while my father unlocked the cupboard holding his shotgun, whistled for his beagle, and trudged across our farmland looking for rabbits. He usually bagged two or three, brought them home, dressed them, and presented them to my mother, who cut them up and braised the pieces in a rich brown gravy. We kids enjoyed the meat. We thought it tasted like chicken. We just had to be careful when chewing—buckshot was occasionally lodged in the flesh.



INSECURITY I'd never heard the term "food insecurity" until I began research for a revised edition of my book *Financial Basics, A Money Management Guide for Students*. When I interviewed a vice-president for minority affairs at a large public university, she told me that although the university doesn't allow food to be purchased for meetings, her division always has food available if students attended. "I do that because I know some of them will be hungry," she told me. "Some will not have had a meal that day." At another university, the vice-president for student affairs confessed that he learned about food insecurity when county social workers informed him that the university's graduate students were applying for food stamps. I was taken aback to learn that many colleges and universities now have food banks on campus for their students.



JULIA Some quotes from Julia Child: “People who love to eat are always the best people.” “I think careful cooking is love, don’t you? The loveliest thing you can cook for someone who’s close to you is about the nicest valentine you can give.” “The only time to eat diet food is while you’re waiting for the steak to cook.”



KELLER Weldon and I were meeting my son, James, and his wife, Debbie, in Napa Valley for a few days of wine tasting. I was eager to go to Thomas Keller’s French Laundry restaurant. Keller was winning various awards and *Wine Spectator* had named it the Top Restaurant for Food. This might be my only chance to have dinner there. They took reservations two months in advance. This was in 2000, before online scheduling was available, so on the exact date at the exact time, I called to make a reservation. Busy signal. I redialed. Busy. I redialed for hours before I connected. By then, the only availability was early seating at 5:30 pm for the nine-course chef’s tasting menu. I gratefully took it. I remember being led to our table. It was akin to entering a church, and after we were seated, we spoke softly to one another. The meal was superb. I especially enjoyed the macaroni and cheese—butter-poached Maine lobster with creamy lobster broth and mascarpone-enriched orzo. Sublime. As it turned out, we were fortunate to have had the early seating because as we were served dessert, the power went out and diners with the coveted later reservations were turned away.



LAST Before we left Ohio for Oregon I decided to arrange one last dinner party. The guests didn't know we were moving. We had just made the decision and couldn't tell anyone until my husband's boss and my clients were notified. I relished the idea of a secret farewell dinner. I intended to make the evening special, so I ordered six small crystal vases each filled with a different flower to march down the center of the table. I ironed table linens and polished the sterling silver flatware. I pored over my cookbooks to devise the menu. I spent time with the wine merchant debating the best wine pairings. I served a five-course meal with matching wines—everything from caviar to chocolate-covered strawberries, Prosecco to Vin Santo. Everything was delicious. One guest exclaimed as he left, "It was like 'Babette's Feast'!" Good-bye Columbus.



MOREL MUSHROOMS The first time I laid eyes on morel mushrooms was at Pike Place Market after I'd moved to Seattle. They're in season as I write this and cost \$39 per pound. I discovered a recipe in the *New York Times* food section for creamed morels on chive butter toast. Here's what Melissa Clark said about devising this dish: "As the morels cooked, the pan dried out before the mushrooms were sufficiently soft, and the shallots were on the verge of burning. I wasn't prepared for this . . . So I did what cooks all over the world often do in these situations: I tilted my wine glass over the pan, letting a drizzle of my nice crisp Sancerre lubricate the contents. Not wanting to part with too much wine, I covered the pot to encourage some steam." I usually cook with a glass of wine too.



NIGELLA I delight in TV cooking shows. There's something for everyone: *Barefoot Contessa*, *Great British Bakeoff*, *Chopped*, *Top Chef*, *Iron Chef*, *Naked Chef*, *French Chef*, *Frugal Gourmet*, *Galloping Gourmet*, and *Giada at Home*, but I'm especially drawn to *Nigella Feasts* featuring Nigella Lawson. I love her accent, her easy way with food, her table settings, and her food tastings, but my favorite part comes at the end of each episode when we see Nigella in her nightclothes steal down to a darkened kitchen and open the refrigerator to reveal leftovers—a midnight snack for Nigella.



OATMEAL There's something special about oatmeal, specifically Bob's Red Mill Organic Extra Thick Rolled Oats. I have it most mornings. This oatmeal takes twelve minutes to cook and five more minutes covered, off heat, to rest. The two-portion oatmeal lasts me four days. Oatmeal's always best newly cooked but it's handy to have some already made up and in the fridge for a quick breakfast. I reheat it in the microwave, sprinkle five or so pecans, one-half teaspoon brown sugar, and one teaspoon heavy cream on top and it's ready to eat. Luscious. I savor the silky oats in my mouth, the melding flavors of brown sugar and pecans, and the unctuous treat of cream.



PEPIN I was thrilled when the famous, handsome French chef and cooking teacher, Jacques Pepin, bummed a cigarette from me at a small cocktail party given the evening before he was to teach a cooking class. Jacques had dark hair and eyes and was short and charming. I'd never met a Frenchman before. I adored his accent. I also appreciated the no-nonsense cooking class, the way he informed the students that we didn't have to squeeze the moisture out of mushrooms before sautéing, the way we'd previously been taught. This was in the late seventies. Pepin went on to create a series of television cooking shows. His latest series was filmed in 2015. I often watch reruns on my local PBS station, and I always think of that cigarette.



QUALITY We were spoiled by the quality of produce we were able to purchase when we lived in Eugene. Located in the heart of the fertile Willamette Valley, many local farmers were committed to organic farming, and markets made a point of offering organically grown produce fresh from the farm. Fruits and vegetables were so delicious that it was natural and easy to increase our intake. After we moved to Seattle, I couldn't eat my favorite veggie, broccoli, for a year because the produce offered in the Seattle markets was by comparison tasteless. My greengrocer told me it's difficult to raise good broccoli in Washington.



REWARDS I like to cook. I like to plan the menu, go to the market, consult my wine merchant for the perfect wines, prep the food, and produce the meal. A well done dish can elevate my mood the way the publication of one of my short stories shores up my writing confidence. Cooking is a meditation, and I rarely allow anyone in the kitchen while I'm cooking. Best of all, my husband truly appreciates my efforts.

SEAFOOD In my childhood, we ate beef or pork from animals we had raised for every weekday dinner. On Sundays, we had fried chicken. For over forty years, the only seafood I ate was shrimp cocktail, breaded scallops, and Gorton's frozen fish sticks. Then we moved to the Pacific Northwest—a mecca for fresh seafood. With the fishmonger's advice, I tried cooking fresh Copper River salmon. My husband and I were amazed by the taste. We added seafood to our menu and now only occasionally eat beef and pork.



THANKSGIVING Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, and for years I entertained my family every year. I believe it's a time to celebrate abundance, so I always serve lots of appetizers followed by many different dishes for dinner. Looking back, I'm a little embarrassed by my salute to abundance. The first time my father-in-law came for Thanksgiving, I told him we would eat all day and into the evening. He was surprised, but not as surprised as I was when he shoved back his chair after finishing the main course, and said, "Time to go," and he got up and drove home.



UNCOUTH When I was fourteen, my Aunt Betty, who always seemed glamorous and sophisticated and drove a bubblegum-pink Cadillac, took my cousins and me to the Lazarus department store for lunch. I ordered shrimp. My meal arrived—golden-fried with red cocktail sauce, completely breaded so I didn't notice the shell still attached to the tail. I ate the entire shrimp. I looked up from my plate to see my aunt staring at me in horror, but she didn't say a word, and I continued eating the shrimp.





VAGABOND Every once in a while, there would be a rap on the screen door leading to our farmhouse kitchen. A weather-beaten man with darkly tanned skin, hat in hand, would ask my mother for food. She never admitted these men into the house, but she fed them on the back porch. She worked with whatever she had on hand—ham sandwich with mustard and pickles, peanut butter and grape jelly, or a fried egg sandwich with a glass of milk and a cookie. The food was always consumed, followed by a polite thank you, and they went on their way. My father called them hobos and said they placed secret markings in front of homes where they had been fed. I looked in vain for the signs.



WINE Pike and Western Wine Shop is just steps from my condo building. I've been buying wine exclusively from them since we moved to Seattle. I usually shop daily at Pike Place Market for our dinner, picking up fish, vegetables, fruit, and bread at various food stalls. My last stop is the wine shop where I recite my dinner ingredients and ask for a wine match. The staff are skilled at this, and I've learned a lot from them. I'm such a good customer that recently the owner, Michael, offered to store my wine in the back room. I often buy a case of wine when I find one I particularly enjoy. Michael was concerned that I didn't have good storage space, and with Seattle summers getting hotter, he thought my wine would be safer with him.



XANTHAN GUM Xanthan gum is used as a thickener for many processed foods such as soups, salad dressings, and syrups. It's derived from *Xanthomonas campestris*, a bacterium discovered in 1963 that inhabits cruciferous vegetables like broccoli, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts. The sugars produced by the bacteria are gathered from leaves of the plants and processed into a powder. Not very appetizing. I checked my pantry and sure enough, xanthan gum was on the list of ingredients in my bottled salad dressings.

YORKSHIRE PUDDING My mother was raised by her English grandmother and learned to cook dishes like finnan haddie, bangers and mash, cauliflower cheese, Welsh rarebit, and steamed suet pudding with brandy sauce—dishes foreign to my friends who occasionally visited for a meal. But my favorite English dish was Yorkshire pudding, an eggy, savory, puffy popover served with roast beef and gravy. When my mother made them, we kids always waited anxiously for the oven door to be opened. Would they rise? I continue Mom's tradition of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. I learned a failsafe tip for puffed popovers by following the Galloping Gourmet recommendation to let the batter rest for an hour at room temperature before baking.



ZENON'S We lived in Eugene for six years, and Zenon's was our favorite restaurant. They made creative Mediterranean dishes, had fabulous wines by the glass, and served sumptuous desserts. After twenty years in Seattle, we traveled to Eugene and looked forward to dinner at Zenon's. We drove to the corner of Pearl Alley and Broadway. Zenon's was gone! ❖