



# My Food Village

by Janice Cook Knight

We belong to many communities in our lives, social groups that influence us, help sustain us, and hopefully, expand our scope and our purpose. None have been as important to me as my food community.

I find the subject of food continuously fascinating. From the clown cake with the white marshmallow frosting that stuck to everything when I was five, to the raw food recipe for crackers composed of flax seeds and zucchini and “cooked” in a dehydrator, it’s all something that must be tried, explored, and understood.

Food has always been front and central to my life: cooking it, preparing it, growing it, and talking about it. I love to read recipes, food memoirs, and food poetry. I even dream about food. I was born at the center of some kind of food vortex, savoring food, and with extra taste buds to boot (more on that later).

Naturally, all my life I have found food people around me. First were my parents and sisters, whose obsessions with healthy food would grow to influence my line of work. At sixteen, I got a summer job at McDonald’s, a job that illustrated the dark side of food, health-wise, but introduced me to the working world and the teamwork of a kitchen. At nineteen I began working in a vegetarian restaurant. I met many people there who loved to play and create in the kitchen. Seven years and one cookbook later, these people had become my community *and* my friends. I even met my first husband there.

Curiously, or perhaps appropriately, every man I’ve ever loved has also been a passionate or at least competent cook. Other women complain that their men don’t do much of the cooking, but this has never been my problem. I didn’t consciously seek out these cooking men, or many of my cooking friends, for that matter.

They have always just been there, disguised as a high-school boyfriend or a next-door-neighbor.

Of course, there are people in my life, some friends even (though few) who find food less fascinating than I do. As a cooking teacher, some of these people have come to me as clients. They are people who would like to learn to cook but for whatever reason have not had the time or inclination to do so. I try to inspire them. I hope to invite them into, not just my own food circle, but also the food community at large. How does one go about doing that? Is food culture innate, or learned?

Several years ago I belonged to a book group. We took turns choosing books, and one time my selection was *The Art of Eating* by MFK Fisher. This was a daunting choice, given that *The Art of Eating* is actually a compilation of five books and is 750 pages long, and they had only a month to read it. To my credit I believe I only assigned sections of the book, not the entire read, but my friend’s memories may differ.

In case you’ve not read her, let me just say that MFK Fisher didn’t just write about food in these books; she wrote about life, love, travel, history, culture, and family, among other subjects. But food is the lens through which she looked at life.

When we gathered to discuss the book, it was interesting to note who were the foodies and the non-foodies. The non-foodies expressed exasperation at having to read so much about food, food, food, even though MFK Fisher is a wonderful writer. They found the assignment irritating at the most and boring at the least, while the foodies, including myself, were closer to a state of rapture discussing her writing. This was a case where my reading community and my food community overlapped, like those circles, Venn diagrams, that math teachers make you draw to illustrate which things are included, which are not. So deeply grounded am I in my love of food that I remember being surprised that some of my friends did not share this passion.

I was in my twenties when I first read MFK Fisher. It was she who helped introduce me to another aspect of the food community: people who like to write about food. My bookshelves are now full of books by these people: Laurie Colwin, Molly O’Neill, Calvin Trillin, Waverly Root, Patience Gray, Ruth Reichl, Frances Mayes, Harold McGee, Shirley O. Corriher, Jennifer Prentice, Julie Powell...

many of these writers include recipes in their books, too, though many of their books couldn’t technically be called cookbooks. Often they are food memoirs, or travel memoirs with food in them, instructive food science books, or could even be called food philosophies. I’ve also collected many cookbooks. Cookbooks aren’t just full of recipes; they contain the stories of people’s lives as well – lives as seen through the lens of food.

It’s not odd that there are so many foodies out there. We all have to eat, every one of us – so why wouldn’t we all want it to be delicious, and make the choice several times a day to eat tasty, nutritious food? What’s odd is that we aren’t all foodies. It’s a cultural thing, I guess, as so

*Seeing my friends that often made our town feel like a tiny village.*

many Americans have not been raised on real food. In France or Italy, for example, you are going to find a lot more people who “savor the flavor.”

Even though I was raised in that 1960’s-Southern-California-convenience-food culture, I could still hear the heartbeat of some larger food existence. Picture me, sixteen years old and eating pizza at an Italian restaurant in Reseda, California, with my friends. The pizza was very good, not your run of the mill Shakey’s or Domino’s or some other chain brand. It had just the right amount of cheese, a tasty, herbaceous tomato sauce, and a thin chewy crust. I detected something else too – but my friends didn’t notice it. I could taste the metal that the crust came in contact with – probably the iron floor of the pizza oven – this was in the days before wood-fired brick ovens were popular. I was aware then that I could taste things that others didn’t notice. Later, I would come to be very astute at detecting specific herbs and flavorings in foods.

Years later, I learned about the physiology of taste buds. The number of taste buds a person is born with will affect one’s ability to tolerate spicy foods, because the more taste buds a person has, the more “heat” one experiences. This would explain

why some men (who in general have less taste buds than women) could tolerate spicy foods when I would literally be in pain if I tried to eat a hot chili pepper. It meant I simply had a lot of taste buds, which also explained the way that pizza had tasted, and why certain aromas were also so powerful. Besides growing up with an awareness of food, there was something physiological going on with me, and many others, as well.

Twenty-four years ago I moved to Santa Barbara. Walking through our farmer’s market for the first time I could scarcely believe my good fortune. Here were people who cared about food the way I did. All this bounty, for me? The vendors and choices of products have probably doubled or tripled since then, so every season I feel luckier still to have all these amazing raw materials to cook with. Once again, my food circle had expanded and become more inclusive.

When my children were little, I belonged to a dinner co-op. This is how it worked: one night a week I cooked dinner for four families. On that day I pretty much cooked all day. Late in the afternoon when I was presumably finished cooking, someone from one of the three other families stopped by my house, Tupperware in hand, and I packed them dinner to go. That meant that three other days of the week, I didn’t have to cook dinner – we just went to pick up our share. This worked pretty well for nearly three years, at which point most of us mom’s had gone back to work and were too busy to take a whole day off to cook. It was the women in this group that did most of the cooking; all of us were married then but the husbands had outside jobs and rarely cooked the meal. This was actually fun most of the time, and all of us were foodies and pretty good cooks. (If you’re going to try this, I recommend that all the cooks be at about the same level, otherwise somebody’s going to be disappointed.) The dinner co-op gave me a great sense of community. Seeing my friends that often, the kids seeing the other kids, touching in several days a week, made our town, for those three years, feel like a tiny village.

My best friend, who had also been a member of the dinner co-op and had once lived next door, is a chef and caterer. Other friends are amazing cooks, or they have jobs importing food, growing food, styling food, photographing food, manufacturing food, or writing about food. They are nutritionists, or restaurant owners, or cooking teachers.

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I do have friends who are not in the food business, professionally. They might be engineers, or small business owners, or nurses. But damn if a lot of them don't love to cook too!

My food community has grown so much bigger lately. Besides our active local food scene, Slow Food, the non-profit food advocacy group of which I am a member, the Food Network, the food blogosphere, all have me reeling with the largess of people fascinated with food. Where did all these people come from? I can find recipes for just about anything on the web. It gives me the sense of that small village once again, and that I have more in common with others, not less.

I facilitate a cookbook-writing workshop. I've taught cooking for many years, but this class is a little different. It's small and intimate. Students write in class and share their stories of cooking and life as well as their recipes, some of which they've made for years and have been handed down from their families. These recipes and stories are their legacy.

I remember when I wrote my first book, and that exhilarating feeling of sharing something so intimate as one's best recipes with the public. It still excites me when someone tells me that they cooked one of my recipes. They often change an ingredient or a few to suit themselves, and feel they must confess this. But I know that the words I shared had the power to inspire them, which makes me really happy that I put them out there to be read.

A kind of magic happens for me in the class, as my students pour forth their food creativity through their words, their family stories, and their cooking. Frequently I can't wait to repeat one of the recipes we test in class, it was so delicious. Each student has her own unique perspective and style of cooking, each one contributing to the food community, ever-widening the village circle.

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