

I thought mine an ordinary childhood: paper dolls and make-believe; coq au vin or sole meunière; pollen from the terrace flowers blowing through and mingling with dust on the wine bottles that occupied every surface of the apartment. My mother was my best friend, consistently a holler away, paying bills at the dining table, making pesto or pissaladière in our Lilliputian kitchen. I grew up in what had been my father's bachelor pad, a quirky old apartment across from the United Nations that had more outdoor space than indoor. My bedroom was made by combining a dining alcove and a closet. When I was a teen, my outstretched arms reached both walls. From my room I could hear her kitchen ticks—her slow methodical chopping, the way she drummed her hands three times after rinsing a bowl or pot clean, the snap-snap as her shears pruned the sharp tips off artichoke leaves. The dining table was the center of our lives. Isn't this ordinary? It seemed so to me because it was the only life I knew.

In 1970, when he was 26 years old, my oenophile dad created an industry brouhaha by flying to London and buying the most expensive bottle of wine ever sold at auction: a double magnum of 1865 Lafite Rothschild for \$520. He brought it back to New York and invited members of the food and wine press to join him in drinking it at the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building, thus proving that exquisite wines were wallowing in the cellars of Bordeaux, waiting to be drunk, and that Americans should buy them and enjoy them stat. It was a game changer.

My mother had fallen for my father's "groovy" style, his trademark beard, his propensity for bellbottoms, and his predilection for excellent, often-undiscovered wines. On April 11, 1974, my father returned to the Four Seasons to wed his bride in front of 30 friends and family members. Just like that, the Brooklyn agnostic Jew, whose family wine business began with selling Manischewitz during Prohibition and by the 1970s was one of the most esteemed in New York City, and the New England Protestant, who grew up on L.M. Montgomery novels, TV dinners, and flashlight tag, were unified. My father had found himself the most eloquent, gracious, and gorgeous wife... but there was a glitch: She couldn't cook. Ten years later, by the time I was 5, the situation had long since been rectified. Pouring over Julia Child and the *Silver Palate* cookbooks, my mother found her way.

We weren't wealthy, but when it came to food and drink, it was only the best. Antique crystal decanters were used at Tuesday night suppers for just us three. For dinner parties, there were four or five region-specific wine glasses to accompany each course, laid out on the table with the good silver and pressed linen napkins. Guests were served smoked salmon with capers and lemon on toast points

(offered by yours truly, with a stack of starched cocktail squares in my other hand). Once seated, they enjoyed corn cakes with caviar and crème fraîche accompanied by Champagne Laurent-Perrier Brut, then duck and pork cassoulet served with Hermitage "La Chapelle" 1978 Domaine Paul Jaboulet, followed by bitter greens and Stilton, and finally pear tart with Château Climens 1976 Barsac.

From May on, we dined on the terrace—my miniature wilderness with a view of the Pepsi-Cola sign across the water in Long Island City—where we occasionally slept during August heat waves. It was during one particular al fresco meal that I learned the correct way to eat an artichoke.

Among the various guests my parents invited over were George Michael, "the long hair specialist"—who, for my mother's wedding day, had woven tiny daffodils into her tresses to match her yellow dress—and his wife, Merci. If memory serves, Merci was a Gauguin-esque dark-skinned beauty with a heavy jet-black mane, the tips of which moved softly in the perpetual breeze of the terrace, like buds on spring branches. When my mother served our second course, cool artichokes with vinaigrette to go with Dad's Sancerre Clos de la Moussière Domaine Alphonse Mellot, the convivial table began to attack their pretty thistles with gusto. As my father waved a skimmed leaf around as punctuation for the joke he was telling,

I was transfixed by what was happening to my right.

Merci was removing one leaf at a time, dipping it in her ramekin of vinaigrette and skimming the "meat" off against her bottom teeth. Then, rather than tossing the finished leaf toward a disorderly pile on her plate, she placed it in a growing row of leaves around the periphery of her dish. The skimmed leaves lay in a perfect circle like fallen dominoes, and—like any only child who takes cues from the adults around her—I began to mimic Merci, rearranging my discarded leaves and following suit with each leaf that I consumed until I had a tidy verdant ring around my plate.

The heart that hides beneath the choke, as rough as a cat's tongue, was not wrestled out with one's fingers. Merci caressed it out with the tip of a butter knife. The tender concave round was then cut into quarters and devoured in four earthy, metallic bites. I have never eaten an artichoke any other way since.

Twenty-five years later, in cooking school, I would adopt the adage: "We eat with our eyes," a constantly imparted statement from Chef Alain, our instructor. The splendor of food is not just in the pleasure it gives our taste buds—it's in the occasion we make each meal, the devotion we give each morsel, and the beauty found even in the detritus of a well-loved dish.

how to EAT AN ARTICHOKE

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