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A Deliciously Interesting Collection of Words

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Neureuther Book Collection Competition
Undergraduate

A Deliciously Interesting Collection of Words

I was never really much of a reader. To be honest, the imaginative fun that I had while playing make-believe outside with my neighbors was always more stimulating (and much less limiting) than the seemingly boring stories we were required to read in school. I was an energetic tomboy who was too busy running around pretending to be a monkey to even sit long enough to crack open a novel. However, I quickly realized that even the most energetic of monkeys eventually had to refuel, and consequently discovered the one thing I enjoyed even more than living in my imagination – eating.

Food became central in my life at a very young age. Though it may have started out of necessity (having passed out on the playground one too many times) it quickly became enjoyable when I realized its creative potential. I started helping my Italian mother cook dinner by kindergarten when I still had to stand on a kitchen chair to reach the counter and was only allowed to use very dull knives. By eighth grade she trusted me with the entire operation, knowing I would have a delicious dinner prepared and waiting any night she had to work late. Though my mother was a wonderful resource, I was curious to explore what lay outside the realm of recipes that she had committed to memory (although her Penne Bolognese has never failed to impress), and started questioning how to make foods that I had tasted outside of our blue polka-dot kitchen.

I was around five years old when my collection officially started. The first book I received was rightfully titled “My First Cookbook” by Angela Wilkes, which had simple recipes for exciting a young palate and large pictures illustrating every step. I quickly

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outgrew this, however, for by the third grade (when my favorite foods were oysters on the half-shell and filet mignon “extra extra rare please”) I had paged through “The Joy of Cooking” in its entirety and was well versed in the art of sautéing, breading, and blanching – still curious for more.

With technique somewhat more pinned down, I began looking for cookbooks of specialized interest. “Small Bites”, a book dedicated to tapas, was always good for a quick afternoon project, and “The Whimsical Bakehouse” helped me create numerous cakes for friends’ birthdays and was the reason I earned the vote of “Class Betty Crocker” by the time I graduated. I have books dedicated solely to Mac and Cheese, Tomatoes, Balsamic Vinegar, et al. so no matter what sort of craving I ever had after school, with a browse through my library and a quick trip to the supermarket, I was able to satisfy it to a tee.

As I grew up and began traveling the world, my collection grew as well. My first summer in France, which I spent taking cooking classes in local chefs’ houses in Provence, was probably the most influential trip for my collection. Rene Husson’s underground terracotta kitchen was the most memorable. He taught me first-hand how to make perfect profiteroles from a simple pat-a-choux, and an upside-down peach tart that was absolutely to die for. His book, “Recipes from Provence” is only a mere paperback published locally in Aix, but is still one of my favorites to date. A few years later, on a service trip to Nicaragua during my junior year of high school, I was unable to purchase an actual cookbook, but came back with notes on black bean tamales and fried plantains that were added to my binder of loose recipes that I’ve clipped from magazines (which, at this point, is the largest volume in the entire set).

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Cookbooks quickly became a go-to gift that my friends and family knew I would be more than enthusiastic to receive. Some were books that I had specifically requested but others have helped give my collection its x-factor – things my friends enjoy eating and wanted me to master to make for them at a later date (ex: “Amuse-Bouche” by Rick Tramonto with a note from my sister that reads “feel free to amuse my bouche any time...”). This category also includes some international favorites from cities my friends have visited while vacationing in places such as India, and Italy, and local cities like Kansas City and Charleston. These have helped expand my culinary horizon without even stepping foot out of my kitchen – just a whiff of garam masala and I’m right on a busy street corner in New Delhi, munching on samosas and sipping on sweet chai.

Of course, every good collection needs a celebrity appearance – and mine has over fifteen. Pretty much every chef that has ever been on the Food Network, including Giada DeLaurentis, Tyler Florence, Mario Batali, Rachel Ray, Martha Stewart, Emeril Lagasse, Bobby Flay, and Ina Garden have all personally signed cookbooks that now sit on my countertop. I have even shook hands with industry greats such as Thomas Keller (my hero), Ming Tsai, and a former pastry chef from the White House, Roland Mesnier, who signed and personalized his book “Dessert University” for me when I was eleven. And while I do have my own copy of Julia Child’s “Mastering the Art of French Cooking”, I am secretly waiting for my mother to pass down her 1st edition signed copy from the 60s to me...

At the end of the day, these books are the ones that finally got me interested in reading. They may not be distinguished classics in line to win Pulitzers anytime soon, but to me, they are the most interesting pages ever to be bound by a printing press. They have

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allowed me to use my imagination and have inspired me to action, therefore making them just as important (if not more so) than any work of Shakespeare or Hemmingway I have ever read. I still get the same excitement from paging through a new addition, expanding my creative horizons far beyond anywhere I had traveled during my monkey days on the playground. Though I still find novels novel, the words Bon Appétit are two that I will never get tired of reading again and again, and if all goes well, I will one day read them from the pages of my own cookbook which I hope to title “My Very Tasty Life”.

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