

Teaching Whitney to cook

by Julia Corbett

"Seriously?" I asked. "You don't know how to cook? Not at all?"

We were standing in a rustic cabin an hour from Moab, futzing with the tiny propane-powered stove. Whitney, a blonde, wide-eyed and enthusiastic 20-something vegetarian and recent environmental studies graduate, was part of our university trip to this remote field station. On a hike that morning, she and I spent the ascent kvetching about all things environmental, and then used our descent to talk about world travel plans.

I assumed that her obvious environmental savvy included cooking savvy. She eagerly pitched in with dinner preparations, but she held the knife awkwardly, and stared dumbfounded at an asparagus spear, not knowing how to proceed. The second night, as she gobbled the roasted vegetables and quinoa with gusto, she shyly inquired, "Do you think I could learn to make this?" Her mom cooked a little, she said, but she had never learned.

By the time we returned to Salt Lake, I had offered and she had accepted a cooking lesson. We set a date, and I e-mailed her recipes.

Our first lesson in Whitney's kitchen included Southwest corn chowder, a tomato-based spaghetti sauce with pasta, and green salad with homemade vinaigrette. She peeled onions, potatoes and jicama for the soup and practiced a dice, a mince and a julienne. For the spaghetti sauce, I showed her how to press a garlic clove with the flat side of a knife to slip the papery skin. She loved how the mushrooms darkened and shrank in the sauté pan and how red wine evaporated. "Man, that is so amazing," she said. We sat down to eat and clinked our wine glasses, the sink piled high in our wake, and she proclaimed each dish the best she'd ever had.

My soup recipe said "1/4 cup cilantro, chopped," and Whitney had bought a jar of dried cilantro, unaware there was fresh cilantro in the produce aisle. She said it took forever to find someone to show her the jicama. So we took a field trip to the grocery store for lots of pointing and identifying. "I had no idea this was even here!" she squealed over bins of grains, rices and spices in the bulk natural foods section.

Cooking with Whitney made me appreciate how many cooking skills -- large and small -- I take for granted. How to hold a knife. How to flick your wrist to beat butter, sugar and egg. The difference between simmer and boil, whip and fold.

Cookbooks can only furnish the language; it's like thinking you can fly-fish or rock-climb after reading a description. Cooking, like casting, is a bodily knowledge, and sensations and movements over time become memories stored in fingers, elbows and body. Whitney had none of these bodily lessons.

Cooking skills have eroded steadily since the 1960s, and those least likely to cook are small households and 20-somethings, like Whitney and her roommate. And when environmental enthusiasts like Whitney don't know how to cook, it's difficult to talk about eating locally and sustainably, about food miles and food chains, about factory and family farming.

The second cooking lesson included Pad Thai, an enchilada casserole, and key lime pie. She impressed her coworkers with leftover pie and made the Pad Thai again for her boyfriend. We took a field trip to a kitchen store for some basic utensils and two crucial pans.

The third lesson was two salads, minted Greek couscous and Asian greens, and a glazed orange bread. She intently pulsed the blade to my food processor, mincing the raisins, orange rinds and walnuts. "I might need to get one of these," she said. The couscous salad became her new "best dish ever." By the fourth lesson, even though we set off the smoke alarm making roasted vegetables over instant polenta, and roasted beet salad with goat cheese and pine nuts, her cooking confidence was surging.

Occasionally, I get a call from Whitney in the grocery store or her kitchen, with a question about how, or where, or what went wrong. After the key lime pie triumph, she asked for more pie recipes and made a blueberry pie with a custard. It refused to firm up in the oven. "It's the oven," we concluded and laughed, having learned from the orange bread that its heat wasn't accurate. Last week, she e-mailed me: "Do you have a recipe for carrot cake? It's Jeff's birthday and I want to make him one." A confident protégé had emerged.

The saying goes, if you give a man a fish, you have fed him for today. But teach a man to fish, and you have fed him for a lifetime. Well, teach a young woman -- or man -- to cook, and you've provided a lifeline to physical health and well-being, and reason to care about fresh food and the land on which it's grown.

In my work, I try to engage college students in environmental issues, and I research environmental attitude and behavior change. I write letters and speak up, take the bus, live small, turn things down and off, and I cook. But surrounded by blown oil wells, obscene consumerism and inaction on climate change, I don't often feel I'm doing much good. The most rewarding, pleasurable and modest-yet-profound environmental action I've taken in a very long time was teaching Whitney to cook.

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