

The Zen of Cooking

Sometimes the way you cook is more important than the recipe

By Laura Deutsch

While some women were beating egg whites, I was beating opponents in court. As an overworked public interest lawyer, the last thing I wanted to do when I dragged myself home, I claimed, was slice and dice and tap my toes until onions glowed translucent.

The truth was I didn't know how to cook, but after years of eating takeout, I longed for home-cooked meals. So I decided to sign up for a five-day Cooking and Meditation retreat at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, six hours south of my home in Marin County, California. I was familiar with *The Tassajara Bread Book*—considered a bread bible in some circles—which celebrates the miracle of dough rising, the sweet fragrance of loaves baking. Plus, not only would I have a measurable goal—surely, I'd learn to cook *something*—it would be relaxing. The Zen monastery sits in the secluded Santa Lucia Mountains. In the natural hot springs there, I could soak away the stress of “real life,” I thought.

On the first day of our workshop, I discovered that this wasn't the how-to-cook class I had expected. At Tassajara, cooking was simply a way into Zen—a way to practice mindfulness. I went with the flow.

We began by paying attention to the tastes and textures of food. In the kitchen, we passed around bowls of carrots, broccoli and potatoes that we'd boiled, steamed, baked and broiled, digging in with our forks to compare the flavors. I had always steamed my vegetables (quick and fat-free). Now I learned that veggies are sweeter when baked or broiled rather than steamed because sugars are released in the process.

Our workshop leader made raw kale salad, squeezing the leafy greens between his hands with a bit of salt, turning the kale juicy and tender. He added honey, the juice of a lemon, garlic and green onion. After each step, he passed the plate around, so we could taste the effect. We nodded our heads as we munched and called out our verdicts: bitter, earthy, salty. Sweet, tart, pungent.

But the workshop wasn't just about noticing what happened to the food as we prepared it. It was also about observing our own thoughts. For example, my judging mind saw the skillful way our teacher sliced and chopped, comparing his technique to that of my struggling classmates, who hacked their way through celery and onions. During the first

couple of days, I also noticed how much I thought about my work back home.

I recalled the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk: “Take peaceful happy steps... do not try to arrive anywhere... We always want to do things in order to get something. The practice of mindfulness is the opposite.” The man is obviously not a lawyer.

To get my mind off work, I volunteered in Tassajara's kitchen, tearing lettuce for salad. Lined up with the other volunteers at a butcher-block island, I sliced the cores out of red lettuce, tore bushels of leaves and tossed them into gallon buckets. To my surprise, this simple task was calming and taught a lesson that would serve me well in “real life”: Tear gently. Don't force. Allow.

The head of the kitchen told me, “The main thing is not the food, it's the practice. To be present. To give with generosity. To have compassion.”

Basic cooking lessons took on broader meaning. Remove the stones from the beans: take what comes into your life and make something good with it. Improvise on recipes: tune in to the tastes and create dishes that taste good to *you*. And so I learned secrets of cooking not found in most recipe books: slow down, trust my intuition. Pay attention, and value whatever is presented to me. Cooking was as restorative as the dish itself. I was present as I added resinous rosemary to soup and bided my time as bread baked.

When I went home, I was determined not to lose what I had learned. Memories of fresh-baked bread and steamy bowls of homemade soup stayed with me. The law firm fed my bank account, but home-cooked meals were now feeding my soul. One night, I prepared a delicious cannellini and kale soup. I sliced the leeks, garlic and carrots mindfully, squeezed the seeds from the tomatoes, carefully pulled the fresh kale from its ribs and thyme from its stalks and added the beans to a savory broth. I enjoyed the process, one ingredient at a time. No rush to get to the next item on my agenda. Again I remembered, cooking in the moment is as nourishing as the food. And I was in the moment. 🍲

LAURA DEUTSCH's book *Writing from the Senses* will be published by Shambhala in May. Her work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times and More magazine.

