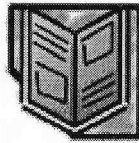


News



There's Something about Mary's Kitchen

By Dianne Jacob
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I had a college roommate who never cooked unless she invited a date over for dinner. Then, she would spend a half-day or more in the kitchen, making an outrageous combination of foods, under very stressed conditions.

On those days, the noises coming from the kitchen frightened me and Ann (not her real name), my other roommate. There were banging doors and clanging pots, the sound of water turning on and off full blast, things crashing to the floor, sometimes shouting.

We tried to stay out of Mary's (not her real name, either) path. If we had enough nerve, we would peek in to see if any surfaces were visible, including the floor. Often they weren't.

Mary believed in making each course. She was an all or nothing kind of gal. Beforehand she would rummage through my cookbooks. She was particularly fond of a Provençal spinach dish that called for a cubic yard of Parmesan cheese. It was in a vegetarian cookbook from the 1980s when there were no limitations on fat.

Mary also liked to make a giant chocolate chip cookie on a baking sheet, which she would then serve with ice cream and chocolate syrup. Her dates never went home hungry.

After hours of this preparatory violence in the kitchen, the house would suddenly become quiet. Mary would go upstairs to her bedroom and perform an act of transformation. By the time the date arrived, our roommate was calm, gracious and gorgeous as she answered the door. None of her dinner guests ever knew what had transpired. Ann and I, however, took awhile to recover.

After the evening ended, Mary did a good job of restoring the kitchen to normalcy. Occasionally, days later, Ann or I would discover that a certain item was missing. When Ann couldn't find her saucepan, she finally located it under Mary's bed. Mary had scorched the bottom and there it sat, filled with a soaking solution.

(We sometimes found pieces of our wardrobe under there too, and once I found a dress she had borrowed scrunched up into a little ball, in the back of her car.)

The first time Mary made dinner for her future husband, she asked for my cannelloni recipe. It was your basic stuffed shells with ricotta and spinach, covered with marinara sauce. Unfortunately, Mary forgot to cook the pasta shells.

Her husband retells this story with particular delight, recalling how he bit down on the large crunchy pieces hidden in the sauce. He married her anyway, as I believe he found her skills rather charming. They stayed together for 16 years, and he did most of the cooking.

Today, the three of us no longer live together, and Mary is newly single. She's on the prowl for new recipes. A few months ago she came to visit armed with a new cookbook for aphrodisiacs. She's already made braised chicken with fresh lavender for a date at her place. Let the dinner dates begin! But this time, I'll be in the safety of my own home.

Names have been changed to protect the dates.

Dianne Jacob grew up in Vancouver, Canada, the daughter of Iraqi Jews from Shanghai. She is now an Oakland, California-based editor and writer and a columnist for ucook.com.