

Pot Luck

By LARA VAPNYARMAY 25, 2008

Around 1979, when I was a child living in [Russia](#), my teacher once assigned our class an essay: if a Magi promised to grant you a single wish, what would you ask for? I knew what I wanted, and I wrote about it with passion and sincerity. I thought it was a beautiful wish until my teacher read my essay and said she was appalled — she couldn't believe anyone would waste a wish like that. She leaned close and whispered, "Wouldn't you rather wish for world peace?"

I considered her words and nodded. I did worry about the cold war and the arms race and the stockpiles of nuclear warheads everywhere. We learned about these things during weekly political-awareness sessions, and we did feel frightened. Yes, world peace would have been very nice — but what I still really wanted was a magic pot that could produce any food I fantasized about. And since in Russia at that time the variety of available food was very limited, my magic pot would have a lot of work to do.

I had always paid close attention to the descriptions of food in books. If a certain description struck my imagination, I could think about it for days, weeks, even months and years, trying to visualize and taste the food. When I was about 5, my mother read a book to me in which the villainess was crazy about cheesecake — so crazy that the hero was able to lure her into a wolf trap with a piece of the cake. Neither I nor my mother had ever seen cheesecake, so I imagined it like a pie with a golden cheesy crust and a layer of hard salty cheese in the middle. In my mind, a cheesecake tasted something like my grandmother's grilled-cheese sandwiches, only infinitely better. Falling into a wolf trap didn't seem like such a high price for trying a slice.

Asparagus was another mystery. I didn't know it as a child, but once I started reading adult novels set in 19th-century Russia or 20th-century Europe and America, asparagus seemed to be the primary food a literary character would eat. I would read the asparagus pages over and over, trying to conjure a picture of it. The descriptions were maddeningly incomplete. The author would go on and on with his boring psychological insights, mentioning asparagus only in passing.

Nobody I knew had ever seen asparagus. I couldn't even find it in the huge Household Encyclopedia that had pictures of various fruits and vegetables I had never tasted, like mango or kohlrabi. I constructed an image of asparagus from bits of novelistic description. To me, it was green, expensive and exquisite, and it had a stem and a head, with the head being the juiciest part. I pictured that asparagus was shaped like two teaspoons put together, forming a hollow locket on a long stem. It was firm, round and smooth, and filled with exactly two teaspoons of buttery juice inside.

And then there were oysters. From one book to the next, characters gorged on them. But as was the case with asparagus, the authors didn't provide much detail. I applied the same method of deductive reasoning and came up with a sea creature, something like a shrimp, only larger, that was gray and eaten alive. They could crawl around the plate, and it was probably scary to put them into your mouth. They must have tasted completely wonderful for all those characters to put up with that.

When I saw oysters for the first time in a small restaurant in New York, I was shocked. They were just little puddles of slime. But I could imagine their brisk, slightly sweet taste before even trying them. I was instructed to swallow them whole. "Swallow them whole?" I asked. "But I won't be able to taste them." "You will. You will taste them while they're slipping down your throat." I put an oyster in my mouth, but I couldn't bring myself to swallow it. I bit on it first. The taste was amazing. I tried to swallow the next one, but I was overcome by the same desire to bite on it, and so I did. I simply couldn't believe that if I swallowed it the taste would be any better. I've eaten hundreds of oysters since, but I still haven't swallowed one without biting on it first.

Cheesecake, though, was a big disappointment. It was bland, too sweet and so thoroughly unexciting. It tasted like farm cheese with sour cream and sugar — a dish that my grandmother pushed on me daily because she said it made my bones stronger.

The first time I tried asparagus I was equally disappointed. It didn't taste sublime, and it wasn't rare or exquisite. I ate it many times — raw, boiled, steamed, puréed — and once, only once, did I have a revelation. We were at the house of our friends Inna and Alex in Manhattan for a spring-themed dinner. Alex served fresh farmers' market asparagus, very simply prepared. The texture and the taste were exactly as I had imagined. It had been steamed, the stalk perfectly tender, the head soft but not mushy, with a faint buttery sweetness. It tasted like an old fantasy suddenly coming true.

Today there is hardly any opportunity for food fantasies. If I see a description of an unfamiliar dish in a novel (for example, lamb biryani in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Namesake"), I can look it up on the Internet, and within minutes I know what it looks like, what it's made from and how to cook it. And then, if I still feel like tasting it, I can order it at one of the many Indian restaurants in New York City. Every dish we can think of is within reach. It feels as if we have been granted that magic pot without ever asking for it.

So, I guess my teacher was right: I should have asked for world peace.

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