The Chicken Comes Home

George Yatchisin

Despite growing up in a suburban New Jersey house where my mother bought tomatoes bulk from the Sharkey's Farm (the only place beyond *Hee-Haw* I saw people wear overalls), so she could can them, which still seems the wrong word since the tomatoes went peeled into jars, the glass jammed with almost-medical specimens that sometimes rested in our cellar so long they seemed to be an experiment in wine aging, despite all that farm-to-sterilized-glass-to-eternity, I'm pretty sure young me thought green beans only came frozen! It's as if Birds Eye were an actual growing variety, right there with bush and pole, or the more exotically tinged Roma or *haricots verts*, the latter names that took your tongue around the world even before you ate them.

But frozen French-style green beans, those made perfect '70s sense. Particularly in one of my mom's show-stopper dishes, a stuffed chicken breast that also featured cheese—American sliced, naturally—and diced pimentos years before I'd learn they belonged in my martini's olives. My earliest drinking, as it was with any good child, was beer. My first hard stuff crush was Black & White Scotch, not only because it was my dad's drink and therefore easier to sneak some out of his liquor cabinet under the sink, but also for its label, adorned with those cute terriers. Or perhaps, even more so because that one New Year's Eve, when drinking it, I first found that balance one might call *tight* and that I still ache to achieve each time I tipple.

Meanwhile, you can see the attraction to the dish, what with its protein-hiding vegetables in its precisely-pierced-with-toothpicks pocket. Whip up some potatoes, and it's a plate, perhaps with iceberg aside splashed with some bottled dressing, or if Mom cared to show off, some Good Seasons dressing shaken from that special, pre-measured cruet they'd offer once a year. I'm sure many a visiting priest got this dish post his busy Sunday morning work when he stopped in at our very Catholic house. And given the priest was so close to God, you needed to treat him well—it was sort of a bribe on a hope of heaven. Despite one of our most favored priest's wicked ways, it's possible I learned the f-word from Father Fortuna when he acidly quipped, "You don't fuck the

flock," in a way that we couldn't tell if he just hoped to be outré or was trying to make us feel safe from any advances. At the least, I learned my mother cut men of the cloth more slack than she'd cut her own son.

In addition to guilt, I also learned the recipe from her, no doubt having a poorly photocopied version of it to work from (I imagined I'd find it still jammed inside my paperback of the *Betty Crocker Cookbook* but I was wrong). I attended a college that didn't have dorms for its students once we moved on from our first year, which at the time seemed like brute optimism and not bald finance, although the two might be the same. Living on my own I *had* to cook for myself, if for no other reason than I liked eating. After all, an 18-year-old boy, particularly me, thought nothing of downing the 900 calories wrapped in deliciousness of a pint of strawberry Haagen-Dazs in one spoon-licking sitting. I had the anxious metabolism of a greyhound knowing he had to win at the track or get it in his long neck.

So I doggedly went to work in the kitchen, as I liked pleasing myself (see eighteen-year-old boy, above). This dish was particularly fitting as it seemed so removed from anything that ever actually lived—is there a stranger bit of flesh than a boneless, skinless chicken breast? It's all about convenience, for someone has subtracted the animal for you. What you gain in distance from Perdue's killing fields you lose in flavor, of course, but that wasn't really this recipe's goal. It was all about comfort, home, a Pyrex baking dish full of bubbly breasts that didn't look like breasts at all. I haven't had the meal in decades but can still sense in the roof of my mouth how over-cooked the breasts tended to end up, somehow dry even with the pool of melted cheese oozed out, the defrost runoff from the beans, all that liquid as their "sauce." Of course, some of their edges would crust brown, a particular sort of enjoyment that teaches you the joy of gnawing. I mean, I made this dish because I didn't know better not to like it.

Taste is always 20/20 hindsight, to mix a metaphor. We convince our taste buds as kids we were kidding. So perhaps we gain sophistication and lose ourselves.

Of course, that the dish is not hard to make is why it's easy (and that's not quite a tautology). In some ways getting all the pre-sliced cheese out of its packaging is one of the toughest steps, what with Kraft slices both in plastic and lined with a bit of waxy paper too, a pre-made precious cargo.

If you wanted to show off—and I'm pretty sure I even made this dish for a dinner when a writing TA came over one evening, if that wasn't one of my mom's other famous dishes, like the pork chops in the Lipton mushroom soup mix—you'd work on the breasts a bit, as they always came with a bit of that gelatinous pallid yellow fat that needed trimming. But this was even in the days before you seasoned every step, so you just laid out the breasts, lined that with the cheese, spread some of the semi-thawed French green beans, sprinkled that with a bit from the jar of pimentos. Rolled. Had a reason to have a box of toothpicks. Pierced, and the chicken tended to fight back, so you'd have a tiny pile of failed picks as kindling for a humblest fire until you accomplished your goal. The oven did the rest.

It always came out as you cooked the crap out of it; the thing I've come to learn to call, thanks to recent TV chef shows, *hammering* is fail-proof, if done is your goal. But now having had pimentos in paella and loving them reclaimed by their Spanishness, living in a town with farmers' markets where beans are delicious and snap-able and green, observing chickens with not just personality but also names roaming my own backyard (that crazy Julia charges the dogs!), providing us eggs with yolks more orange than slices of processed American cheese, I can't help but still wonder what I've lost refining my taste, losing a recipe, knowing so much more despite my mom gone over a decade.



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As a journalist he has worked for outlets like *KCET Food Blog*, *Sunset*, *Santa Barbara Independent*, and *Edible Santa Barbara*. His work also appears in the anthology *I'll Tell You Mine: Thirty Years of Nonfiction from the Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program* (University of Chicago Press 2015).