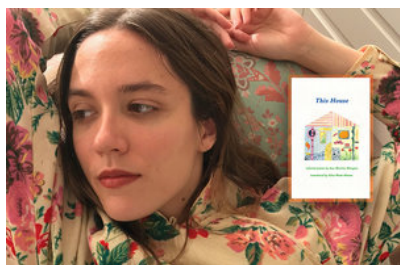


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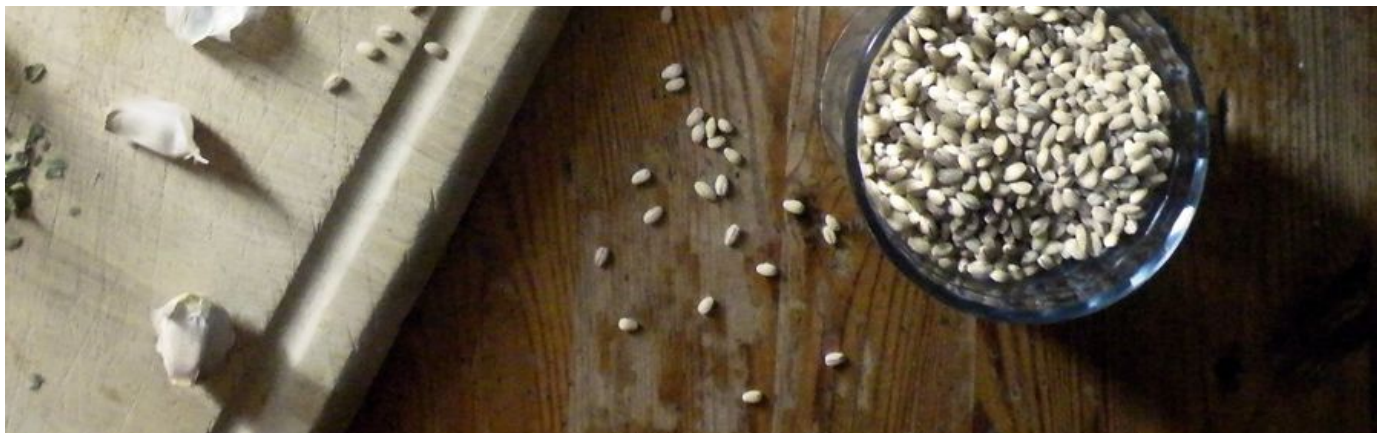


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Learning to Cook After Relearning to Eat



(/web/20190413085205/https://catapult.co/ariannarebolini)

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Feb 06, 2017

I've gotten better at eating since rehab, but I've yet to explore the pleasure of food; of preparing it and enjoying it.

Nancy refused to eat her chicken.

It wasn't like the rest of us were particularly excited about eating ours, either. Yes, we had a certain level of control over our one shared daily meal—each day we were given a menu sheet to select the following day's snacks and dinner, crossing out boxes for servings (or “exchanges”) of protein, dairy, fats, carbs—but it wasn't as if we could enjoy that power. For most of us, that one meal was more than we'd eat in a day, and for others, the idea of eating it without throwing it back up was unconscionable.

But still, we did it, because what else were we going to do? Drop out of rehab? Go back to college or our families, to our bad habits and addictions, to the hospitals that sent us to this outpatient facility? We knew we'd end up right back here—in this depressing network of beige-carpeted, undecorated, harshly lit offices—unless we ate our chicken.

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We were not allowed to leave the room until everyone was finished. We were not allowed to drink water with dinner. Our napkins and trays and pockets were checked; we had to eat every bite. And it was the staff's job to enforce these rules, and, that night specifically, to notice Nancy was eating more slowly than the rest of us. Nancy, in her mid-forties, was in her third trial of rehab; her face was drawn from both exhaustion and malnutrition. Her expression was of concern and disgust, brows bunched, mouth frowning.

"Nancy, are you feeling okay?" Darla, my favorite counselor, asked.

Nancy gripped her fork at the tip with just two fingers, as if keeping maximum distance between the food and her body, and she picked at the chicken on her plate. It was a roasted breast, the same protein that I had picked over meatloaf or dry salmon, and I saw it on the trays of three other women. I looked down at my own serving, half gone.

"I can't eat it," Nancy said.

"Nancy," Darla began.

"I ate the meat," Nancy said. "But I can't eat the skin."

"No specifics, Nancy," Darla said—a phrase spoken like a mantra every day, whenever anyone slipped up by lamenting the donut they'd grabbed or the full fat yogurt they'd accidentally ordered. But Nancy was crying, and soon others were, too.

"It's full of fat," she said, through tears. "Just let me leave the skin."

Darla signaled to a nurse to lead Nancy to a private room, and stayed to talk down the women now panicking about the specifics of what they'd just eaten (How much fat, exactly? How many miles of running would undo it? How much time before it could no longer be purged?) and about what still had to be finished.

Dinner bled into post-dinner meditation as we finished slowly, quietly, stomachs tensed. Darla repeated in soothing tones the messages we'd been learning for the past month: Food isn't good or bad; fat is necessary; one meal won't change your body. But I'd heard Nancy echo the fears I felt, had seen the panic in a woman twenty years my senior and felt vindicated in my own neuroses. I would complete my rehab treatment in two months (when my insurance would stop paying for it), but I would continue restricting and

purging for the next seven years. I would steer clear of chicken skin.

*

I am a terrible cook. I'm lucky that I live in a city where I can order almost any dish I can think of and have it directly delivered to my door, and luckier still to live with my boyfriend, Brendan, who worked for over a decade as a chef. Still, my lack of culinary skills is a source of shame, shame which I mask via endless self-deprecation. I tried to make toast in my office kitchen and the whole place filled with smoke! I tried to pan-sear pork and I *literally set my own kitchen on fire*. Tell me to buy a zucchini and I'll come home with a cucumber; give me leftovers to reheat and somehow it will be both too hot in one place and semi-frozen in another.

There are many factors on which I could blame my bad cooking. I'm stubborn. I'm impatient. I prefer clear instructions over improvisation. But I'm realizing now that I mostly never learned how to cook because I spent my late teens and the entirety of my twenties relearning how to eat. This required a relinquishing of control—no calorie counting, no exchange tracking—and the easiest way for me to do so was to limit the amount of decisions I had to make when it came time to eat. Prepackaged microwaveable dinners were easy, and easy meant possible. Preparing my own meals meant too many options, too many items to obsess over—Which dressing was healthiest? How big, exactly, is one serving of tuna?—and it meant grappling with the list of foods I'd designated as bad over the course of fifteen years of disordered eating. So I chose not to do it.

I've gotten much better at eating (which is to say: I do it, and I don't punish myself for doing it, which is more than I could have ever wished for even three years ago), but I've yet to explore the pleasure of food; of preparing it and enjoying it every step of the way. Food was an enemy, then a necessity, but now I want it to be more. I'm thirty, living for the first time in an apartment with a kitchen my boyfriend and I can keep fairly well-stocked, and I'm thinking about food as a function of domesticity, an extension of home. As I see my boyfriend moving around the kitchen almost unthinkingly and I'm envious—I want that ease, that capability. But to be comfortable with cooking I need to be comfortable with food.

So, I decided, I will teach myself how to cook and I will start with those bad foods, that I

might tame them into something good. I will learn how to cook and eat some chicken.

*

I'm not sure what type of chicken I want; I just know the skin has to be part of it, so I Google "skin-on chicken recipe." I skip the first result and go for a name I recognize, clicking a Bon Appétit slideshow which promises to "convince me to get some crispy skin in the game." I choose a recipe for roasted chicken thighs with lemon and oregano (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190413085205/http://www.bonappetit.com/recipe/roasted-chicken-thighs-with-lemon-and-oregano>), which seems both easy and familiar, similar to the Italian staple my mom used to make.

All day I'm excited. I'm excited at the grocery store, which I usually treat the same way I did as a child—grabbing the things I'm asked to grab, tossing in ready-made treats by whim. I accidentally leave my phone at home but luckily have the ingredients written on a paper list. This is good because I'm left to fend for myself when I'm confused about whether or not it matters if bone is in the thighs, and bad because I can't do my own research to find out what a shallot looks like. What I can't find I don't get, and I leave with two packages of bone-in, skin-on thighs, low-sodium chicken stock, lemon, garlic, and oregano.

I'm excited at work, waffling on which podcast I'll listen to while cooking imagining the near-meditative flow I'll tap into once I begin. I text Brendan to remind him he doesn't have to worry about dinner. I feel a sense of satisfaction, as if announcing the feat is as good as doing it.

I'm excited when I get home, clear the counter space, and line my ingredients in a row against the wall. The recipe says the whole thing, prep and all, will take thirty minutes, and so I calculate how long I need to wait to begin in order to time the plating perfectly with Brendan's arrival (about twenty minutes) and then spend that time reading and forgetting and rereading the recipe. I remember what it is about cooking that frustrates me—the insistence by everyone I know of the importance of reading a recipe in full before beginning, and my inability to retain information beyond the first step.

But I begin. I preheat the oven, mince the garlic, salt and pepper the thighs. I oil the skillet with a conservative pour, my knee-jerk reaction to any fats still an involuntary tallying up of their Weight Watchers points. I place the thighs into the oil, skin down, the

crackling getting louder and louder. I resist the urge to scoop out the rendered fat gathering at the bottom of the pan, calling forth the words of three nutritionists who've promised me individually, at various points over the past three years, that fat is nothing to fear. Fat is good. Fat is my friend. No one has ever needed to remind me that fat is delicious.

Fear of fat transforms into fear of fucking up—why is the skin sticking to the bottom of the pan? How do you know if chicken is raw in the middle without slicing right through it? Am I *really* not supposed to flip these thighs over? After ten minutes of pan frying, the chicken is supposed to be cooked halfway through and transferred to the oven, but I can't tell what "cooked halfway through" looks like and just assume everything's on the up and up.

Brendan gets home just after I've pulled the skillet out of the oven, as I'm prodding the juicy meat with a knife. "Can I come in?"

Brendan knows my least favorite thing about cooking is how much better than me he is at it.

"No," I say, "but if a person wanted to know if chicken was finished cooking, how could she tell?"

"Is it firm?" he asks.

It isn't, so I put the skillet back in the oven.

"Five more minutes?"

"Let me look at it."

"No!" I set the timer for ten more minutes.

Ten minutes later, the chicken still isn't firm, just as it isn't five minutes after that, and ten minutes after that. After a half hour, Brendan has made himself a snack ("Just an appetizer!") and I've dipped into the cooking wine. I'm angry and embarrassed and discouraged, moving inward into dark thoughts about how incapable I am of nurturing myself and my loved ones, how I'm still making up for the time lost to this disorder and its treatment, how it's my own fault I can't even get one goddamn chicken ^o recipe right.

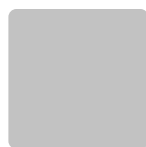
Brendan comes into the kitchen, where I'm standing over the skillet, defeated, poking the remains of the thin lemons that were supposed to be my beautiful garnish. He pokes a thigh with his bare finger. "It looks like it's almost there!" he says, and because I don't care anymore, I just want to eat, I ask him what to do next. "Let's get rid some of the juice—too much and the skin won't be able to get crispy—then put it back in the oven for ten more minutes and then cook it on the stove."

I agree; maybe the dish can be salvaged. "Do you think the cook time changes if the bone is in?" I ask. "The recipe was supposed to be boneless."

"Oh!" Brendan says, his voice light and playful, the way it gets when he's telling me I don't need to worry about the thing I'm worrying about. "Yes, big time. That's absolutely the issue."

I feel better, but still hungry, and we stay in the kitchen together until we're satisfied the chicken is no longer raw, at which point I send him into the living room to cue up whichever episode we're up to on *The Walking Dead* while I mix the remaining oil with the garlic, oregano, and red pepper flakes. The oregano is easy—can't mess up sprigs—but I eyeball the red pepper, which kind of gets away from me and spills freely into the pan.

No matter. I place the thighs, perfectly browned, on a platter we never use, drizzle the sauce over them, and carry it out with two knives and two forks. It is way too spicy, but the skin bursts in my mouth like little pockets of butter. It is exactly as good as I remember. I finish every bite.



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