



The author, Chef Bert Mattson, is shown here serving a meal for Holly Frame and her family.

COMMUNICATING through, with food



By Bert Mattson | Photos by Katie Thering

Food connects us. It is essential to human beings, not only for nourishment, but also for framing our relationships. It has done so since antiquity. In this sense, food tells a story. Eating, on the surface, is very basic. But sharing a meal is complex and intimate (proof is in the range of manners and etiquette involved). It stands to reason that some find cooking as a form of communication. Some find their voice through food.

This very food story was inspired by an invitation — from my friend Holly Frame — to prepare a meal for her mother’s birthday. Actually, the original intent was a cooking lesson. That was last year. Fortunately, they invited me back! That first year, the ladies arrived, got comfortable, and ... well, got so comfortable they ultimately allowed me to cook the meal myself. All the better. I internalized something that evening working contentedly to a soundtrack of laughter drifting in from the dining room. After decades of cooking or otherwise considering food, that party refreshed my perspective on the role food plays in our relationships.

This is not exactly a new discussion. Plato, and a parade of famous minds after him, all contemplated mealtime. Brillat Savarin, trying to make a science of eating well, dubbed the subject

“gastronomy.” He literally wrote the book. It’s called, “The Physiology of Taste.” My impression is that his work went somewhat ignored. Maybe because he missed the mark. Maybe because the word “gastronomy” is so unappetizing. Despite all the attention, the subject still seems somewhat scattershot.

More recently, social scientists have taken to calling eating habits “foodways,” and shown some signs of sorting them out. “Foodways” is a fun name. It achieves a kind of cave-man quality by crunching two elementary words together: Uh. Food. Uh. Ways. Foodways! Uh-uh! Roasting social scientists aside, prehistory is a pretty

good place to start thinking about it. Richard Wrangham, in “Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human,” makes the ambitious and compelling (at least to me) argument that the invention of cooking drove the physiological evolution of human beings. The argument also insinuates that the seeds of our



social relations were cast while our ancestors huddled around the first joints of meat set over flames.

That's the dry side. Savarin, at least, left room for the idea of dining as an art form.

As we considered the menu for her mother's birthday, Holly recalled that I'd been working with Asian flavors on a side project. Specifically umami, "the fifth taste." She suggested I spin off that. Holly's mom, Colleen Tacheny, could be called a foodie. This I learned that first year when she came to the kitchen to visit and ask questions. So, unusual ingredients were far from off limits. Still, I wanted the menu to seem familiar but be whimsical. We settled on Asian flavors and an Italian aesthetic.

Here's where food gets a little artsy. Some cooks and chefs might call this kind of cuisine "fusion," in that it combines elements of different culinary traditions. I once heard Edward Lee, an award-winning chef known for drawing inspiration from an array of influences, say on TV that he wrestles with the label fusion. Rather, he said he puts different things together and lets the boundaries blur. I can't recall if he used it, but the word "sublation" comes to mind.

At that, I anticipate, unfurling across the reader's face, a sardonic smile — as a diner waiter might smirk when asked by a non-regular if the tuna is freshly caught. And the thought bubble over his or her head reads, "This guy is taking this food thing way too seriously." Maybe. Sublation is when some element is simultaneously overcome and preserved. Ideally, that's what happens when two global cuisines collide; the combination transcends what they were before. That is, unless the dish is terrible.

I'm trying to get to the idea that cooking has that in common with relationships. People, with differing backgrounds, come together to form a new reality that replaces what they were without eliminating it. Sharing meals helps it happen. Chefs talk about building "flavor memories" and "libraries of sound" to help guide them through the creative process. Well, I'd argue building

relationships is a creative process, and food offers a rich source of material to help forge common experiences. Even if the food is terrible. Sometimes, especially if the food is terrible! I recall one horrible meal, from before my marriage, which my wife and I still laugh about. That wasn't the case with Holly's meal ... at least I think not. Holly and my wife are friends, and I believe I'd have heard about it.

Big meals, the ones shared with friends and family, are opportunities for people to learn to live together, when to laugh, to talk, how to disagree, and to have an open mind. These meals are also where we learn to idle. Mortimer Adler, American author and philosopher, argued that idling is important. Most folks, however, haven't learned how and tend to fear it. So they turn on the television (or look at their phone, he might have added.) A load of research suggests advantages in frequently dining with people close to you. I thought about listing it all, but then imagined someone bringing it up at the dinner table. Just because mealtime is a swell place to practice tolerance wouldn't excuse tempting anyone.

Which brings us to social awkwardness.

In commercial kitchens, I've worked beside many a misfit who discovered food as a form of expression. These otherwise irreverent oddballs would go crazy if a customer didn't get their food just so. Today I see chefs venting on social media

about customers deconstructing their dishes with special requests. This is because they work insanely hard to create and share a specific experience. It betrays an intense desire to contribute and an intuitive understanding that feeding people is important. That intensity could be one reason they're more comfortable communicating with food. I, for one, am relieved to have some kitchen duty at hand when conversation runs dry at a party. In fact, it's not uncommon for my enthusiasm in that area to earn me strange looks. All told, I fancy that I fall closer on the spectrum to an Italian grandmother than a temperamental chef. Though I'm sure I have my moments.

Conversing through food has familiar pitfalls. The past year I've come to have a powerful crush on fish sauce. No doubt I'm a latecomer. It was sprinkled liberally about the menu. During a course that featured it heavily, I felt a twinge of guilt as though I'd brought a funky friend to a formal affair who'd been bold enough to propose a toast. Almost apologetically, I lead with, "it sounds strange but I think you'll like it..." After serving that course, I returned to the kitchen. The soundtrack from the dining room went silent for a second. But any awkwardness was mine alone. They enjoyed it. I stood there grinning dumbly. That plate was my best line in the whole story. **MM**

