

# DINNERPLATE IDENTITIES

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

This is the story of how my stubborn German stomach became an Italian Indian sunkissed resident of Scotland. An adventurer, a rather complicated, open-minded soul with more layers than filo pastry and deeper fillings than the most luxurious mince pie. I'm not quite sure how this happened. The odds must have been nil, so of course, there was simply no other way. This is the story of the most beautiful digestive manifestation. My grand theory of everything, brought to you in a carefully prepared five course meal of a thousand words, or thereabouts. Bon appetit!

First, the hors d'oeuvre. This is not just an amuse-bouche. The starter sets the tone.

My mother came from a small place in central Germany. Her family had lived there since the day before the beginning of time. Mum could slice and dice an onion with the precision of a neuro-surgeon. She always held a knife in her silky smooth hand, a silver, scalpel-thin murder weapon, which she yielded in our kitchen like an executioner. Nobody dared to come near her when she was at work. Mum prepared the traditional recipes from her own mother's dogeared, well thumbed and warped cookbook. A wartime monstrosity – the book, to be sure, not my gran - printed on paper so coarse it remained indestructible, practically still a tree, and forever growing. I remember, Mum sellotaped little notes full of new tips and tricks between the old, jaundiced pages of the bulging, bursting book, this yeasted dough of an ever expanding universe, quietly fermenting.

The original entries came in three flavours. First, the standard recipe. Second, a compromise, in case you were short of a few things. Third, a prayer, nothing but a wishlist full of 'Ersatz'.

Careful instructions on how to provide for a family, when the rations just wouldn't stretch. Cakes made without eggs. No butter, no flour. Simply scoop up some sawdust from the shed floor, stir in a spriglet of hope, add a sprinkle of goodwill, and then bake the lumpy mixture with the gentle heat of trust. An act of faith.

'This will teach you all you'll ever need to know', Mum said.

As a child, I was convinced the book covered alchemy and philosophy as well as slightly aspirational mock meat Sunday roasts. I learned a core skill from my ancestors: How to make something out of nothing. How to keep going, when you want to give up, but must carry on for the sake of others.

Time to bring in a light entrée to complement the first course.

My dad came from the small village next to mum's insignificant home town. He, the blunt son of a baker, represented the complete opposite to her sharp pointiness. Dad taught everything through the medium of bread. 'Don't be scared to get your hands dirty' he said. 'A loaf can't be made by spectators. Also, never hurry, my dear. Bread demands patience, souldough and rye'. Wheat, in his view, was for weaklings, the quick and easy way out. 'Once you do understand bread and the need to wait, then life will be easy.'

This all made sense. There was something missing, though.

Course number three. Enter the main meal. My own choices.

Sometimes we find all we need in the seeds planted long before we were born. Sometimes we have to venture, seek out more and hope for chance encounters, travels and discoveries. The serendipity of focaccia, ciabatta, naan and pitta bread. They sneaked into my life from the sidelines to prove that wheat was indeed not just for weaklings.

On my first journey to Florence on an art history field trip, I instantly recognized heaven. Not so much in the tricolore marble of the Duomo, but in the red, white and green of tomatoes, mozzarella and basil leaves. Italy felt like a home I just hadn't met before, a perfect match. India was even more accommodation and came to me, on a rainy evening in a small, family-run restaurant around the corner from where I was staying at the time. 'Mister Singh' introduced me to the pleasures of the subcontinent. I tasted the forbidden fruit of curiosity and the most marvelous fairy dust of faraway spices. My tongue loved the tickle of ginger and turmeric at the very first contact. Apparently, my heart was in desperate need of a curry, and chickpeas made my soul smile with glee and ghee.

Course number four. Bring out the cheese and nibbles.

During my student stint in France, my stomach got lined with unspeakably stinky, yet divinely delicious cheeses. Unsightly, odd-shaped creations, placed on a wheatfest of baguettes. Who knew paradise had a vein of blue mould running right through it?

When I moved to Scotland twenty years ago, I quickly learned that anything can – and will – be fried and that fluorescent orange is not just the colour of corrosive drain pipe cleaner, but also the signature tinge of a popular fizzy juice people gulp, guzzle and – would you believe it – survive.

Food works in miraculous ways. My wartime Germany-inspired, eternally hopeful Indian-Italian stomach-heart combo with a penchant for smelly French brie, fell in love with my Scottish husband, haggis, neeps and tatties, cranachan, and all things oat. As for the brightly-coloured carbonated soft drink, well, let's not go there... maybe in another life.

I've reached course number five, the inevitable dessert trolley.

Apfel Kuchen, crumbles and custard, gelato and Tiramisu, always. Turns out, my belly has become a true citizen of the world over the years, a cosmopolitan, at home in many cultures, a polyglot, a mangetout. No prejudice, no pride – simply a philosopher happy to observe and learn with greatest gusto.

My mum used to stick little notes into her mother's old cookbook. I keep adding to our family recipe collection, leave my trace for the next generation. I think I understand now, why the stomach sits so close to the heart. Food is fun. Identity, both given and chosen. A great teacher. An expression of time, past, present and future. Life and love, manifested. Let's savour it properly, for all that it's worth.

After dinner mint, anyone?

*Britta Benson is a circus skills instructing German writer, performer and linguist, thriving in Scotland, her chosen habitat since the year 2000. She writes a daily blog, Britta's Blog – Letters from Scotland, runs an online creative writing group (The Procrastinators), teaches Gaelic and drinks far too much tea.*