

Lesbian stew

Enter the concept of taking control of our lives through food. Creating our own rituals around food.

B Y L E E L Y N C H

At dinner the other night, a friend suggested that lesbians have a unique relationship with food. What I took to be the essence of her thoughts was this pithy observation: We fuss over food. It is another of the innumerable Issues that make us so loveable.

There probably is not a lesbian in the world who would not, at the slightest sign of interest, tell you about her personal

T H E



AMAZON TRAIL

history with food. For some, food has been a joy, for others, a struggle. I spent my earliest years swallowing great quantities of evil-tasting stuff called *tonic* in an effort to fatten my skinny frame. One of the most humiliating moments of my childhood was the time my father, rather than take my hand to cross the street, encircled my wrist with his big fingers and laughed at its slightness, like he'd found a pitiable lone toothpick in an otherwise empty jar. We were crossing a busy street in Boston at the time; to this day I can't think of the school, the VFW post, the apartment building on that site without a sense of shame. All those years of nauseating tonics and I still, literally, couldn't measure up.

As an adolescent, I wished food could be served powdered, in a capsule, and that the social rituals around it would be banned by the World Health Organization. Dinner Out was the only thing worse than Dinner At Home with the nuclear family. Why in the world groups of people gathered around tables and talked to each other while stuffing their mouths was beyond me. I had what the doctors called a "nervous stomach." They gave me little blue pills, bitter white pills, tiny peach-colored pills. In college, after a little blue pill and some gross imitation of nutrition, I could just barely stagger back to the dorm to pass out. I spent a good part of my first thirty-five years sick to my stomach. Literally. I thought *every* ne went through what I did and, like me, was just too polite to mention it.

Now I know I faced two problems. The first was solved fairly simply: I had food allergies. Some of the most common table foods actually make me ill. The second was much larger and more complex: A need to control my life. It was this latter problem which I suspect is at the bottom of the unique lesbian relationship with food.

Everyone, it is said, is born into this world kicking and squalling. The lesbian child, whatever other strikes she may inherit against her, enters life with two. The

female condition has been well documented. But who has talked about butch infants striding around their cribs with clenched fists? Of *femmes fatales* plying their early little charms on every aunt, girl cousin, and housewife-neighbor who peers into their playpens?

I always thought that I came out at fifteen. Last year I delved into a box of family photographs to find images of Baby Lee (clothed in a more feminine appellation) dressed in three-piece corduroy pants suits, in flannel-lined dungarees, in overalls. Images of my pre-adolescent self in flannel shirts and jeans, hair slicked back. Or just-adolescent with my sleeves rolled up to my paltry biceps, an unlit parental cigarette hanging from my sneering 11-year-old lips. "Holy shit," I thought, I was gay even back then.

"Holy shit," I say now, no wonder so many of us have food issues. If food, as we've learned from research on anorexia and bulimia, is a way of controlling, often the only way of controlling, our young lives, no wonder lesbians wield it like a weapon. Scrawny Little Lee was rejecting everything her innocently straight parents were offering her. "This is the life we want you to live," they told me in a thousand different ways, offering me marriage and my very own family; offering me boys, dresses, homemaker skills; offering me a highly socialized role that my gut knew was dead wrong for me. I rejected their social nourishment — of course I'd reject their carrots and spinach and steak. In fact, I suspect my food allergies are no more than a systematic, automatic response my body developed to those foods which most obviously represented to me family life and the golden platter of heterosexuality. I couldn't stomach it. It made me sick. I gagged on it.

Enter potlucks, vegetarianism, feminist restaurants, growing our own foods, collective cooking, music festival foodlines.

Enter health foods, allergy testing, rotation diets, organic foods, food coops, *The Political Palates*, and *Red Beans and Rice*.

Enter the concept, shared with other alternative cultures, of taking control of our lives through food. Creating our own rituals around eating. Determining for ourselves what to feed us, how to feed us, with whom we would feed.

Once, after leaving a lover and moving into my own place, Barbara Grier, then editor of *The Ladder*, urged a recipe on me to forestall malnutrition I was likely to have suffered. She told me to cook up some green peppers, onions, rice, hamburger and what all in a great big old frying pan, and then to freeze individual packets of the stuff in foil. Dutifully I took a packet of what I'd dubbed Lesbian Stew from my freezer each day before work and each night when I came home pushed it around the frying pan. I think that was the first time I'd ever fully understood that there was a connection between food and sustaining life — between putting this stew in my mouth and being able to write stories and articles for *The Ladder*, or make love to women, or dance all night.

My cooking repertoire has grown. I've even come to enjoy long solitary nights of baking cookies, the smell of garlic frying

in preparation for a rice dish, the way a well-sharpened knife can make paper-thin slices of tomatoes look pretty all soaked in rice vinegar, under a sprinkling of minutely chopped scallions. But more, I've come to almost like digging in with friends, comparing recipes or writing styles or the day's events over a casserole topped with bubbling just-toasted cheese. No longer does anyone serve me promises of motherhood,

skills for keeping a husband happy, or Emily Post's recommendations on hostessing.

My body has learned what foods poison it; my queer soul has found tablemates to nourish it; I take great care what I ingest, having been force-fed from an alien menu too long. Where once the little girl stood accused of fretfully fussing over her food, now, lesbian-like, I fuss joyfully over what I know I need, body and soul. •

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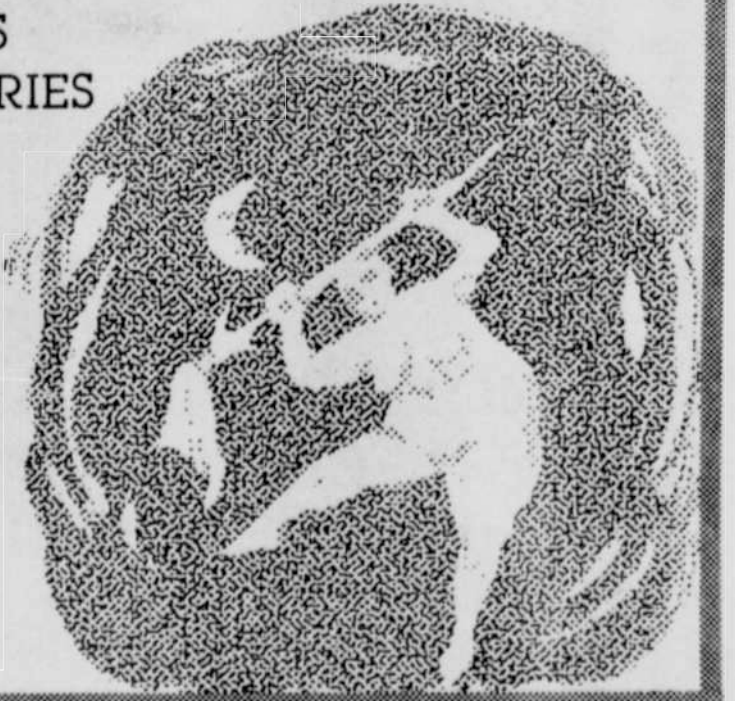
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