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FOOD BY MARINA WOLF



Brittle Lives

Seeking transformation in a pan of burnt sugar.

We cook from cans now in my house. We eat soups and chili, fruit cocktail, tuna fish. Our recycling bin is filling up with the jagged edges of our indifference. It's survivalist eating, and what is surviving is us.

My live-in lover and I have not cooked together in months. This didn't use to bother me, back when our excuse was star-crossed schedules. And anyway, we needed a break from the intense list compiling, menu making and grocery shopping that marked a more, shall we say, creative era in our eating. But lately I, who used to delight in feeding her, have not been able to cook for her without feeling that I am somehow doing penance. Guilt is a highly effective appetite suppressant, and when you're not that hungry, convenience food is the most efficient fuel.

So it surprised me the other morning to find us both in the kitchen. I felt suddenly awkward, as though we were two strangers in an elevator going all the way to the top of the building. But we both had a rare day off, and we came to an agreement: we would make candy, a homemade version of Almond Roca, to be precise, with a brittle layer of toffee slathered with milk chocolate and coated with almond bits. She had a recipe from one of her work parties and I had a confectionery book culled from the teetering piles. We had our issues, but we also had our mission, and somehow, together, we had to make this work.

Turns out that candy is a slightly scary substance to work with, deceptively simple in its composition, but requiring a great deal of attention, being essentially sugar on a controlled burn. The cookbook says you can interrupt melted sugar at any of five temperatures and get five different sorts of candy. We were going for extreme confectionery. We were playing hard-ball, literally, going for the far side of the candy thermometer where it looks as though the mercury might shoot out the end in a minute.

As soon as the sugar melted and began to thicken and bubble, I was entranced by the obvious alchemy of it (which is a good thing, because at temperatures like that, you can't look away for a second). I stirred incessantly at the pale glutinous mass that formed in our little pan. My lover roamed around our small kitchen, putting away dishes, looking over my shoulder. I kept peering into the pan, my mind whirling with

doubts. What if I burn myself? How do I know when it's enough? This feels as though it's taking forever. Is this how it's supposed to be?

I was tired of searching for answers in a sugary swirl that was as inscrutable as a broken Magic 8-ball. Will you stir? She took the wooden spoon and cautiously began stirring. I watched at first, not sure that she wouldn't spill on herself, but then I relaxed a little. I drank down a glass of orange juice (it was morning, did I mention this?), and then gently took the spoon back from her and continued to stir, scraping carefully along the bottom and the sides. The changes happened almost imperceptibly at first, with the pale sludge getting more unctuous, roiling with thick creamy strands that showed golden along the edges. The color deepened, and I stirred, hypnotized. It was starting to look promising.

Then suddenly the magic broke. The candy turned chaotic and ugly, all curds of mahogany bubbling fiercely in nothing more mystical than burning butter. The stuff had de-emulsified, broken apart. I stirred harder, but there was no going back. Silently I showed the pan to her, and shrugged my shoulders. Maybe this was a lost cause. Almost hopelessly, I dropped a bit into a glass of cold water, and fished out the result. The droplet crunched between my teeth, sweet and buttery rich with promise. Holding my breath, I carefully emptied the liquid onto the waxed paper pan, and watched the substance spread in muddy currents across the pan, leaving hissing, curled-up edges in its wake. My lover, too, eyed the pan dubiously, then we went back to our desultory conversation while we waited for the stuff to cool. The minutes passed, and the surface of the candy dulled. I tapped tentatively on the greasy surface. It had solidified according to plan. But still, it could not be good enough, I thought, poking at the edges. One shard came free, and I nervously put it in my mouth after offering my lover a piece.

We both smiled at once. Yes. The toffee melted on my tongue, its hard edges crumbling away to a luscious chewy mouthful. Still grinning, I lifted the waxed paper from the pan. The toffee came away in one stiff sheet. If we dropped it, it would break into a hundred little pieces.

EW

Marina Wolf lives in San Francisco and teaches dance classes for "people of all sizes" (www.bigmoves.org).

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