

Co-Munching

A little on the side can be nice.

Today I'm going to discuss co-munching, an important culinary technique that straddles the line between cooking and eating. Co-munching is cooking in that it is a conscious attempt to adjust the final flavor of the finished product. Co-munching is eating in that it happens in your mouth, while you are chewing, followed by swallowing.

I caught my first whiff of this exciting practice during my restless high school years, when every afternoon would find me in the household of a different buddy. Each kitchen had its own culinary attractions, and there was much to learn. I discovered chips and salsa at Chad's house. Heather's place was good for cold cereal and ice cream. Larry's fridge had Budweiser. Judah's fridge had really good digs, but between Judah and his hungry siblings, good luck finding any.

My favorite stash was Jake's, where his long-suffering Red Sox fan of a Jewish mother could often be found by the radio, listening to the game, none-too-hurting with an uncorked bottle of pretty good cheap red wine. Jake's fridge inevitably contained *hippy dippy noodles* — also known as cold peanut-sesame noodles, and often contained baked bluefish in Dijon sauce (usually near the bottom of the fridge, wrapped in foil).

I had a lot of adventures around that dining room table, culinary and otherwise. Much useful information was gleaned, like the autumn afternoon when Jake and I were eating pasta. I had chopped some raw garlic and sprinkled it on top

of mine, as I am want to do. When I got to the table, Jake had his fork in one hand and a clove of garlic in the other. He would take a bite of pasta, and then a bite of garlic, and he would chew.

Jake was co-munching, although neither he nor I knew it at the time. Jake had no cutting board or knife to clean afterward. He didn't even bother to peel the garlic. He just munched through the wrapper. Brilliant.

I should add that after years of co-munching, I have come full-circle with regard to the aforementioned scenario. Rather than co-munch pasta with garlic, I now mince and toss the garlic with olive oil into the hot pasta. Then I dress with sauce and serve. This is not an indictment against co-munching, just a personal choice. Co-munching is a tool for you to apply in accordance with your particular flavor goals. Pasta with co-munched garlic is still infinitely better than pasta with no garlic. Indeed, many things are much better when co-munched with garlic.

Today it is rare to find me at the table without a pickled pepper on the side of my plate — including that plate of pasta. I take a bite food, and then I nibble the pickled pepper. The size of my nibble depends upon how hot the pepper is, and with what dish I am co-munching. The best items for co-munching are those that add spice, acid, or some other component of your own personal flavor equation.

And there are many flavor equations to choose from. Asian cooking, for example, seeks a mix of sweet, sour, acid, and hot. Other

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