

A Language of Love

I love cooking; it has been my hobby for about twenty-five years. I often cook from scratch and, over the years, have learned to make my own bread, pickles, and mayonnaise, among many other things. I remember my son Kai's first food, steamed homegrown winter squash, and for the longest time his favorite dish was homemade macaroni and cheese. For his seventh birthday I made him a true-to-life-sized Super Nintendo cake, complete with a controller and all the buttons. For his tenth birthday, it was a three-dimensional pokéball cake that weighed at least ten pounds. Cooking is not only fun for me, it's how I show my love.

For the first nine years of my son's life, we lived in a minuscule town in the mountains of southeastern Arizona. Most of the year the air was warm and dry, except during the monsoons when torrential rain would fall down and the air smelled of petrichor. We spent our summers dressed in bathing suits and were regulars at the local public pool. I would bring all sorts of snacks with us and we often stayed until they closed for the night. I learned to close my doors and windows during the day and to open them at night to keep the house cool in the summer, and to do the opposite to warm up the house in the winter. The locals taught me to avoid cooking indoors during the day if I wanted to keep my home cool. My friend Mary could make almost anything, including bread, on her barbecue.

The first time my son ate granola, it was a so-called healthy, commercially packaged, organic product. He must have eaten half of the box in one sitting. I don't remember how many servings he ate, but I remember asking myself where all that food was going. It seemed like a great warm-weather food, as it required no cooking, but when I looked at the nutrition facts I was disappointed to see that sugar was the second ingredient. That's when I got inspired to start making my own granola. I had never been much of a baker, I was a cook. Still, I thought, "This can't be that hard; I'm sure I can figure it out." I went on the internet and looked up a few recipes. They all seemed pretty simple and straightforward. I baked my first batch of granola a few days later, at night. It was a blueberry-almond flavored variety. Fast forward a few months and I was sitting in a booth at a tiny health-themed festival in a small border town, selling my granola.

Although I hadn't originally planned on it, my granola hobby turned into a small business, thanks to my friends and my son's friends' parents. I did everything myself, sometimes baking until the wee hours. My son was dubbed CTO, or Chief Tasting Officer; any new granola flavor would have to be approved by him and his little friends, as they were my first and pickiest customers. I became a vendor in a few farmers' markets and would frequently trade my products for meat, salsa, coffee, vegetables— all sorts of things. I met many interesting people through my trade, including some of my close friends. I recall this older,

rugged-looking, mustachioed, spurs-wearing cowboy gentleman who sort of laughed when he saw my samples, saying it looked like horse food, yet who bought a couple of bags after tasting it. Then there was a woman at the county fair who bought as many bags as she could afford because it was the only healthy food her teenage daughters would willingly eat, while her daughters chatted about how good it was and how “if healthy food was always this good, they’d eat healthy all the time.” It was a lot of work but it was fun, for awhile at least.

By the time we decided to move to Oregon, I had eight flavors of granola and my products in nine retail locations, and I was getting burned out, not just metaphorically but also physically. I have faded burn marks in odd places from baking in my bathing suit during scorching Arizona summer days. Just like sometimes relationships fade and end, the love for what I was doing slowly disappeared. But even though I am no longer in the business of selling food, I still carry fond memories of those days, similar to those of a past love.

I didn’t become rich from this business, but I got to spread some love for a while, and for me that’s what cooking is about: love. I cook for my son and his friends, not only because I enjoy cooking but because it makes me feel like a good mother. Sure, I believe that nutrition is important, but love and care make nutritious food even more so. It doesn’t add the kind of nutritional value that can be measured in a laboratory or that is listed on food packaging; it’s the secret ingredient that makes a parent’s chicken soup healing. My son may or may not know it, but every time I make him crepes or waffles, or biscuits and gravy, I’m not just cooking but I’m telling him, “I love you.”