

# 1

## a brand- name childhood

I grew up in a processed-foods generation, raised on white flour and white sugar. When my friends and I talk about the food we ate growing up, we only talk about brand names. Cap'n Crunch. Diet Coke. Cheetos. We were brand loyal almost before we were born. I don't remember fresh ingredients or creative meals. I remember jingles.



When I walk into the kitchen after school, I find a plethora of choices waiting for me. On the orange countertops, a loaf of Wonder Bread, soft slices spilling out from the plastic wrapper. Should I make a grilled cheese sandwich with American cheese, cloaked in more plastic? Or a fried bologna sandwich slathered with margarine?

When I open the avocado green drawers, I find boxes of Cracker Jack, piles of Astro Pops, cans of Pringles, and enough Abba-Zaba bars to keep my teeth busy for days.

In the wood-paneled cupboards, lined up in neat rows, sit stiff cardboard boxes of Hamburger Helper, little packets of Top Ramen,

and cans of Campbell's soup. Plus, there is always the cereal: boxes of Frosted Flakes, Lucky Charms, and an almost-full box of Grape-Nuts in the back. For a snack, I could just grab a pint-size cereal, the one that comes in six-packs—a kid's idea of a party—and eat it right out of the box. Naaah.

So I move to the fridge. Oscar Mayer bacon sits in the bottom drawer. Sometimes, when I'm hungry in my head, and I want to get back at my mother, I think about nibbling on strips of raw bacon. It probably has enough nitrites to protect me from salmonella. But I don't. Instead, I eye the leftover tuna-noodle casserole in a Pyrex dish. A carton of orange juice and a tub of cottage cheese. Gross—who wants those? The only fruit in the house—some mushy Red Delicious apples, months away from the tree, the too-red color bleeding into the white flesh—sits moldering in the back. And on the door, a bottle of vile-tasting worm medicine, which my mother insists I take daily since my stomach is always grumbling. She's convinced that I have a tapeworm. I close the door.

There is always something in the freezer. When I open it with a flourish, the cold steam billows outward. My mother, perpetually panicked about our safety, turns up the knob in the refrigerator to the highest setting, ensuring that nothing spoils. Some mornings, I have to break a thin layer of ice on the milk before I pour it in my bowl. Sometimes, I put my head in the freezer, just to escape the heat. This is Los Angeles, land of constant sunshine. Whenever I open the freezer door, I find packaged food: cartons of frozen pizza, tubs of Rocky Road ice cream, and a few stray boxes of frozen spinach.

But the summer I turned ten, I knew what I would find in the freezer, and I always went straight for it. Stuffed in among the other foods, in piles of crinkly packets, was my fix: Clark bars. We had hundreds of Clark bars slotted into the spaces of our freezer that year.

My parents had been on a game show called *Let's Make a Deal*, where people dressed in outlandish costumes and thronged the auditorium, stretching out their hands to be noticed by the host, in the desperate hope of being on television. My parents—so I am told—dressed up in the following attire. My mother wore a pink

hat, to which she had somehow attached a head full of pickles. She held up a sign made with magic markers: I'D BE PICKLED PINK TO BE ON THIS SHOW. My father, a college writing instructor, wore his favorite golf hat, to which he had stapled half a head of iceberg lettuce. His sign? LETTUCE MAKE A DEAL.

They were chosen. However, they faltered on the first assignment, a bidding war with other contestants. If they had won, they could have gone on to the individual competition, where they might have won a Pontiac car or a new Maytag washer. But they lost on the first question, in which they had to guess the price of a bottle of high-quality champagne. Never having drunk any in their lives, they guessed ten dollars.

That's why we had a freezer full of Clark bars. It was their consolation prize. Every day, I ate the cloyingly sweet, chocolate-flavored concoction, with the crumbles of peanut butter dulled inside, the crumbs tumbling onto my lap as I sat in front of the television. I ate one, not feeling well, but never knowing anything different. Life might have been confusing, but I had junk food to tide me over.

This was the food of my childhood.



I was not the only one eating this way. If you want to set a room full of *Brady Bunch*-generation adults talking, ask them about the cereals they ate as kids. "Count Chocula!" someone shouted once, after a twenty-minute heated discussion of Honeycomb, Chex, and Cocoa Pebbles. At the sound of the name, this group of lawyers, engineers, and teachers turned ten years old again. "Oh, my God, Count Chocula!" We each had our favorite brands, and the daring among us would mix them: a bit of Trix, some Life Cereal, and more Alpha-Bits. Sugar and more sugar—we just craved that sweetened milk and enriched white flour. My friend Paul says that his most vivid food memory was going to a friend's house, where he discovered that they ate Raisin Bran for breakfast. Pouting, he put three spoonfuls of sugar in his bowl before he could even stomach the taste. We were raised on the sugary stuff, almost all of us.

My friends with the mothers who insisted on hot cereal and grainy flakes felt deprived because they couldn't eat what everyone else in the United States ate. No one my age remembers eating whole-grain bread as children, except for the one who was raised in Berkeley. I have a friend whose mother woke up early every morning to make three loaves of white bread from scratch, just so her seven children could eat warm, homemade goodness for lunch. But still, my friend felt ostracized at school, because she didn't have Wonder Bread in her lunch box. Being normal meant having that squishy white bread.

An entire generation was raised to believe that cooking meant opening a box, ripping off plastic wrap, or adding water. The television told us what to eat, and we paid attention. But after a lifetime of grabbing burgers from fast-food joints and eating in the backseat of our cars, we are a cooking-illiterate generation. We're fascinated by food, and we know we should be healthier, but we don't know how. We only know how to tear open a package and stick it in the microwave.

We were a typical American family: baby boomer parents with Gen X kids, living in the suburbs of Los Angeles. We lived in the land of shrink-wrapped plastic and the endless vapidness that comes from desperately wanting to look good, all the time. We were smiling children, both stars in school. Dad was the coach of the soccer team; Mom was the head of the PTA. Mom organized potlucks at school and made class cookbooks with recipes for chili casserole with crushed corn chips, mimeographed in smeary blue ink.

We were not out of the norm of American society.

We also really weren't that normal.

When I was seven, my mother plunged into agoraphobia, which kept her trapped in the house with her fears. She kept us trapped there with her. She feared anything different, an almost visceral reaction to anything too weird. Everything needed to be just like what she saw on television. Like the rest of America.

We ate what she thought the rest of the country did. No funky grains or odd vegetables. No "ethnic" foods, including that strange "Oriental" cuisine. She cooked breaded and fried food. We ate our

peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on bleached white bread. Day-Glo orange macaroni and cheese out of a box. Green beans from a can, clotted with cream of mushroom soup and crusted with fried onions.

Not only did we eat TV dinners in my stuffy little house—with soggy fried chicken, mashed potatoes with a fake yellow butter substitute, and that volcanically hot cherry dessert—but we also dutifully ate them on our individual TV trays while watching *Happy Days*.

I remember feeling always vaguely unwell, slightly run-down, and easily tired, even at ten years old. Bookish by nature, I became even more so by practice, since my body always wanted to lie down. I caught every bug that went through my school. As soon as I hit puberty, I suffered from hormonal problems.

At best, I felt just okay. I never knew what it would be like to feel *good*.

Sometimes, I felt horribly unwell: wheezing chest, headaches, and fevers; desperate fatigue. I developed pneumonia six times in my life, nearly dying once. If it wasn't pneumonia, it was bronchitis, my throat constricted, my chest squeezed tight. Breathing in too deeply—more than half-hearted pants—brought prickles of pain deep in my lungs.

At the time, my parents blamed my poor health on the smog. Brown gunk lay thick over the obscured San Bernardino hills, only twenty miles from our front door. Some days, Dr. George Fishbeck, the wacky weatherman on KABC, advised us not to go outside at all, unless it was absolutely necessary. In my family, it was hardly ever necessary. We lived in our little cave, together and alone, eating junk food and staying in separate corners as long as we could.

When I was a sophomore in high school, I developed an inexplicable, fiery pain in my belly, horrible searing cramps, unbearable lassitude, and an inability to eat the prepackaged foods that lay before me. My mother, concerned as always that I was dying, took me to the family doctor, a decrepit German man, who probably graduated from medical school before the 1929 stock market crash. He pronounced me fine. My symptoms continued.

After repeated visits, he blithely suggested I might have ovarian cancer. I was fifteen. Over the next few weeks, I endured nearly every medical test known to man, including one that forced me to live on only liquids for three days of preparation (my parents gave me warm Dr. Pepper and canned chicken broth), another with iodine dye run through my kidneys, and a barium enema X-ray.

No clear answers emerged. After the last test, one doctor informed me that the X-rays showed that my lower intestines were kinked. Clearly, it had all obviously been stress. He gave me some vague breathing techniques and sent me home. After all those tests and terror, my parents let me eat whatever my body wanted to eat—nothing but spinach, boiled chicken, and navel oranges for weeks. I tried to practice my breathing. Miraculously, I started to feel better.

No one ever mentioned celiac disease to me. I didn't even know what gluten was. At that time, anyone who avoided wheat was regarded as a bit of a freak, especially by my mother. Who wouldn't want glorious all-American food? Even in my senior year of high school, when I was dissecting a cadaver in my anatomy and physiology class and studying the intestines closely, I had no idea that white bread could ever make me sick.

It took me twenty more years to find out.



There I stood on a driveway in Malibu, sixteen years old, reading a copy of *Laurel's Kitchen*. I clutched it to me and handed the owner of the garage sale fifty cents, then tucked it under my arm so my parents couldn't see what I had bought.

*Laurel's Kitchen*, written by Laurel Robertson, Carol Flinders, and Bronwen Godfrey, was one of the first major American books on vegetarianism. It was published in Berkeley, California, in 1976. At the time, it seemed to me that only die-hard hippies talked about eating whole foods or growing their own gardens. Maybe the original owner of that copy of *Laurel's Kitchen* had gone on a health kick, bought the book, and then tossed it aside to dive into fast food again.

In the privacy of my bedroom, I read it, chapters at a time. I read not only the recipes for whole grains and exotic-sounding Indian food but also the narrative chapters on nutrition and how to balance proteins. Mostly, I devoured the introduction, which welcomed me into the kitchens of these women as the authors baked bread meditatively, talked about politics and how to raise their families, and made everything from scratch. Their world seemed much more at peace than mine, even though they were discussing the worst perturbations of society. They were doing something about it—rebellious—by making their own food. I felt it innately—someone has it right.

I wanted to be in that kitchen.

What was I doing reading a hippie book in the suburbs of Los Angeles in 1982? I was longing for a life entirely not my own. Those were the days of feathered hair, Vans shoes, John Hughes movies, Op shorts, good Michael Jackson songs, Ronald Reagan, prosperity and the trickle-down theory. Greed was good—remember? I was surrounded by mass consumption, bright-white teeth, and the birth of MTV.

How well do you think blemished organic fruit sold in my neighborhood?

“What are you doing, reading that ridiculous book?” my mother asked me. “Those women don’t know how to cook.”

But somehow, *Laurel’s Kitchen* called to me. I read it and reread it, again and again. I decided to become a vegetarian, because Laurel, Carol, and Bronwen wrote that most of mainstream America seemed to feel vaguely unwell all the time. This sounded achingly familiar to me. Since they linked this feeling to eating meat, I stopped eating the steaks that came from the grocery store in polystyrene packages and the eight greasy pieces of meat from the Oscar Mayer meat pack. (The pimento loaf wasn’t much of a loss.) My younger brother decided to join me.

Mom didn’t like us disdaining her food. She told us that we had to make all our own meals if we wanted something special. She insisted that I eat cottage cheese with Lawry’s Seasoned Salt at every

meal to make up for my drastic lack of protein. In a futile attempt to make veggie burgers, I tried to combine raw tofu, barely cooked lentils, and cottage cheese into patties. They flopped and sagged; they mostly fell into the coals. What remained tasted like soggy grit. My brother and I spat them out, and within a few weeks we were back to gobbling up the family's overcooked meat.

I bet veggie burgers didn't taste like that in Laurel's kitchen.

But I didn't give up that easily. Despite my mother's loudly spoken wishes, somewhere inside me there lived a wild food hippie who wanted to roam free, foraging for whole grains.

I began to enjoy tastes other than the prepackaged, sugary-smack treats always laid before me. Slowly, I started to learn that there was a world wider than white bread out there. That world may not have been in my parents' kitchen or in any of the stores in my Southern California town, but I was going to find it.