

Tough Love

Christopher Styler

(From the , 2006 Issue of Food Arts)

About twenty-five years ago, I was working on Manhattan's Upper East Side as a private chef for a couple who ate fried eggs and toast every morning and steak and potatoes every evening. It was not any more exciting than it sounds. Looking for more, I spoke to a friend who suggested I call Barbara Kafka, then a restaurant consultant as well as food writer, to see if she needed someone with a restaurant chef background like mine. I phoned one morning and Barbara suggested I come over right then. When I told her I wasn't dressed for a first meeting, she responded, "Then I won't get dressed either." (Those of you who have visited Barbara at home can guess where this is heading.) I rang the buzzer for the downstairs door of her Carnegie Hill townhouse and was greeted by a woman wearing a knee-length pumpkin-colored nightgown and a pair of Dr. Scholl's sandals. She wielded a can of Tab in one hand and a lit Carlton in the other. Having never met Barbara, and not being one to presume, I said, "I am here to see Mrs. Kafka." Barbara's immediate response was, "This is about all of her you're likely to see, dear."

Barbara began exerting her influence on American food and cooking more three decades ago and has continued unabatedly. In the early and mid-70s, she teamed up with two other titans who changed the way America eats—Joseph Baum and James Beard. With Mr. Beard she taught classes in New York City and at San Francisco's Stanford Court Hotel, a practice she continued for several years. Barbara met Mr. Baum while she

was working on the English language version of the French wine magazine *Revue de Vin de France*. Not long after their meeting, Mr. Baum began working with Michael Whiteman on the restaurants and food service operations in the World Trade Center. Barbara was part of a team of consultants put together by Mr. Baum and Michael that also included Jacques Pepin, and James Beard. (Oh, to be a fly on *that* wall! Nick Malgieri, pastry chef at Windows on the World during the opening and current director of the baking program at Institute for Culinary Education, has a host of priceless stories from that period. He told me that Barbara arrived on the scene one day in a splendid mink coat over what appeared to be a nightgown.)

Windows was more than a room with a view. Former New York Times restaurant critic William Grimes, in an article written eight days after the September 11th attacks, called Windows a “grand experiment” and credited the restaurant with changing public perception about the World Trade Center from overwhelmingly negative to generally positive. It is not difficult to credit the diverse food operations created for the World Trade Center by Baum and Whiteman and their consultants with raising the stakes for New York City and the country’s restaurants.

I met Barbara not long after her stint at Windows on the World. The day after we met, we began working together. I was to be her translator—the person who turned her sometimes eccentric and always original visions into items that could actually come out of a restaurant kitchen station. Barbara and I worked on a host of projects: The opening of Gotham Bar and Grill (a completely different concept, menu, and chef then from what it is today under Alfred Portale’s leadership); a pizza place in Greenwich Village meant to be a prototype for a chain; an historic building turned tavern in rural Connecticut and a

waterfront restaurant in Long Island City with a spectacular view of Manhattan and a young chef named Brendan Walsh at its helm.

Barbara was then, and is now, miles ahead of trends. She foresaw the improving quality in national food chains and predicted their race toward more menu choices when most of us couldn't conjure up the image of Burger King serving chicken. Her 1981 book *American Food & California Wine* steered clear of regional or traditional clichés and headed right for recipes that spoke of American inventiveness, Watercress Mousse with Raw Ham and Shad Roe Soufflé with String Bean Frappe among them. At that early stage of the American food revolution she credited us with tastes we hadn't yet acquired and a level of sophistication we hadn't yet reached. We eventually caught up. Barbara was also well ahead of “fusion” cuisine—not dopey blackened-redfish-over-wasabi-polenta-fusion, but the marriage of ingredients from around the world in a thoughtful and intelligent way to create surprising and surprisingly good dishes. Barbara looked at where cooking techniques, cultures, flavors, and ingredients overlapped. Then she pulled them apart and put them back together in ways that amused or delighted her. Often they did both.

Back then, nothing infuriated Barbara more than a pat response or taking the easy way out of a culinary problem. “Taste, Goddamnit, TASTE!” was something I heard quite a bit during my time with BK. Barbara turned cauliflower into Bavarians, challenged conventional kitchen wisdom (telling readers to roast in a home oven set to 500° F is most notably and successfully in that category) and cooked bravely, pairing avocado with liver or horseradish custard with smoked salmon. Once, when working with Barbara to recreate a dish of fried whole hot peppers and garlic cloves tossed with

linguini that she had eaten on the Amalfi coast, we made several versions that I thought excellent. “Yes, they’re good,” she said. “But they’re not what I’m looking for.”

Apparently what she *was* looking for was schmaltz—as in rendered chicken fat—which in our last version was liberally spooned over the fried peppers and garlic before tossing with the pasta. It was spectacular and I long for as much on this balmy spring afternoon as I enjoyed it on the slushy winter morning we shared it.

That kind of curiosity, her refusal to settle for the everyday, and her drive for knowledge informs everything Barbara does. While working on a restaurant project in Greenwich Village, I had heard the term ‘postmodern’ bandied around quite a bit. When I asked Barbara what that meant to her I got not an answer but a tour. Barbara picked up the phone, called the garage to get her Jaguar ready, and hustled me into the passenger seat. As we drove—screched, really—through Manhattan, Barbara pointed out buildings, explained why the winged Mercury from the old AT&T building ended up in the lobby of their new building, and gave me enough to think about for weeks. (“Have you ever looked, I mean *really looked* at the Seagram’s Building at night?”) It was like the scene in Woody Allen’s *Hannah and Her Sisters* in which Sam Waterston leads Diane Weist and Carrie Fisher on a tour of his favorite buildings, only with whiter knuckles and a much elevated heart rate. (Though my vehicular time with Barbara has been limited, it is the source of some of my favorite BKisms: “Thank God I learned to drive in Paris!” is one of these. “That’ll give ‘em something to talk about back in Omaha,” uttered seconds after nearly clipping a horse-drawn carriage in Central Park, is another.)

A couple of years ago while speaking to Barbara on the phone I realized something was wrong. I offered to come for a visit. It was one of the most difficult hours I had ever spent, watching my friend and mentor, and one of the most intelligent people I know, struggle to finish a sentence. Clearly she was ill and concerned not only about her health but about her long overdue book on vegetables. She asked for help. I didn't hesitate.

As always with Barbara, I got more than I bargained for. For the first few weeks, we sifted through mounds of material that were to become *Vegetable Love*. This material was stored in everything from an empty case of Budweiser to an oversized Baccarat shopping bag. All of my suggestions—for deleting material, combining chapters, and reorganizing the recipes—were met with a simple, “Whatever you say, boss.” It was somewhat difficult to adjust to this new arrangement. Fortunately, adjustment wasn't a problem as the new arrangement didn't last long. Within weeks of our collaboration, Barbara underwent a procedure that restored her to her feisty, preternaturally curious old self. Things returned to normal, with daily emails containing links to websites that dealt with foragers of wild plants, fennel pollen, heirloom seeds, and more. An already staggering mass of information was rearranged on a regular basis and subject to constant scrutiny, revisions and, of course, additions. (“How can you write a book about vegetables and *not* include wild sea kale?”)

Rejected from the start was organizing the book alphabetically by vegetable. Too ordinary. We cycled through arranging the vegetables by botanical family, growing season, and where they grew (above ground, below ground, on vines, etc.) before settling on dividing the vegetables into chapters based on place or origin. This, too, led to some

unusual groupings, like putting vegetables that originated in Asia and Africa together in one chapter. (“At least as long ago as there was a Silk Road, there was a brisk trade among sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey and Asia,” Barbara writes in that chapter’s intro as if that explains everything, which, in fact, it does.) This organization raised some pre-publication concerns among some and, indeed, a few reviewers did mention what they saw as an “odd” organization. But reading a book by Barbara Kafka isn’t about finding expected things in expected places. If, while reading through *Vegetable Love*, you should find yourself lost in Asia and stub a toe on a pea shoot, that is not an accident. It is intentional.

Some of Barbara’s books, *Roasting* and *Party Food* among them, bring a restaurant chef or caterer’s perspective to home cooking. Others, I think, turn the tables and serve as inspiration for professional chefs. *Vegetable Love* is among this second group. There is a glut of information on preparing and cooking vegetables, some of which will surprise seasoned pros, as it did me. There are also recipes that will cause some to look at certain vegetables with a fresh eye. I would never have thought to team beets with rhubarb or turn endives into a sweet-and-sour sauce. Barbara did.

When I first started working with Barbara, people would ask—often, it seemed, “Isn’t she hard to work for?” My standard response became, “It’s better than working for someone simple.” But the truth was Barbara was difficult to work for if, that is, you thought by rote, cooked by rote, or were afraid to spend a few days working toward one of Barbara’s dream dishes only to find that she was on to something else by the time you got there. I looked at it as getting paid to go to school. I had already learned to cook by

the time I met BK. She taught me—and all of us as a community and profession—to think while we cooked. Thankfully, she is still going at it.