



Sprouting Wings: Learning to Cook through Vegetarianism

[Katie Kehrig](#)

Once upon a time I was a vegetarian. I didn't start out that way; I grew up eating my mother's American home cooking. By the time I became a teenager I was eager to cast my parent's values aside. Setting off for college in 1972 provided an opportunity for a clean break. I looked east. In a class entitled "The Philosophy of Yoga," the Indian instructor easily convinced me to convert through his example; he had never eaten meat in his life and looked young, much younger than someone in their late thirties normally should look in the opinion of a seventeen-year-old. Other arguments quickly followed: feed the world, don't kill animals. And then there was taste.



"Portrait of Apple and Mango"
from the *Produce Portrait Series*
by Katie Kehrig

Vegetarians on campus compelled the food service to hire a student to cook in the main Clark U. dining hall (the one with the sign outside which read: "if you've got your health, you've got just about everything") for a segregated vegetarian section. We had to arrive early to beat out the meat-eating marauders poaching on our superior vittles. Between semesters, when there was no food service, I bought my first cookbook, Anna Thomas's [The Vegetarian Epicure](#), and tried to finesse pierogi in my hot pot. Years later I successfully recreated "Nutmeat Paté in Brioche." A slab of brioche dough encases an incredible nutmeat paté and cored apples lying sideways end to end — one of the most impressive, exhaustingly prepared yet delicious tour-de-force extravaganzas you're ever likely to make. Or try the Welsh Rabbit. This is high-end food that happens to be vegetarian, not health food *per se*, but certainly

delicious.

My friend Ron wanted to hook me up as part of the Moosewood- Restaurant commune for the summer. Visions of verdant Ithaca and a utopian lifestyle danced in my head, unrelated to the now ubiquitous but not then published Moosewood cookbooks. But as I was still a minor; my parents dragged me home. I ended up working at Wetson's, a now-defunct burger chain, eating processed cheese melts with iceberg lettuce, pale tomato slices, and mayo on burger buns. A few years ago I bought former Moosewooder Mollie Katzen's [Still-Life with Menu](#) part of a cookbook-club deal. The recipes I tried, a noodle dish with miso and peanut-butter cookies, were so unpalatable that it's the only cookbook I've ever given away.

Nothing draws the line more clearly between healthy food and junk food than working in a fast-food restaurant and visiting the mummified frozen chickens in the meat locker, or seeing vats of preservatives and food coloring in a food factory. Surely no lentil burger could be worse than the cardboard-like "meat" they place inside MacDonal'd's buns! In an effort to connect with industrial American workers while making better than minimum wage, I worked my sophomore summer at Automatic Rolls of Auburn on the assembly line, keeping a sharp eye out for mutant hamburger buns destined for MacDonal'd's throughout the northeast and quit after a rising basketball star at Cornell crushed his hand in the machinery.

The next summer, temporarily disowned by my parents for living with my boyfriend, and just as I was thanking all the gods for my good fortune to receive food stamps, The Garden of Delights, a wonderful but now defunct health-food restaurant in Worcester, lost two cooks and I graduated to the command of bins of cashews, an electric slicer, an industrial stove, and the urgent need to convince the owner that I was a cook. I ran immediately to the one decent bookstore Worcester has ever had (and it's still there despite the worsening destitution of an always unstable city) and bought several worthwhile vegetarian cookbooks with my remaining dollars: *The New York Times Natural Foods Cookbook* and Ed Brown's [The Tassajara Bread Book](#) and *Tassajara Cooking*. These are all great cookbooks. *The Tassajara Bread Book* has a recipe for whole-wheat bread so delicious that you'll devour it before it gets cold. *Tassajara Cooking* includes a terrific cheese quiche which surprisingly includes oats in the filling. *The New York Times Natural Foods Cookbook* is the source for the addictive lentil burgers The Garden of Delights sold by the dozens. And what an artifact of democracy! All the recipes, and there are over 700, were mostly collected from home cooks.

At The Garden of Delights I found the most fascinating vegetarian cookbook of all. Entitled *A Good Cook... Ten Talents*, but commonly known as ["The Ten Talents Cookbook,"](#) it's an earnest and

primarily vegan book written by Frank and Rosalie Hurd, who I've always understood to be Seventh Day Adventists. I would love this book solely based on the refreshingly rotten banana featured in the bowl of fruit on the back cover, but it has even greater value in its recipes which replace cream with cashews. The cashew gravy alone is good enough reason to buy this book. I made it many times at the restaurant, and you can launch any number of your own successful variations off it. And cashew ice cream without dairy! Better than you think; better than you can imagine.

Through vegetarianism I learned to cook, because once upon a time if you were a vegetarian, you had to know how to cook. Aside from health-food restaurants, pizza, iceberg-lettuce salads and Chinese food were the only common choices available when eating out.

Staying off meat takes dedication. It means learning to like once unfamiliar or avoided vegetables. American cooking is so meat-based that going vegetarian means becoming a culinary expatriate. It takes a lot of effort to make some healthy ingredients taste good; sometimes their flavors must be creatively buried. And at home, preparing vegetables and legumes is labor-intensive compared to the ease of broiling hamburgers. Such dedication requires meat aversion. Back in the 70s, rumor had it that effects as unpleasant as those of heroin withdrawal would attack any vegetarian who lapsed into the world of meat-eaters.

But after seven years of militant vegetarianism a revelation quickly and insidiously appeared: I missed eating chicken! I remembered staring into the zombie eyes of cows who used to look in the kitchen window of the farmhouse where I once lived. My solidarity with farm animals vaporized. A hot pastrami sandwich became irresistible. I took the plunge; no ill effects. It became open season on all foods, and it is wonderful to eat.

DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

Brown, Edward Espe. *The Tassajara Bread Book* . Shambala 1970. Paper, 146 pp., out of print.

Brown, Edward Espe. [The Tassajara Bread Book](#) . Shambala 1995. Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition. Paper, 146 pp., \$12.00.

Brown, Edward Espe. *Tassajara Cooking* . Shambala 1973. Paper, 256 pp., out of print.

Hewitt, Jean. *The New York Times Natural Foods Cookbook* . Avon Books, 1971. 434 pp., out of print.

Hurd, Frank J., D.C. and Hurd, Rosalie, B.S. [A Good Cook... Ten Talents](#) . Chisholm, Minnesota: Dr. and Mrs. Frank J. Hurd, 1968. Paper, 354 pp., \$21.95.

Katzen, Mollie. [Still-Life with Menu](#) . Ten Speed Press, 1994. Paper, 350 pp., \$19.95.

Thomas, Anna. [The Vegetarian Epicure](#) . Vintage Books, 1972. Paper, 305 pp., \$18.00.

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