

Simple Cooking

Electronic Edition



Amy Cain

25th anniversary issue

89

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My Kitchens ~ Wollaston, Massachusetts (1978 - 1986)

Upstairs in my grandfather's house were two one-bedroom apartments. As a baby I lived in this one while my father was away fighting in WWII. When he came back, he had decided to stay in the army and soon we moved off to Texas, and many other places after that. I returned to live here in 1978 and stayed for eight years. It was here that I began writing *Simple Cooking*.

Apart from the refrigerator, the kitchen had pretty much remained the way it had been when I was a baby. The same Depression-Era gas stove, the burners small, the oven un-insulated (a cinder block was kept under it to keep the linoleum from melting), and neither self-igniting (see the "bistro" match holder on the left of the photo above). There was also an old porcelain-coated cast-iron sink with a shallow basin to do your dishes in and a deep one for washing your clothes. (See photos on the following page.)



The metal-topped counter visible above was the bottom half of a Hoosier, the top half of which, including a large flour sifter, was quietly decaying in the basement.

The kitchen was small and cramped, shaped like an "L," and had three doors (leading to the living room, bathroom, and bedroom hall), so there wasn't much room for the cook or his equipment. However, I was in the full flush of enthusiasm, so hardly a day passed without my trying to cram something else onto the counters or into the crowded cabinets. Looking back, I think that, by the end of my time there, I owned more kitchen stuff than I ever would again. In the photo above, you may recognize a salt pig, a potato devil (on which rests the tin in which I roasted my coffee beans). The lower half of a New Orleans coffee biggin sits on the



stove; the top half (with the coffee grounds) can be seen in the photo on the left, sitting in the kitchen sink. What you might not recognize is a cast-iron pig face, hanging on the wall just to the left of the window, which weighed as much as a flatiron and turned out to have no conceivable use. It soon went.

You will also spot a black cast-iron coffee grinder bolted to the little cabinet beside the sink, a pressure cooker (rescued from the basement), a fondue pot (!!), and a red metal Scandinavian fish smoker hanging from the wall beside the bathroom door (photo on left). Beside the radiator is an unopened parcel, a brown paper shopping bag, and a wooden box, scavenged years before from the Fulton Fish Market, and used to store flat items too large to put anywhere else, like pizza peels, cookie sheets, etc.

In the photo on the right, you see Jim Horelick, the friend whose idea it was to take these photographs (and whose camera I used to do so). The inset cabinet of shelves and drawers held still more stuff—among the items

wedged onto the bottom shelf, the keen-eyed will make out a single-blini-size skillet and (behind the kerosene lamp) a *second* salt pig.

The room had two electric outlets, which I pushed to the edge of overload (the wiring in the house dated back to the 1920s). For example, the light on the little table in the same photo (right) was plugged into the socket over the Hoosier in the first photo, halfway around the room. Matt and I shared our first several meals at that table (I hope I picked up the napkin on the floor first!), but this is still very much a bachelor's kitchen. And, for a time, so will be the next one.



My Kitchens ~ Castine, Maine (1986 - 1991)

All kitchens have their faults. For example, the smallest one I ever had was built on a second-floor balcony, barely had room in it to turn around, and had no plumbing at all. But it did have lots of light and a certain sweetness, and I learned how to prepare dinner parties in it, washing the dishes afterward in my bathtub.

My kitchen in Castine, however, was from hell. It was a tacky add-on to a presentable little summer cottage, with cabinets made from cheap, rough plywood slapped with varnish, and a floor covered with a single sheet of linoleum that, as half the room sank on its foundation, had split in two. The stove was electric, which meant no cooking during power outages, which came often. Since our water was pumped from a well, no power meant no water, either.



Joni Miller

I could go on—the tacky wallboard; the stained Styrofoam ceiling; the uninsulated floor, freezing cold in winter; the drafts; the spiders; the rats (my friend Dave’s dog Wolfie killed three in a single night)—but to what purpose? It’s the cook who makes the kitchen, not the other way around. This was a time when several photographers came here to take pictures— among them, Bill Burke, for a piece about me by Joni Miller in *Connoisseur* and Stephen Muskie, for a profile of us by Richard Sax in *Yankee Magazine*. They took one look at the room and just photographed the food, or me making the food. The kitchen was ignored.

Looking about, we can see that the Periodic Table of Vegetables pursued me from Wollaston, as well as the salt pig and the coffee biggin(s). The granite mortar and pestle on the stove

was one of two (large and larger) bought at a Vietnamese grocery in Portland. Leaning against the far wall, beneath the picture, is a soapstone griddle, nonpareil for making buckwheat pancakes, which, like the mortar and pestle, is still with us.

Matt and I began to live together in Castine, and we married here on November 1, 1990. One of the regrets of my life is that I've never been able to sustain a cooking diary for longer than a few weeks. Not only does this mean that a lot of interesting ideas went unrecorded and so were eventually forgotten but that I have no record of what, during any period of time, Matt and I actually cooked and ate. Looking back a decade and a half later, I would be just as interested in the unremarkable dishes that fell by the wayside as in those few that have been with us ever since.

There are, however, the photographs. They show me roasting coffee beans, heaping a toasted bun with crab salad, hoisting a rack of slow-smoked pork ribs, and goofing around with a unopened package of Taco Tubs, but most reveal a persistent interest in baking, which is certainly something you do to warm up a winter kitchen. This was the period of my outdoor bread oven (see below—only a tiny amount of that firewood was for it, by the way, most of which was used to heat our house). There is one photograph of an attempt at an Irish brown bread and several of cornbread, which we made in cast-iron skillets both small and large (see above). No photos exist of the bread-oven loaves, which is just as well. They were delicious, but more days than not they came out of the oven as white as tombstones.



Joni Miller



My Kitchens ~ Steuben, Maine (1991 - 1997)

Steuben was a small coastal village about an hour's drive north of Castine and about as Down East as you can get. The house we rented had been built by a fisherman who lived in it until he got involved in a fishing cooperative and relocated to Seattle. He and his wife had definite aesthetic tastes that combined a love of wood with Japanese design (the bathroom had a Japanese soaking tub).

This is the first kitchen where Matt's own taste and sense of neatness set the tone. She has a love of colorful pottery and tableware, and the open shelving of this kitchen allowed us to put quite a bit of it on display. We also had much more counter and storage space than we had in Castine, so, for the first time in my cooking life, there was a place for everything and an attempt made to keep everything in its place.



This view shows the shelving and the freestanding stainless-steel sink, sunk in a thick slab of oak. By this point, Matt and I had merged our kitchens and begun to jointly acquire new cooking equipment, mostly in the way of pots and pans, since mine were, to put it kindly, rather worn out. Even so, as these things go, this was all rather modest. We discovered a restaurant supply store in Old Town, just north of Bangor, and got solid, reasonably priced skillets there to add to our multifarious pot collection. By now, I had stopped roasting my coffee beans, but still hand-ground them in the cast-iron mill that appears in the Wollaston photographs and can be seen clamped to a bookcase on the far left of the photo on the next page.

In the photo above, note the pizza peel leaning against the wall next to the door. The outdoor bake oven stayed in Castine, but we still made our own bread. Matt perfected her way with scones, biscuits, and all sorts of quick breads; I made sourdough loaves in a cloche, but also

branched out into pizza-making, learned (more or less) how to bake pita, and returned to my interest in English muffins. You wouldn't believe how many photos of these I took during our Steuben years—or how close I got to perfecting my recipe for them.

My father once told me that his fifties were the best years of his life. Looking back, I think there's a good chance that the same is true for me. Matt and I had all the time in the world to enjoy each other.

We would drive miles to visit a favorite farm stand or fish store or smokehouse; we had a welcoming kitchen to cook in and the good health to enjoy all that we prepared. Most of all, I guess, we had what now seems like an incredible amount of energy. I planted a garden every year; we picked blueberries, raspberries, and cranberries; we gathered chanterelles; we put up pickles and preserves and smoked meat; and we spent many an afternoon just roaming the highways and byways of a good part of Maine.



My Kitchens ~ Northampton, Massachusetts (1997 - 1997)

Of course, we've had two kitchens in Northampton, the first in the city's original middle school, which was converted to apartments back in the sixties. Once we went out and bought our own stove, the kitchen there filled all our needs—it was spacious, with plenty of storage—but it never won our hearts. Unlike the rest of the apartment, which, although somewhat dingy, had genuine eccentric charm, the kitchen was plain vanillin: modular cupboards, raspberry-sherbet-colored Formica counters, fluorescent lighting, and an absolutely ordinary linoleum floor. Its two amenities—a dishwasher and a garbage-disposal unit—were, neither of them, anything we ever used. (You get a hint of it in the photo of Matt and me on the last page.)

Our new apartment, already described in an earlier issue, offered more by providing us with less. We had the landlord remove both the stove and the pathetic metal cabinet that was also meant to serve as a counter. For that we use Matt's antique Swedish dresser, with drawers on one side, and a three-shelf cabinet on the other. The backboard is actually a shelf taken from the living room bookcases. The bin into which we toss our recyclables sits on the stool beside the stove.

Over to the right, you can see our electronic scale, just in front of the pepper mill. Beside the pepper mill, barely visible, is a little ramekin that holds the cooking salt. (No more salt pigs!) The electric cord climbing the wall beside these things goes to a little exhaust fan, set in housing I built myself when we discovered the window was too narrow to hold a store-bought one.

Turning to the left (and turning to the next page to see the picture), you can see our porcelain-coated cast-iron sink (shades of Wollaston! And, it turns out, the two kitchens are about equally old). The big black rectangle resting on the faucets is the same cutting board as in the previous photo, here set to dry. On the far right of the top shelf over the



sink is a little bean pot that we bought in Maine (you can see it in one of the photos of the Steuben kitchen, sitting on the refrigerator). It holds just enough beans to serve two, and we use it at least once a week. The little blue ramekin in the center of the same shelf came from Elizabeth David's kitchen to ours thanks to a prize-winning limerrick. In the photo below, the open door leads to our pantry closet, with shelves from floor to ceiling; behind the door is a wine rack filled with seltzer bottles.

To your eyes, probably, the big difference between my Wollaston kitchen and this one is its neatness and cleanliness. No filthy aprons, hand-smudged towels, stains dribbling down the stove. The counters are empty



of anything that doesn't belong on them. This is due entirely to Matt. Let me spend a week here alone and all that would come right back—not because I want it to, or miss it, but because I just can't help it. I was born to make a mess.

For me, though, the truly surprising thing is that there isn't a single item in these photos that came from my Wollaston kitchen, except for the Chantry knife sharpener (visible beside the knife block in the photo to the left). There may be a few things from that era tucked in a drawer or packed away somewhere, but nearly all of it is gone: given away, worn out, used up, broken, or thrown into the trash. I recognize everything there, even after twenty years, and still feel a real fondness for most of it. What I don't feel is the unfocused, omniverous enthusiasm I must have possessed in those days—it isn't the kitchen that's a stranger to me now; it's the cook. ♦





Frank Ward

*Sixteenth anniversary, November 1, 2006.
(John forgot.)*

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