

The Tale Food Tells

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My wife and I had been thinking for months about having our neighbor Margaret over for dinner. She's a widow who lives alone, and we thought she might enjoy hanging out with our raucous toddler and us. But our 19-month-old's demands, my visiting children's ever-changing needs, and a complicated work schedule put us off. Inviting her over seemed all too hard.

We solved the problem by visiting a local Farmer's Market, heading to another friend's for dinner, and picking crops from our garden. These unrelated events suddenly made asking Margaret over for dinner the most natural thing in the world.

We hadn't been to a Farmer's Market in the west, but Jo was fed up with dragging our toddler through the supermarket. We headed to Spotswood Primary School one Saturday morning and, from where we'd parked, the backs of canvas tents looked uninviting. We considered heading home, but persisted and hauled the stroller and our squawking toddler from the car.

We were glad we did. Instead of narrow supermarket aisles, there was a large grass pathway between organic fresh vegetables, fruit, meat, eggs . . . We spent a little more than usual, but the fresh air, conversations with growers and locals - and the room for our miraculously happy toddler to free range - more than compensated.

The food in the bottom of our stroller had a story. We had eggs from a pictured rural run, garlic, capsicum and carrots from a farm near Bairnsdale (my mother-in-law's hometown), a box of peaches straight from a tree, and free-range saltbush lamb from the Otways. On special at \$15 for a decent-sized roast. We planned to cook it that night, but then friends invited us for dinner.

The Brownsteins cooked us up a pungent meal of pesto, full of garlic, with a garden salad. From their garden. They have a bigger patch than ours so their odd-shaped cucumbers have room to grow. And they tasted cool and fresh. When we left that night, they gave us some, along with a batch of lemons

from their tree.

The following Sunday afternoon, Jo was on a food high. Her normally relaxed manner was frantic; her eyes narrowed to pinpricks. When she's using, I just let her trip out around the kitchen and garden. That day it was picking the green capsicums she'd expertly grown in a small pot, and lopping off some of her Roma tomatoes. Then she fossicked for parsley, rosemary and oregano in the tiny herb garden she'd manufactured beneath the clothesline, jammed between the house and fence.

She got the lamb roast out, started squeezing lemons into it, stuffing and topping it with herbs and garlic. The capsicum was put to the knife, along with cucumber, carrots and tomatoes, and then oregano joined some olive oil and lemon juice in a dressing.

'Paul,' she called, even though I was in the room.

'Yes, chef', I replied, thinking I'd soon have a kitchen-hand's task.

'Go and invite Margaret over for dinner.'

Two hours later, Margaret was at the table, nodding and smiling (politely?) as we told her the story behind every item of food she ate. The Spotswood Primary School's Farmer's Market, Margaret, that's a tongue twister, isn't it? That's where we got the lamb you're eating, from the Otways, it's delicious, yeah. And the lemons and cucumber from the Brownsteins; they're a lovely couple, got a baby like us. The tomato, herbs, capsicum; Jo's an amazing gardener, so little space, but such a big yield. And the peaches, tell me they're not the best you've eaten . . . Oh, and the garlic: grown near Bairnsdale. That's where Jo's family's from. Where's your family from, Margaret?

The food was the conversation, but in unexpected ways. Every item led to a new discussion, about politics, education, healthy eating - even the Council's hated plan to chop down the trees on our nature strips. Margaret told her own food gardening stories and we developed a manifesto that everyone in Melbourne must cook a meal at least once a week with ingredients only from Farmer's Markets and their own gardens.

When Margaret left, we realized why it had been suddenly easy to ask our neighbour over. When it's our own food, we want to tell the stories behind it, and somehow Farmer's Market food was as much 'ours' as that from our garden and the Brownsteins'. 'It seemed wrong to have that lamb in the fridge and not have her over,' Jo added. Like any good story, food with its own tale to tell has to be shared.