Ovarian cancer conquered my friend, Liz Maguire, but the art of making perfect pastry never did. With a mound of flour, cold bits of butter, a few drops of ice water, and her ever-expressive hands, she was the conqueror as she cut and fused and coaxed the ingredients into perfect flaky pastry. She was a kitchen alchemist creating sheets of gold to enclose fruit, vegetables, and the lucky occasional filet of beef. Just as she brilliantly edited the words of authors like Michael Dyson, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., George Weigel, Benita Eisler, and Richard Brookhiser into feasts for readers at many of New York’s great publishing houses, so did she brilliantly find the exact proportions that allowed her friends and family to feast on something greater than the marriage of flour and butter.

It was love that allowed her to do this for, besides everything else that she was, Liz Maguire was an unabashed amorist when it came to food, to the table and the joy those things could bring to others. She knew that a meal was more than a meal. She understood that the food on the plate was a manifestation of a cook’s caring, devotion, respect, sense of joy, and, again, love. And isn’t that what all of us who proudly call ourselves “home cooks” know? Isn’t that the secret every kitchen alchemist harbors? I think so, and I think that was the key to her love of cooking and, especially, to her extraordinary ability with pastry.

Sometimes, she fed us history: On the millennium New Year’s Eve she served us a perfect plum tart. The pastry cradled deep purple plums that covered an exquisite frangipane. It reminded us of Paris and was nothing if not a portrait of France in the early twentieth century. Alice B. Toklas must have been smiling somewhere. Sometimes, she fed us things that some of us thought we didn’t like: Her wild mushroom tart, tasting buttery and filled with all the dusky flavors of the forest, remains the only mushroom dish that has ever crossed my partner Gary’s mouth, made him happy, and prompted him to ask for more. And, sometimes, she fed her family its ancestry: Liz’s yearly quest to create the perfect pastiera for the Easter feast is a legendary story she loved to recount in a way that recalled Fanny Brice reciting the Song of Roland with a dash of Marcella Hazan. It was a very long story. Its centerpiece was the saga of “the centuries” it took her to soak the wheat kernels. As she told it, vast storms crashed over my head. I believe I aged during the telling, but it was, of course, worth the wait because, as she always concluded the story, the pastiera was delicious.

It was wonderful to cook for Liz and to cook with her. I’ve never seen anyone prepare vinaigrette with the care that she took. For me it was thrilling, simply, to talk with Liz or think about food with her sitting across from me. Her lexicon of favorites left out very little, and any conversation with her was larded with mention of a number of classic dishes: oysters on a bed of ice, a grand aioli platter, a whole grilled branzino burnished with extra-virgin olive oil, long-braised Boston pork butt, fresh ricotta ravioli, beefsteak Florentine, soft-boiled eggs cradled by lightly dressed lettuce leaves, a simple roast chicken, and, of course, cheese, cheese, and more cheese. Her list of favorites was as boundless as her joy in exploring it. And, yes, she had her “boys” to help her explore: Eduardo taught her the secret of making that Boston butt. Nav schooled her in the ways of choosing correctly from any menu. And Mark’s Seder was graced every year with Liz’s matzoh ball soup.
And then there was me. I must say that, besides her partner, Karen, who received the daily barrage of Liz’s kitchen magic, I think I got the best of Liz Maguire in the kitchen, and I’m grateful for it. We could talk for hours about Madeleine Kamman’s *When French Women Cook* (a gift she gave me), Roy Andries De Groot’s *The Auberge of the Flowering Hearth* (a book I introduced her to), the work of Richard Olney (whom she adored), or the vagaries of offal (we both came to the conclusion that, though our roots are in Italy, we didn’t need to like tripe, if we really didn’t…). We e-mailed planned menus for each other’s opinions and judicious editing. I could spend hours with her in Murray’s Cheese Shop on Bleecker Street (or in any cheese shop, for that matter) debating between an Époisses or a St. Marcelin. She dreamed of moving to the country to become a food writer and grow heirloom tomatoes.

It was delightful to receive e-mails from her in the middle of the day that said

I’m thinking of a dish of iced oysters and a bottle of icy Bandol, even though I’m sitting at my desk and staring at an Excel spreadsheet, facing miso soup and green tea. How about you?

or

I’m cooking for my father this weekend and I need your mother’s recipe for stuffed veal breast with pistachios. Can you send asap?

or, the one I was always pleased to receive,

If you’re available for lunch, I don’t think anything could be more perfect than an herb omelet and a glass of white wine at Cosette.
Even our last e-mail exchange dealt with food. I was making her a pot of beef broth and, knowing some vegetables interacted badly with her medications, I sent her the list of ingredients. She responded that the broth sounded wonderful, “but, frankly, my dear, I would drink your dishwater….” I never got to reply and can only write now—

L,

If I thought that sending you my dishwater would have cured you, I would have gladly sent you gallons.

M

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As I thought of her in these few days since her untimely death at forty-seven (My God, what incredible meals we’re all going to miss with her!), I wondered, “How does a kitchen alchemist grow?” I found my answer on the last day I visited Liz in the hospital to say goodbye. Of course, a great chain of kitchen alchemists starts somewhere, and Liz always raved about her mother’s cooking. Nina Maguire, an accomplished painter as well as a clearly wonderful cook of Italian heritage, fueled Liz’s love of the table. Though they once fought loudly over two very large black bass Liz brought to the Maguire homestead one Christmas Eve (shouts were heard clear across Westchester County, though no firearms were ever brandished and the police were never called…), there was a real food bond between them. At the hospital Nina told me a story: In Liz’s last weeks, she spent some time at her parent’s house in Harrison while Karen was away on business. Nina made fresh ricotta gnocchi for her daughter. Liz, even though she was grievously ill, enjoyed a few of the wonderful dumplings and some time at the table. Though she knew how ill her daughter was, Nina knew the comfort Liz got from the joys of the table and showed her that joy one final time. In that comforting vision of a mother feeding her daughter, I had my answer: A kitchen alchemist, like Liz Maguire, grows from love, willingly given, usually from a mother or a grandmother or an aunt, to a child. When grown, we nurture each other and pass on our knowledge. We recognize each other in the market, in the cookbook aisle of our favorite bookshop, and in restaurants as we watch each other peruse the menu like medieval scholars trying to decode an ancient manuscript.

I walked out of Mt. Sinai onto Fifth Avenue on that cold gray Friday in April, thinking of four hands working in flour. Just as Nina folded the flour into the ricotta to remind Liz of her childhood, so Liz had cut and coaxed the flour and butter into pastry, doing the kitchen alchemist’s work, to remind all of us that two simple things can create something miraculous, like a memory, and that love can come just as surely in a simple pie crust as it can in a glance, in a touch, or in a kiss.