Los Angeles
My Parents’ Palates

…Our intestines large with a bizarre combination of the old country and a brave new world: sweetbreads and TV dinners, gefilte fish and Pop-Tarts…It was a gastronomical league of nations with the United States and the Lower East Side as its Security Council.

—Daniel Lazar, The Body of Brooklyn

I recently did a poetry reading in a pizza restaurant on DC’s Capitol Hill. It was an odd experience, headlining at a pizzeria, and I felt a bit like a garage band. But during the introduction, when I mentioned that I had grown up in Los Angeles, a young man applauded loudly. Later he introduced himself as a student at UCLA and then leaned over to whisper in my ear, “Don’t you miss the taste of LA food?”

I do. A longtime Washingtonian by now, I miss my LA childhood more and more, as it drifts inexorably backward into nostalgic fog. I particularly miss the days and nights around my family’s dinner table, where my parents supplied me (and my brother) with endless, delicious stories describing the material culture of their own Los Angeles childhoods. What could be better (or more emblematic of Jewish LA, in particular) than talking about food while eating? Taste, flavor, commentary—I realized I had to begin writing my parents’ stories down, to set in print the taste of old LA. I’d already spent too much of my forties submerged in academic writing, lecturing on the ancient past, immune to corporeal pleasure during long days when I’d wolf my lunch down at my desk, spilling (as I did just now) bread crumbs into the keyboard. But the memory of mandelbread from Canter’s deli brought out that familiar hunger for the gastronomic Judaism of Southern California: my legacy, my own history.

We begin as infants: open mouth, insert food.

I inhabited a fantastic world as a child, hip West Los Angeles during the countercultural 1960s, and I attended a multiracial kindergarten and elementary school where every classmate came from a different country. My local world was overlappingly Jewish, Japanese, and Mexican in flavor, and my immediate family circle included the two rival grandmothers (a Polish Jewish immigrant and a proper German Midwesterner) serving up their ethnicities on scalloped dinner plates. Oranges and lemons drooped from backyard trees, green chile burritos and chopsticks held starring roles in the school cafeteria, and family friends emerged from cars dessert-first, proffering pink cardboard boxes from Canter’s Deli or Nate and Al’s, welcoming children’s hugs with the warning “Oy, darling! Don’t crush the blintzes.” Overwhelmed by multiculturalism, my little

brother began to weep, “I don’t like Hawaii food” at the sight of anything other than American cheese on Ritz crackers. But me? I begged for extra mandelbread, extra kreplach, extra coconut meat chopped fresh from the gourd. What did these foods mean? How had they arrived at our table?

Fortunately, I grew up in a family where dinner conversation like as not revolved around understanding and inscribing where we came from and who we were now, as a cluster of souls fusing together ambitious-Jewish-immigrant and middle-class-Southern-California cultures with their attendant foodstuffs. My mother—a first-generation American whose kinfolk (both spiteful and generous)
landed in LA via Minsk, Odessa, Warsaw, and Boro Park, Brooklyn—grew up on an immigrant diet she willingly traded for the green salads of assimilation. My father was a golden boy of beach and car club, classically meat and potatoes through his Welsh-Nordic ancestry, a man who had never let a gefilte fishball near his body (but nonetheless knew what one was, as all his preferred childhood buddies were Jewish guys). Defying every known local custom by intermarrying, my parents had the opportunity to forge our “family values” freestyle, bringing me and my younger brother into the sixties landscape of peace marches, rock climbing, Pacific Rim cultural fusion, and folk music—yet we always returned from eclectic hippie outings to perfectly balanced Betty Crocker meals idealizing the WASP norms my mother felt obligated to reproduce. In a bizarre reversal of their destined identities, my Jewish mother dished out unkosher bacon, ham, and shrimp while my all-American movie-model father taught us kids about the politics of countercultural rebellion or read aloud from radical black authors and poets. Much of dinner was devoted to my parents describing old LA as they recalled it from their childhoods, laying out earlier geographies of streets, studios, restaurants, beaches, canyons, imprinting in our minds our heritage as Angelenos.

When we weren’t dining on postwar recipes seasoned with hippie relish at home, we were driving over to the homes of our different grandmothers for the Sunday dinners that signified an embattled, gorgeously fattening legacy from all sides—the pickles and corned beef and rich
Passover geese of Ashkenazic Judaica, the chocolate cake and pancake batter of Norway, the holidays that made God into candy. Even as a kid, living on the border where Jewish and Gentile LA met, I wondered how my parents had compromised and juggled just to eat together. Years later, my mother would confide, “Roger came over to my house when we were dating, looked in the refrigerator for something to eat, and recoiled as I explained ‘That’s my father’s tongue’ or ‘That’s petchai’—there was nothing simple or familiar in there for him.” She, in turn, retained a lifelong prejudice against his “cardboard bread” and “cat food–level” tuna fish, those wicked hallmarks of generic Gentileness.

In the years before my father died, I had ample opportunity to turn on my tape recorder, and I urged my parents to free-associate. One question set them off for hours: What did they eat as kids?

**Roger Morris:** The two greatest things for kids in LA were: one, the Good Humor man, and two, the Helms Bakery truck. You’d be out playing hide-and-go-seek or kick-the-can, a technically more difficult sport, after dinner in the summertime, when it was coming dusk. We didn’t even have Daylight Saving Time in those days. The Good Humor man would come down the street, jingle-jingle, and everybody would run home to get some money. Ice cream bars were a nickel; “a milk nickel” was a chocolate-covered bar. My own favorite was a boysenberry push-up. But the best was the Helms Bakery truck.

**Myra Morris:** It had drawers you could open…

**RM:** Of the most beautiful wood—and they’d pull open these drawers, and there would be cupcakes, or cherry tarts—and such wonderful smells!

**MM:** Cookies! And challah! And the cupcake drawer, where they were all laid out in a row.

**RM:** For Helms, you didn’t get a nickel. Your parents went out to the truck, and you tagged along and were a big nuisance, because of course your hands were into everything. And both the Helms man and your parents said, “Out. OUT!”

**MM:** Right! All the edges neat and only about this high. My sandwiches, you could hardly get your mouth around. I used to joke that my mother’s idea of a chicken sandwich was a chicken between two loaves of bread. Then she would also give me shoestring potatoes, dried fruit, fresh fruit, cookies, pickles, olives, carrots. At the end of the semester, one of my friends wrote my mother a note thanking her for my lunches.

And when we went to the movies, my mother would send us to the Stadium matinee with salami sandwiches and pickles. We’d be there eating these stinky sandwiches in the dark.

**RM:** Every kids’ radio show had a food sponsor. Tom Mix was “Shredded Ralston can’t be beat!” and Captain Midnight was Ovaltine.

**MM:** During the war, a lot of moms went to work, moms who previously had time to make scrambled eggs and toast and bacon and pancakes for breakfast. So breakfast cereal was pushed on us, and new processed foods—Velveeta was a big product in the war years. Then food really changed after World War II. Television introduced snack foods and
one page of a document
we went to Scandia, and Paul Newman walked in. Every head swiveled; every pair of eyes in that restaurant was glued to him. Instantly. Those blazing blue eyes.

**RM:** There were several places in LA that we went to once we could drive. A big drive-in at Sunset and Highland was popular, and you often saw people you knew there. Over in the Valley there was a bigger drive-in, called Bob’s. It became Bob’s Big Boy, the national chain. Other places included the Huddle, known as a hangout for Jewish kids, and generally called, by those Jewish kids, “the Hoddle.” You didn’t go in there unless you were wearing a certain kind of sweater, the sleeveless kind with buttons.

**MM:** A golf sweater, like Perry Como wore. It was very popular among Jewish fraternity guys. I often went to the Hoddle on coffee dates.

**RM:** Then there was the Hamburger Hamlet, a little more upscale. And a place on Pico called the Clock. I’d go there and get spaghetti and a chocolate soda.

The restaurant where I had a job parking cars, Richlor’s, specialized in always being too busy to seat you right away.

But they had a seafood bar where you got shrimp cocktail and a drink while you waited. Now, the main dish they specialized in was planked hamburger, a big hamburger steak on a big plank, and they squeezed mashed potatoes out of a pastry tube, all the way around the plank, with the hamburger in the center. Then they pushed the plank into a hot oven and flashed it, so the hamburger had a little crust and the potatoes had just a bit of burn all around the top. My God, it was good; and it was two dollars and seventy-five cents. That’s how much dinner out cost, okay?

**MM:** But let me tell you how we ate in our very different homes, growing up. My grandmother lived with us and would be cooking when I came home from school, cursing the pot in Yiddish. She made kreplach, which I loved; it was a really big production because she also made the dough. And that dough is not just flour and water. It’s egg-based, really substantial. My sister and I would sneak into the refrigerator at night, after a big holiday meal, and eat the leftovers cold. They were filled with shredded meat that had been put...
through a food grinder with chicken fat and sautéed onions and a lot of pepper. You could not stop eating them.

But our family styles of eating were very, very different. When we began dating, I ate at Roger’s house on Sunday nights, a nice dinner in the dining room. I was amazed that everyone there had their own plate—

RM: Well, yes; some of us even had forks.

MM: I only meant that you had your main plate and salad plate so neatly on the table. The salad plate was just to your left, and you were served meat, potatoes, a vegetable, and bread. When my mother served dinner, everything came out of the refrigerator—three stewed tomatoes, some leftover sauce, a little bit soup, how about some smoked fish, you want maybe some cheese? Tons of food on the table, and you couldn’t see where one person’s place setting ended and another’s began. Every meal was a smorgasbord.

RM: Because your family came from the shtetl, when people were hungry, and there wasn’t enough to go around. And all of a sudden, here you were in America, doing okay. What are you trying to hide from me?” And we’d have a silence, and People just kept going; it was always lively, with my father cracking jokes and the seltzer bottle going around. My father would also send us to the dictionary to look up words. He’d joke with my mother, “What’s under the gravy? What are you trying to hide from me?” And we’d have a seven-layer cake. That’s the one thing my mother bought; my sister Martha and I would take it apart and eat it one layer at a time. But because my mother had a Mixmaster, she was often inspired to make cakes at home, with strawberry frosting or almond-flavored marzipan frosting, tinted green with food coloring.

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MM: There was never a lull at our house; I cannot remember there ever being an awkward silence at the dinner table—or a mellow silence, for that matter. Any kind of silence. People just kept going; it was always lively, with my father cracking jokes and the seltzer bottle going around. My father would also send us to the dictionary to look up words. He’d joke with my mother, “What’s under the gravy? What are you trying to hide from me?” And we’d have a seven-layer cake. That’s the one thing my mother bought; her sister Martha and I would take it apart and eat it one layer at a time. But because my mother had a Mixmaster, she was often inspired to make cakes at home, with strawberry frosting or almond-flavored marzipan frosting, tinted green with food coloring.

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MM: So there we were. It took us a while to get beyond our inherited, status-related prejudices. It also took a while for me to learn what I really liked. I was a real reactionary to new stuff. When something new or faddy came along, like pizza, even, I figured, “Who needs that?” I was anti-progress. Then I would get a taste and be won over. I tasted your grandmother’s kreplach, and I have to admit it was very good.

RM: Yes; some of us even had forks.

MM: But let me say this. You’ve heard about our tuna fight when we were first married? Oh, my God. His mother gave us a case of dark-meat tuna, which Roger ate every day for lunch on white bread with mayo, as a wedding gift! And I said, “Well, I can’t eat this.” And then he called me a tuna snob. It was a small fight, that first week we were married.

RM: But it had receding depths.

MM: I had to totally abandon any idea of Jewish food, and I truly never cooked him any Jewish dishes. His sister threw me a bridal shower where she served Jell-O in parfait glasses, in three layers—I didn’t know how that was done. I learned to make toy food, a cheese spread shaped like a pineapple, with olives on the outside. Cocktail food, like those tiny little meatballs in sauce, and shrimp cocktail. I learned how to make ham steaks, meat fondue, veal scallopini, Beef Stroganoff. And scalloped potatoes, because his Uncle Bert sent us all these potatoes from Idaho. But I also wanted to impress Roger that I was thrifty. I’d cash a check for twenty-five dollars and spend only seventeen dollars on food. I tried to cook this horrible cube steak—which we called tube steak.

RM: Tube steaks were kind of the done part of meat that was forced through a tenderizer, pretty much looking and tasting like the fake plywood you see on houses. You chewed them and chewed them forever.

MM: That was the fifties. Toy food, Gentile food, being a thrifty housewife, but also staying up all night to make a teddy-bear cake for a one-year-old who couldn’t care less and slept through her own birthday party. Let me tell you, it was all about making an impression!

I was that one-year-old, the unwitting (and ungrateful) birthday girl asleep at the wheel of assimilation and status. By the time I was awake at the table, well past baby food and about to begin school, it would have been the mid-1960s, my mother juggling a trifecta of competing kitchen influences: Jewish deli heritage, Betty Crocker,
My brother and I would carry away our own identity memories from those early dinner years—certainly, my attachment to the red plastic cowgirl cup from which I sipped my orange juice was my initial foray into baby-dyke objets d’art. And Johnny and I understood that the turquoise Melmac serving bowl, split down the middle with an art-deco S-wave, containing my mother’s white tuna and my father’s dark tuna on opposing sides, signified their class conflict. Whose tuna would rule? Sandwich makings were the stuff of politics. And while our world was full of delicious grandmother food, both grandmothers were clearly vying to make us inheritors and carriers of their heritage, their holiday traditions, and so we dined at one grandmother’s house for Christmas and another’s for Hanukah, one for Easter, the other for Passover. My role, as the Gentile-looking product of the mixed marriage, required me to serve as a point of fond agreement between my wary relatives. I soaked up these messages with the rye bread and vitamins, my bones built from good talk of the past, the meaning of a meatball. Both sides of the family had an investment in dyeing me with their team colors, and that dye was food. I took it all, from every side, and learned to like the taste of everything.

My domestic persona was ever mindful of Hollywood glamour: this young housewife wore sunglasses to do her morning marketing on the few occasions when she had to go out without first applying complete eye makeup. I followed her on her errands around West LA, to Hughes Market near Mar Vista Park, to the Farmer’s Market where we greeted the chocolate maker and Bill the chicken man. I stared, fascinated, at the little automated donkey advertising horseradish with a “kick” in it; nearby, the elderly Jews sat in light dappled by the partially shaded dining courtyard. These were the little, tough, outspoken old ladies my mother had come from, as she shopped in her sunglasses and Capri pants for my father’s American dinner. All of her identity conflicts were acted out at the table, with running commentary and conversational footnotes. In this way an attachment to objects, flavors, and rituals of eating served as our family religion: compromise.