

GRETCHEN HANSON: MY STORY



First, a little about myself...

I suspect that my introduction to a career as a chef came a little earlier than most. I had attained the ripe old age of 2 1/2 years when I came to the conclusion that the prospect of facing another unpalatable meal prepared by my culinary-challenged parents was just not the way this particular little chef's life was meant to begin. I dragged a chair to the stove and told everyone to keep back; from that point forward I would be feeding myself.

By twelve I had my own little catering business; a burgeoning cottage industry cooking for the "lunching ladies" of our affluent southern California community.

Being from the wellness center of the universe certainly flavored the way I thought about food but, without access to big grocery stores or convenience foods, the only things I had to work with were the raw ingredients that were delivered by either the food co-op or the local grocer. Cooking was from scratch, the way God had intended. Was there any other way? If so, I didn't know it. I cooked my way through high school learning rouxs, salsas, sauces, reading any cookbook I could get my hands on, dissecting the information and experimenting on my ever-willing family and friends.

Fast forward many years and I found myself at Columbia University spending much of my time in midtown, training in a classic French kitchen. Bechamel, Béarnaise, Brulee and an addiction to Julia Child had turned me into an incurable foodie destined to seek out restaurant kitchens, cheese shops and charcuteries as my natural habitat. My focus during those years had been classic French in all its glory, but now I found the cuisines of the sun calling to me again and my years of travel had begun.

My favorite markets had always been in Mexico and Central and South America; every moment I spent exploring them an adventure in exotic produce, an ongoing introduction to new chilies and spices that cleared the nasal passages and intrigued the palate. Every country I traveled to welcomed me with its own tastes and smells. In Europe, olive oils as unique and different as the rustic red wines that graced every meal and every village proud of its family trattoria with its ancient and guarded recipes. Every chef creating a signature of specialty recipes and flavors that was entirely different and unique from their neighbors.

Towards the Far East, the flavors became as exotic as the ingredients. Being linguistically challenged in any but romance languages, I was happily content to observe and taste my path through most of the Middle and Far East. The small towns through which I traveled rarely had English speaking inhabitants and yet the universal language of food needed little translation as I became as fluent in curry as I already was in mole' and coulis. My wanderings had one focus, the food and, for the most part, the women who cooked it. I watched and learned from mothers and grandmothers tending braziers and open flame stoves in the stalls and roughshod kitchens of the daily markets: the alchemy of food as an extension of the nurturing role these women played in all facets of their families and community. Wherever I stayed, I tasted and cooked my way into the heart of each life I was privileged to briefly share.

My eldest child was a surprise and blessing that I didn't expect. Surprise because he caught me without a supporting partner and blessing because I had to figure out a very clever way to combine food with staying home with him. I started a catering company that focused on cooking wholesome meals for people with medical challenges. Whether challenged by diabetes, heart disease or obesity, I began to see the correlation and relationship in every aspect of how we live and what we eat.

So now we come to Hobos and everything comes full circle. Food as love, food as healing, food as community. And yet there are still many more journeys left to make, meals to share with friends old and new, and so much more to learn along the way (always that!). I begin this next stage of my life focused on living and cooking a diet based on predominately vegetarian food choices. As I draw from the culinary background I have been so blessed to have, everything is still, and always will be, made from scratch. Like the hundreds of little farming villages that I have visited and lived in through the years, my ingredients are purchased from my neighbors whenever possible; making my dream of a 40-mile menu a reality from our very first season.

Welcome to my table, welcome to Hobos.