

Cook and Tell Confessions of a Kitchen Romeo

By Steve Friedman

Feb. 9, 2005

I KNEW I was in trouble when it took 40 minutes to chop a garlic clove.

"Dude, you've got to peel it first," suggested Jack, my close friend, kitchen aide-de-camp and fellow bachelor.

"If I'm supposed to peel it, then why doesn't the book tell me to peel it?" I asked. Reasonably, I might add.

"Trust me," Jack said. "Peel it."

Trust him? Jack spends nights playing snowboard video games. He broke up with his last girlfriend, a beautiful, witty and loving woman, because "she did bad impressions." His favorite dinner is Sara Lee lemon cream layer cake. Then again, Jack worked as a waiter a few years back. So I peeled. Then I chopped. This cooking business wasn't so hard. I shoveled the garlic chunks into a bowl.

"Chop," Jack said. "Not cut in quarters, chop."

That was when I realized this was going to be tougher than I thought.

It was a simple plan, with some minimal and harmless deception involved, much as the Bay of Pigs invasion was a simple plan with some minimal and harmless deception involved. In time for Valentine's Day, I would leaf through a handful of cookbooks apparently designed to inspire passion. Then I would deftly prepare three dinners for three unsuspecting women, who would fall deliriously and uncontrollably in love with me.

But what to cook? Whom to cook for? I am a single man with Ollie's Noodle Shop and Domino's on speed dial, so these are questions that I have not spent a lot of time wrestling with. In the last 10 years, I have cooked approximately seven meals. Six have consisted of beef enchiladas.

I turned to my most trusted advisers. "Get Spanish cheese and crackers with saffron," Jack said. "Then it won't matter what you cook. Women go wild for Spanish cheese and saffron. I mean that literally. Wild!"

"The ladies love mashed potatoes," declared Andy, another single friend. "And any lady who claims she doesn't love mashed potatoes is lying."

"You're cooking?" Jerry asked. "For a woman? Are you going to talk about your feelings? Are you going to share?"

If I had a nickel for every night that Andy, Jack, Jerry and I stuffed cheeseburgers down our gullets at the neighborhood Greek diner, wondering why we weren't married, I could hire someone to chop garlic. They would be no help.

No, for my three nights of love food, I was on my own.

Dinner Companion 1: Elizabeth, a farmer's daughter from the West whom I'd met at a party. I used as my source book "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Cooking for Guys" by Tod Dimmick (Alpha, 2004) because I qualify.

I roasted a chicken (Jack assured me that even I am incapable of screwing up roast chicken) and mixed a simple salad and made a fake cheesecake, whose primary ingredient was pudding mix. ("Prep time: five minutes, plus chilling time.") Except for the garlic contretemps and an embarrassing shouting match in the spice aisle at Whole Foods (the store doesn't carry what the book calls Italian seasoning; Jack and I argued for half an hour over the national origins of paprika and oregano), everything proceeded smoothly. Elizabeth had seconds of everything. Post-cheesecake, we played gin rummy for two hours. Yes, she said, she would love to see me again. Hmm. Maybe this cooking thing has potential.

The next morning I woke with an unfamiliar sense of energy and well-being. Perhaps a break from my usual midnight snacks of deep-fried chicken chunks in sweet and sour sauce and pepperoni pizza was not an altogether bad thing. I was also bursting with confidence. Yesterday I chopped. Last night I basted. This evening I would broil.

Dinner Companion 2: Natasha, a thrice-divorced heavily jeweled Russian, whom I knew through a former colleague.

I turned to "The Seduction Cookbook" by Diane Brown (Innova Publishing, 2005). We would start with sweet melon with prosciutto, move on to steak au poivre with pink peppercorns, accompanied by grilled marinated portobello mushrooms. For dessert sumptuous stuffed strawberries with mascarpone cheese and dark chocolate. Natasha would sashay in at 7. By 10 she would be like rendered yak fat in my clever hands. Besides, how difficult could such a meal be?

Seven and a half hours later, I had my answer. Shopping took two hours. Cleaning the

kitchen from the night before -- a new issue in my life, trust me -- took another hour. Then an hour for more shopping. (A broiler is necessary to broil steaks, a copper-bottom sauce pan is necessary for melting chocolate, pink peppercorns are impossible to find, and if one is to marinate giant portobello mushrooms in self-sealing plastic bags, one must actually own self-sealing plastic bags.) And how was I to know the strawberry was such an egregiously temperamental little fruit? To decapitate and hollow out a dozen sticky berries is tough enough. But stuffing them with cheese and chocolate mix and plopping their little caps back on their pulpy little bodies takes time.

Still, it looked as if I would pull it off. Eight minutes to set up a fan and disconnect the screaming smoke alarm. Nineteen minutes 45 seconds to shower, shave and put on clean clothes. The meat and the mushrooms were done at exactly 6:57. I removed them from the oven and let them stew in their own delectable juices while I flipped the place mats over to hide the chicken stains from the night before, dimmed the lights, took another peek at my initially intransigent but now flirty little strawberries, and it was 7 o'clock and Natasha had not arrived. And now it was 7:05. No Natasha. And 7:10. And now it was 7:15.

Was this a game to her? Did she think steak au poivre seasons itself? Did Natasha not understand that when a guy cooks dinner for you, there is this quaint custom called punctuality? That maybe she should check her diamond-encrusted Cartier once in a while? Did she have any idea what I had been doing all day?

She showed up at 7:22. I tried to be angry, but when I slipped the mink from Natasha's shoulders, I could not help noticing that she looked hot. Besides, my steak needed me.

Natasha loved it. All of it. Over the strawberries she leaned toward me, touched my knee, told me I was in the wrong line of work. She wrote her phone number and commanded me to call her. Anytime.

I thought if I kissed her, she would respond. But I was too tired. And too full.

Dinner Companion 3: Gina, a Midwestern waitress, who once served me a sirloin and who I could not help noticing was wearing fishnet stockings. I don't remember much about the sirloin.

I placed six lightly scented candles around the apartment for mood. I made a plate of Spanish cheese and saffron crackers, just in case Jack was not completely whacked-out. And I pulled out "Seduction and Spice: 135 Recipes for Romance" by Rudolf Sodamin (Rizzoli, 2000). Gina would be served shaved fennel and frisée salad with lemon vinaigrette, lobster risotto and poached pears with chocolate sauce.

This was not just an adventure; this was a job. Total prep time was eight hours. Four

hours to cook. An hour to clean the previous night's mess. An hour to wash the place settings and napkins. Another hour to shop. (I needed a steamer to steam the lobster tails and something called a mandoline to shave the fennel bulbs.) It took me 20 minutes to unpack the mandoline and read the instructions and 15 more barely to avoid amputating all my fingers. It took 25 minutes to try and fail to repack the mandoline (I wanted my money back), then to stack its machine parts in a hopefully nonlethal pile in a corner on the counter.

The pears alone took an hour and a half. On paper "two ripe pears, peeled and cored," is a simple enough concept. By the time I had successfully scooped the guts from two of the slippery beasts, chunks from four of their previously mutilated cousins lay scattered on the floor, and pear juice was dripping from every surface in my kitchen.

And then there was the risotto.

"You cannot ignore risotto, dude," Jack told me on the phone. "Risotto demands all your attention and much of your time. In many ways risotto is like a needy woman."

I stirred my risotto for 50 minutes, adding stock and spices and garlic and cheese gradually, lovingly. During that time I called my mother to apologize for taking her cooking for granted, my sister to apologize for taking her cooking for granted and a woman I had dumped to apologize for taking her cooking for granted. Then I called a woman who had dumped me to brag about my risotto. She screamed back: "Lobster risotto! How come when you were hanging out with me, your entire repertoire consisted of takeout Shandong chicken and broccoli with Sichuan sauce?"

I then called some friends I had not talked to in months, mostly so that when they asked what I was up to, I could toss off: "Oh, not much. I'm just cooking some lobster risotto."

When Gina arrived, I offered a saffron cracker and a piece of Spanish cheese and watched her eyes light with joy as she took a bite. Is it possible that Jack, though deranged, is also a genius?

I smiled. Then, with all the pantherish insouciance I could muster I said, "I hope you're not allergic to lobster."

She frowned. With great effort I held back tears.

I put on a brave front, told her there was plenty of salad. And cheese. And poached pears in chocolate sauce. I thought I detected pity. She insisted on eating the risotto, saying she would pick around the lobster chunks.

I spent the meal looking for early symptoms of anaphylactic shock while breathing

through my mouth. It turned out I was having an unexpected and thoroughly unpleasant respiratory reaction to the candles scattered throughout my apartment.

On the upside no one's air passage entirely collapsed, and the flavors I was able to discern were agreeable.

And Gina? I believed Gina was coming on to me. She told me I made the "perfect cup of coffee." She told me that my poached pears were "restaurant quality." She referred to my couch as "buttery," at which point I ignored my crushing fatigue. (I had barely slept in three days and had been plagued by dreams of giant taunting fruit.) I ignored my pinching belt and swollen gut and slid a few inches her way.

That is when she informed me that the fishnets are part of her waitress uniform, that she never gets involved with customers, that she comes from a religious and conservative background and really is not ready to date anyone. I slid back. She was right. The couch is sort of buttery.

After she left, I cleaned up the kitchen. It took awhile, so I pulled the leftover risotto from the fridge to nibble on. And when I was done with that, I heated up some chocolate sauce and ate it straight from my copper-bottom saucepan. Spooning melted chocolate into my mouth, surrounded by cracked lobster tail shells and a disassembled and still dangerous-looking mandoline and the hacked remains of a once beautiful fennel bulb, inhaling deeply the lingering scent of pear juice, I realized that my life had changed. No more late night pizza. No more dates that involve rental movies and Chinese takeout. No, henceforth I will chop and roast and marinate and, yes, even core.

In fact, I'm planning to call the farmer's daughter to inquire about this weekend. I believe that beneath that wholesome exterior lurks an adventurous minx. I'm thinking tiger prawns with cucumber-mango salad.

ites