

RELISHING THE RADISH

By Kate Adamick, JD

My first childhood food memory isn't a dazzling birthday cake or a melting ice cream cone, as one might expect. Rather, it's a small blue bowl of bright red radishes.

When I was growing up, my grandfather ate radishes at every summer supper. As a devoted five-year-old who wanted to be just like him, I tenaciously set out to do the same. That year, I began to mimic his every move as he methodically reached for a newly stemmed radish, dipped it gently into sprinkled salt, and unceremoniously popped it into his mouth. I'd sit at the table next to him and unconvincingly exclaim, "Mmmmmmm! These are good!" even as my mouth burned and tears ran down my face. If eating them would make me more like Gramps, I would happily endure the pain.

Within a few days, my grandmother asked me if I'd help her as she washed the dirt from that evening's radish crop. I vividly recall my pride at being entrusted with such an adult responsibility as I pulled the step-stool from the utility closet and dragged it to the sink for my first experience in meal preparation. My grandmother stood by my side praising my cooking skills and telling me that my efforts would mean the world to Gramps. As my grandmother had predicted, Gramp's face beamed when I presented him with my work, and the feeling I experienced that day of delighting others with food has never left me.

My childhood relationship with the radish evolved still further when I returned home later that summer and excitedly told my mom of my new favorite food. She promptly bought a package of radish seeds and helped me plant them in the foot-wide flower bed between the house and driveway. As I watched over the tiny plants during the next few weeks, I learned not only of their need for water, sun and weeding, but of my own intimate connection with my planet and my food. The simple radish had taught me to appreciate the fundamental links between growing, cooking and eating.

Today, 40 years later, our nation's children seem to have fewer opportunities for such personal contacts with their food. Instead, most of their food mysteriously arrives in sterile stores encased in flashy packages bearing a laundry list of unpronounceable ingredients, most of which have been "grown" in corporate science labs. Their contents have been freeze-dried, pre-cooked, concentrated and vacuum-packed. And even the whole foods they consume have often been genetically modified, sprayed with myriad pesticides, or derived from animals injected with a virtual pharmacy of antibiotics and hormones.

Our children now live in a world in which more than 25% of their meals are eaten in front of a television set and another 25% in the car. Fully one-third of American children eat in fast food chains every day. Under such circumstances, rarely do children learn that meals are an opportunity for leisure, conversation and hospitality. Rather, millions of media messages each year scream out to them that food is about convenience, image and instant gratification.

But there is hope. In the past year, I have had the good fortune to observe a classroom full of six-year olds shout "Me! Me! Me!" when asked who wanted more of the beans they had just sautéed together as a group, to hear an eight-year-old exclaim, "It has veins just like I do!" when examining a leafy collard green under a magnifying glass, and to witness a teenager utter in amazement, "It's magic!" after pulling a carrot from the ground.

But while certainly magical, these children's experiences are hardly magic. Rather, they are nothing more than opportunities diligently discovered and passionately pursued. With a little imagination and initiative, classrooms become make-shift kitchens, city balconies become urban

vegetable gardens, family field trips become agricultural adventures to farmer's markets and farms, and narrow suburban flower beds become miniature patches of radishes.

Unfortunately, in our never-ending efforts to give our children more of what we think they want, our frenzied schedules often prevent us from providing them with more of what they really need. As a result, we all too quickly fall into the habit of picking up ready-to-eat meals on the way home from work or stopping for burgers on the way home from soccer practice. But as adults, the responsibility for shepherding our youth through the perils of our modern industrialized society, and reconnecting them to their own roots in the natural world, rests squarely and unequivocally on our shoulders. Perhaps the best way to accomplish this overwhelming task is by exposing our children to food in ways that not only feed their growing bodies, but nurture their very souls. Perhaps the best way is by teaching our children to relish the radish.

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