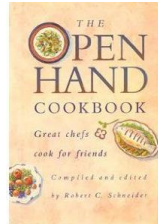


FLAWLESS FOOD
BY CLAUD MANN



I've been going through my unnecessarily large collection of cookbooks recently hoping to free up a little shelf space for future needless acquisitions. But try as I might, how can I be expected to part with irreplaceable gems like *Richard Deacon's Microwave Madness* or *The Guinea Pig Luau*? Adding to this lunacy is the fact that except when baking, I'll do just about anything to avoid having to follow a recipe (especially one of my own). That being said, I've been known to read an inspired cookbook all the way through at one sitting, usually hoping that some tidbit or brilliant idea just might stick in what's left of my memory to be plucked and employed oh-so-impressively at some crucial moment. Single subject books, food science, history and technique titles are among those I'm most likely to revisit. There are others I value on a more personal level. *The Open Hand Cookbook—Great Chefs Cook for Friends* is one of those.

I first became aware of Open Hand in the late 1980s. I'd been cooking at a series of medium-high-end San Francisco restaurants where profit reigned, customers generally left their meals half eaten and there appeared to be some kind of spooky unspoken contest among local chefs to see just how high food could be stacked on the plate before toppling en route to the table. My gig at the time was as a line cook at Ivy's on Hayes Street. The least experienced cook in the kitchen, I snagged the duties and shifts nobody else wanted but that was OK; I was learning like mad and actually liked my insane co-workers. Our boss, Executive Chef Rick Cunningham, cooked the kind of food I liked and still do: focused, unpretentious, creative but not flashy with an emphasis on impeccable ingredients. Rick knew that the simplest way to ensure that stellar food hit the plate was to make that 4 a.m. produce run himself and snap up the good stuff rather than wait for a delivery later in the day. Another smart move: getting the cooks involved in menu development. The menu was divided in half: a core menu of the tried and true, and a weekly list of seasonal choices composed by one of us on the line. Ours was an engaged kitchen because of this. We each, somewhat selfishly, understood the value of mastering the weekly menu. The following week one's own recipes would be at the mercy of the other cooks—and if you stiffed Maynard the ex-Marine on his plate presentation of macadamia crusted diver scallops ... well, you can guess how much extra love Maynard is going to give your red abalone tart with huitlacoche and tamarind-guava coulis the following week (hey, it was the '80s; restaurants really served that stuff).

One evening in February I came in to the restaurant on my day off to throw together a four-tier 110-pound carrot cake with fresh pineapple, black walnuts and crystallized ginger from a recipe in Jim Dodge's *American Baker*. I was getting married the following day and had shrewdly opted for a night of baking over a bachelor party. I suppose even pre-You Tube, I was subconsciously aware that no one has ever been blackmailed over a grainy video highlighting the dirty details of a late-night romp with a couple of well greased sheet pans and a three-speed Hobart mixer ... although if Congress and clergy are given enough time it will probably happen eventually. Rick and I talked as I worked and I remember asking whether he and his longtime partner, Will, ever considered any kind of ceremony. Note: When firing off indignant letters defending the god-given sanctity of heterosexual marriage, please do include the names of all the children you know who endure weekly shuttling from mom's house to dad's due to the scourge of legally recognized gay unions ... sorry, I forgot; those offspring of the 48-plus percent of straight marriages that currently end in divorce ... (And yes, the view is great up here on my high horse.) Anyway, Rick's answer stuck with me. He said simply that a ceremony wouldn't be much fun because most of their friends were now dead. Thinking back, it was the way it was stated, matter of factly, that had power. Although Perla and I had recently lost someone close and had also just learned a dear friend was HIV positive, when it came to the daily impact of the AIDS epidemic, our realities

were worlds apart from Rick's. It made me think of a Japanese-American friend in high school who once told me that her parents met in camp and when I said something stupid about how romantic summer camp can be, she smiled and said, "Manzanar, silly" ... I gave her a blank look ... "Prison camp", she said—"My parents both lived in Berkeley and were taken from their homes and relocated by the U.S. Army"—a wholly different reality.

As I finished up that night Rick invited me to an upcoming book signing at Macy's. He had recently joined Hubert Keller, Deborah Madison, Judy Rogers, Alice Waters, Bradley Ogden, Lindsey Shere and a slew of other heavyweights in a compilation cookbook. It was to be divided by season with each chef sharing a favorite menu—not from his or her respective restaurant, but more so the kind of meal each prepares for close friends and loved ones. A share of the proceeds from each book would be donated to Project Open Hand, the creation of a retired grandmother from South Dakota named Ruth Brinker. At 66, Ruth hadn't imagined herself launching a nonprofit kitchen and home meal delivery service, but after watching a young architect friend literally fade away with AIDS, it occurred to her that many with the disease were actually succumbing to malnutrition, simply too weak to feed themselves any longer. In 1985, working out of a small church kitchen, Ruth's vision of "nutrition with compassion" began to take shape with the delivery of hot meals twice daily to the homes of a handful of clients. By the end of 1989, Open Hand had served its millionth meal, daily clients had grown to more than a thousand and the annual budget tipped a million dollars. Although staggering, I don't think this was the kind of "success" she had ever hoped for. At the Macy's book signing, Perla and I stood in line to meet Ruth Brinker. Sitting at the long signing table she really did look like somebody's small, white-haired grandmother. In no rush to herd us through the line, Ruth smiled and greeted us like old friends, asking our names and thanking us for taking the trouble to come. Up close Ruth wasn't at all elderly—just calm and eerily focused, with the eyes of someone much younger, maybe more turquoise than blue. I remember Perla starting to say how much it meant to have someone finally doing something after so many years of helplessness and silence when she stopped in mid sentence and I realized that all three of us were crying. Not long after that I left Ivy's and began working at Project Open Hand.

My immediate supervisor was to be Chef Fernando Castillo, who could have been the poster boy for Latino gay pride week. When I mused that growing up openly gay in Mexico must have been interesting, he said he was blessed. His mother, the town matriarch, upon learning of her son's sexual orientation, threw an enormous party and then simply made an announcement about it. She also said if anyone had a problem with her son, they were free to leave. No one left that night and the following day no one whispered—and life went on. Fernando had worked with Ruth from the beginning. Early on in the AIDS epidemic he had opened his home to a number of friends too ill to live alone. A trained chef, Fernando modified recipes to provide maximum nutrition, preparing never-ending soups, stews and broths. When his patients became too weak to eat, he spoon-fed them himself. In all, seven good friends died in his apartment. Watching him season and roast 1000 chicken breasts in Open Hand's massive kitchen, I imagined I was seeing the same level of care and deliberation as when Fernando cooked for those first seven friends in his own.

The first morning was terrifying. In what was probably standard hazing procedure for newly hired, arrogant upstarts, I was told to whip up a batch of béchamel sauce for some spinach and mushroom lasagna. When it was suggested that I refer to their béchamel recipe, I made an embarrassing show of demonstrating my knowledge of the five mother sauces, or *sauces meres*, (one of which is this most basic of white sauces). Then I thought to ask the amount needed; one quart, two? Fernando smiled and said, "Let's start with 35 gallons and then see if we need a little more." Remembering the old rhyme *a pint's a pound the world around*, I made a quick calculation; with a gallon of most water-based liquids weighing a little more than eight pounds, I needed to round up roughly 280 pounds of ingredients. I found a baseball-bat-sized whisk and had begun to ponder my next step when Fernando admonished that since there wasn't enough butter or milk for two full batches, it was imperative that I get it right the first time ... and that that it be *flawless*. Struggling to keep the panic from my voice, I casually asked for a quick look at the recipe just for the heck of it. Aside from fatally over-cooking a couple hundred pounds of fresh broccoli that first day, I did OK.

As the days passed, the people and environment grew on me. I was surprised to discover my co-workers had cooked in some of the finest spots in San Francisco or had owned their own restaurants, wisely escaping when love of cooking became overshadowed by hostility toward finicky, mannerless customers or by simple exhaustion. The kitchen was unlike any other in my experience for numerous reasons; by design, our food was intended to be a comforting substitution for mom's home cooking. Since our clients represented an ethnic cross section of the city, vast numbers of international meals were often being prepared concurrently with all attendant aromas commingling into one exotic olfactory cuvee. Labor-intensive scratch cooking and the dedicated use of fresh products meant that each morning dozens of volunteers of all ages showed up to help with food production. Because food-borne illness can be devastating to those with compromised immune systems, volunteers and staff alike underwent food safety and sanitation training prior to setting foot in the kitchen. Something else I'd never seen: hourly employees clocking out of their shifts and then voluntarily continuing to work unpaid until all meals had been finished, loaded and sent out to clients. Also refreshing never to hear any mention of markup percentages or profit; the executive chef simply planned within her budget, leaving the kitchen staff to put out nourishing, delicious, impeccably prepared cuisine, or as Chef Fernando called it, "Flawless Food."

For me, setting up the belt was the highlight of the day; all the meals and side dishes prepared throughout the morning and afternoon were staged on either side of an industrial 30-foot conveyor belt. A tape mix would then be selected and cranked to maximum possible volume (usually salsa mixes courtesy of Perla). Next, a pre-heated thermal transport box, called a Cambro, was placed at the receiving end with paperwork indicating delivery locations, dietary restrictions, meal types and quantities of meals to be loaded within, e.g. Southeast Asian, Central American, high calorie, low sodium, vegetarian, daily special, etc. Finally, if the 20 or so people working the belt moved liquidly as one; filling, sealing, labeling and loading while the food was at its hottest; if the volunteer's cars and vans were lined up and waiting (as they always were); and if the traffic gods were well humored—or at least not pissed off—then within the hour a thousand or more people, many of whom hadn't left the bed or spoken to a soul that day, would eat a warm meal.

A thick binder sat on a table alongside the loading area. In it were bundles of letters, some from clients but most from loved ones left behind. They were for the most part thank-you notes, hundreds of different personal accounts that collectively expressed a single theme. Its essence: the importance of something as elemental as a daily "home cooked" meal. How for some in need it eventually becomes the thing most looked forward to; symbolic of love, hope and continuity—flawless food indeed.

Project Open Hand is in its 22nd year providing meals, groceries and nutrition services to men, women and children with HIV/AIDS, the homebound critically ill, and seniors. Donations can be made at openhands.org.

In Ojai, donations made to Help of Ojai, designated Meals on Wheels, go towards providing daily meals for people unable to cook for themselves due to infirmity or illness. Contact them at mow@helpofojai.org.

Ventura County's food bank has been providing groceries to county residents in need since 1978. Join their virtual food drive at foodshare.com.