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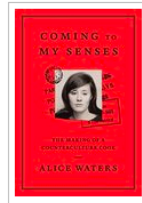
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## Alice's Restaurant

A new memoir recounts the making of Chez Panisse.

MELANIE REHAK



In 1979, Werner Herzog made good on a promise to eat his shoe. A few years earlier, Errol Morris, a protégé of Herzog's in Berkeley, California, had been struggling to finish his first film. Herzog promised that if Morris got it done, he'd consume some footwear. Morris ultimately delivered *Gates of Heaven*, the documentary about the pet-cemetery business that launched his career; Herzog, true to his word, entered the kitchen with a pair of leather boots. He stuffed whole heads of garlic into the toes, added liberal doses of hot sauce, and tossed the concoction into a pot along with heaps of fresh rosemary sprigs. All this was documented by yet another Berkeley filmmaker, Les Blank, in a short film called *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe* (which gave Herzog the opportunity to utter ur-Herzogian statements like "We have to declare holy war against what we see every single day on television").

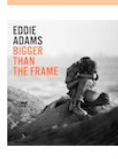
After Herzog finishes seasoning and stirring his boots, the camera cuts to a woman who offers some sensible culinary advice. "It should be like a pig's foot," she explains. "The leather should all soften up . . . and you can serve it with something like beans or chili and lots of onions sprinkled on top and a little raw garlic and some spices." The woman is Alice Waters. The kitchen they're in is at her restaurant, Chez Panisse, which she had opened eight years previously, at the age of twenty-seven. The restaurant had become a hangout for the Berkeley film and arts crowd, as well as for food-centric people. In some cases, the two groups were interchangeable. In her new memoir, *Coming to My Senses: The Making of a Counterculture Cook* (Clarkson Potter, \$27), Waters says of her early Chez Panisse days, "In the beginning I was always just trying to grab people to work for us . . . If I saw a friend who needed a job and had a talent and could do one thing—who could draw beautifully, for example, or play the piano—I wanted that precision in the kitchen, or I was applying it to how they might operate an espresso machine." Together, this band of creative people launched not just a restaurant but a whole new way of cooking and dining, all on their own terms. "We never really became professionals," Waters notes. "But in a way we changed the idea of what it was to cook in a restaurant—we did it so unconventionally that the unconventional became a habit. . . . We would change the menu to accommodate food that had just arrived at the back door . . . we wouldn't stick to a predetermined menu." These days, it's hardly unusual to see "fresh-picked" produce or "day-boat" seafood on a menu, but back then it was a revelation, even in Northern California.

*Coming to My Senses* tells the story of how Waters arrived at this revelation. Though her childhood in the suburbs was far from revolutionary, there were glimmers of what was to come. In 1948, when she was four years old, Alice was dressed up by her mother as "Queen of the Garden" for a costume contest held at the local pool. "She harvested all sorts of fruits and vegetables from the victory garden and put them to use," Waters recounts. "She used the fernlike tops of asparagus for a big frothy skirt, and lettuce leaves became a bodice. She placed a crown of strawberries on my head, made bracelets and anklets of little red peppers, and draped pepper 'earrings' over my ears." Alice won first prize. It's hard not to attribute, however fancifully, her later trajectory at least in part to this early triumph.

Eventually, the family moved to Los Angeles, and Waters attended UC Santa Barbara before transferring to Berkeley in 1964, midway through her sophomore year. It was, as they say, an awakening: "I remember going to a party on the upper levels of a building on Telegraph Avenue, above a bookstore," she reminisces. "I looked into this room and saw people . . . draped all over, smoking God knows what, doing God knows what drugs. I felt a little shaken. I'd never smoked dope. I didn't understand what was going on." She also found herself out of step in other ways: "At Santa Barbara I'd felt a little radical, but at Berkeley I realized I wasn't at all. So much more was going on politically than I was even aware of. . . . I felt I didn't know the facts, and these people were engaged." Before long, though, she'd studied up and recognized that "the people of the Free Speech Movement were speaking my language; their message felt right. And the reason it all felt right, I think, was that my parents had taught me certain basic values: morality, empathy, frugality, love of nature, love of children."

Newly awakened, if still profoundly the product of her genteel upbringing, Waters decided to major in French cultural history and study the French Revolution. Accordingly, she and a

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riena went to France for their junior year—when their plane stopped over in New York, Louis Armstrong and his band got on—not to enroll in an organized program but ostensibly to take a class at the Sorbonne, which Waters never much bothered to attend. Instead, she was discovering her life's work. "Every dish was quietly sublime," she writes of a transformative fixed-menu lunch she and her friend shared in a small village in Brittany. "I realized later that the food tasted so good because the trout probably came from the stream we could see out the window, the melons came from their garden, and the owners likely made their own *jambon*. . . . Years later when I opened Chez Panisse, I looked back on that experience as a blueprint."

Back in Berkeley, Waters's experiences abroad continued to reverberate. "When I got back from France, I wanted to eat like the French," she tells us, "and the only way I could get those flavors again was to make the dishes myself." Determined to share her newfound love with others, she not only cooked (still at home, where a rotating cast of guests including, on one occasion, Jean-Luc Godard came to eat) but also began writing a recipe column called Alice's Restaurant for a San Francisco newspaper.



Alice Waters at Chez Panisse on its opening day, 1971. Charles Shere.

After a stint as a teacher at a Montessori school, Waters got serious about opening a restaurant. When she came across a little two-story house at 1517 Shattuck Avenue, "an old plumbing shop from the 1930s, with all kinds of pipes out front left over from the previous owners," she knew she'd arrived. Scraping together donations from friends and family, she leased the building, with an option to buy (which she did a few years later), and Chez Panisse was born. Named after a favorite character from a 1930s film trilogy directed by Marcel Pagnol, the restaurant opened in August 1971, featuring a menu of *pâté en croûte*, duck with olives, and plum tart. For lack of a sign, CHEZ PANISSE was chalked "in two-foot-high Art Nouveau lettering on the wooden fence out front." The rest is foodie history.

In addition to having roots in French cooking, Chez Panisse was founded on an idea to which Waters has shown unwavering fidelity. "Everybody in the counterculture felt that if you did something *really* well, however unorthodox," she explains, "if you stayed true to human principles, you could succeed. . . . We had a different set of values." Waters loosely defines these values as: being "united against these big institutions and cultural constructs . . . helping each other [and] doing the right thing, even if we didn't make any money." These are tenets that no doubt underlie her Edible Schoolyard Project, which works to build teaching kitchens and gardens at K–12 schools, where they are used as part of the curriculum and also provide students with free lunches. It began in a single middle school in Berkeley and is now a model for programs around the country. These principles also run through the open letter Waters wrote to Jeff Bezos when Amazon bought Whole Foods, in which she idealistically challenged him to use his "unprecedented opportunity to change our food system overnight" by demanding that "produce comes from farmers who are taking care of the land, to require meat and seafood to come from operations that are not depleting natural resources, and to support the entrepreneurial endeavors of those American farmers and food makers who do not enjoy federal subsidies." The odds that this could actually happen—even Jeff Bezos can't change a system overnight, and no doubt restructuring the farming-subsidy ecosystem is a lot more fraught than figuring out one-click ordering or revamping the *Washington Post*—seem slim. But that's not really Waters's point, I don't think. The thing is to put the idea out there, as she did when she opened Chez Panisse, and see who might run with it. After all, who would have thought that opening a little restaurant would lead to her becoming a voice for change not just for well-off diners in Berkeley but also for children of decidedly lesser means?

"More shoes. More boots. More garlic!" Werner Herzog cries toward the end of his shoe-eating escapade. And though he's talking about literal footwear, it's not hard to hear this as a battle cry that Waters has taken up as well. More boots on the ground marching for human principles. More garlic and flavor for everyone.

*Melanie Rehak is the author of Eating for Beginners (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).*

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