

A Conversation with Luisa Weiss

Q: You spent your childhood commuting between your American father's home in Boston and your Italian mother's home in Berlin. What was it like to grow up on two separate continents? Do you consider yourself equally German and American?

A: It was hard! I was always leaving one of my parents behind. The feeling of missing someone something awful was entrenched in me right from the start, as was a feeling of permanent homesickness. Growing up on two separate continents is a strange thing – to cope, I learned to split myself down the middle so that I could better deal with the cultural whiplash I felt going back and forth and so that I could give people a more straightforward impression of who I was: an American in the US, a European in Europe. But how I saw and see myself was and is considerably more complicated. I'm first and foremost half American and half Italian, but having been born and raised in Germany means that I feel quite German, too. It's a funny thing.

Q: To alleviate the loneliness of this peripatetic childhood, you write, “busying myself in the kitchen was how I conjured the people and places I loved the most...when I came down with a rare and chronic illness known as perpetual homesickness, I knew the kitchen would be my memory.” What were some of your favorite dishes to remedy this homesickness, and why do you think you've always found solace in cooking?

A: My favorite things to cook were things that reminded me of the people I missed. In other words, I cooked what *they* cooked to fill my kitchen with their smell. I loved roasting peppers in the oven because the smell that filled the air reminded me of my mother's apartment in Berlin. The first night I ever spent in any new place, I liked to cook the tomato sauce with little cubes of carrots and onions that my father made for dinner every week in Brookline, because it was a reliable way to make a new place feel familiar. And anytime I grated lemon peel, *anywhere*, it was a zipline to my friend Joan's kitchen – my most beloved sanctuary. Joan was my nanny and my second mother and she puts grated lemon peel into almost everything she bakes.

As a child, I would lose myself in books to escape the parts of my life that I found too difficult to deal with. As an adult, I realized that cooking was an equally effective way of distracting myself from sadness or melancholy. Busying myself in the kitchen made me feel useful and relaxed at the same time. And it took my mind off the harder things. Sure, those roasted peppers would remind me of my mother, so very far away, but at the same time, they were dinner and there were other things to do too, like toast pine nuts and boil pasta and set the table and before I knew it, dinner was on the table and I was thinking about something else entirely.

Q: In August 2005, you decided to work your way through a mountain of recipe clippings from *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* and chronicle these adventures on a blog you titled *The Wednesday Chef*, which is now one of the most popular culinary sites on the web. Why did you decide to start this blog, and how did it feel going from an audience of zero to a dedicated readership of thousands?

A: I was drowning in meticulously clipped recipes. I had years of them filed away in notebooks, but I had never actually cooked from a single one. At a certain point, I started to feel absurd every time I

pulled out the scissors to cut out another recipe. (Though I couldn't stop myself either, after all, who knew when I might need that recipe for beef stew with Dijon mustard?) This coincided with the fact that I'd discovered food blogs a few years earlier and was spending most of my free time reading them. Clotilde in Paris, Adam in Atlanta, Julie in Long Island City, Renee in Singapore: I didn't actually know any of these bloggers, but I felt like I did. After all, I knew what they'd made for dinner the night before, or what they'd baked for their loved ones or what they ate when they were blue. How much more information do you need to feel like you know someone? Inspired by their blogs and motivated by my recipe clippings, I set out to test the recipes I'd clipped, just for a year, I thought. But then one year turned into two and then into three and the rest, for me, is history.

As for what it felt like when I realized that people – unrelated to me – were reading my blog, I just have one word: priceless. I hadn't started the blog to find an audience, at least not consciously. I wanted to have a project more than anything else. But then, one by one, my audience found me, and I soon realized that it was sort of the best thing to come out of the blog-writing. The audience was filled with people who were just like me, who liked to cook and read about it and talk about it and have *feelings* about it and now I feel, every time I write a post, that I'm writing for a big group of friends of mine, even if I've never met them. They cheer me on and keep me motivated. They are the most precious thing the blog has given me.

Q: Do you feel that your blog has changed over the years along with you?

A: Yes, absolutely. I didn't think it would ever be filled with so much of my personal life. When I started the blog, I thought it would just be a straight cooking blog. But sharing the pieces of my life I felt comfortable sharing elicited such a strong response, not just from my readers, but from *me*, that I couldn't not keep doing it. It just felt right. Now the blog is sort of a mix of a personal journal and a cooking diary, which is wonderful. When I think back on specific recipes, I can remember the way I felt the day I cooked that dish for the first time, or who was sitting at my kitchen table, or what had happened at work that day. The recipes have become a little like a mnemonic device.

Q: After college, you landed your dream job as a cookbook editor at a major New York publishing house, but you never stopped hankering for Berlin. Then, at the age of 31, after a romantic weekend there, you finally decided to move back. What is it about Berlin that captured your heart on that trip? In what ways has the city changed since your childhood?

A: I had to leave Berlin when I was very little, leaving behind my mother and other very important people in my life. So I think the hankering for Berlin probably started the day I got onto an airplane with my dad in 1980 and ended the day I moved back for good, in December 2009. As an adult, I would fantasize about going back to Berlin, about living close to my mother again, about just being in the one city that really felt like home to me. I guess, in a way, I was desperate to make up what I felt had been lost. But each time I'd visit Berlin when I lived in New York, I felt so sad. While Berlin was more like home than any other place I'd ever lived, I felt that I couldn't make a life there, that I was sort of destined to always just be a visitor there. I hated that feeling. When I got engaged to my then-boyfriend, who had made it clear that he never wanted to move to Berlin, the door to Berlin closed for good. It was a terrible time, filled with heartbreak. So when I returned to the city to see Max the summer after I not only ended my engagement, but realized I had to take some big steps to be happy in life, I had a whole new perspective on life. If I wanted to be in Berlin, there was nothing stopping me - no person, no mistaken feeling that I wouldn't be able to make a life there. It was less

Berlin that captured my heart than it was me making the simple realization that if Berlin (and by extension Max) was what I wanted, there was nothing standing in the way of having it.

The city has changed enormously since I was a child. First of all, there is no Wall anymore. That sounds simple, but it defined everything about Berlin in those days. The dark, sooty East is gone, replaced by creamy pastel apartment buildings, tree-lined blocks, and hordes of tourists. And the West has become quieter since the center of gravity shifted so decisively to the other side of the city. Berlin was always a pretty international place, with its many foreign soldiers and artist ex-pats. But now it's become a tourist destination and a big city like many others, as its mayor Willy Brandt once hoped it would.

Q: Do you feel there is one key to successful home cooking? Some people seem innately more talented as cooks as others, but do you feel it is something anyone can do?

A: I do think some people are better cooks than others in the way that some people are better at math than others and some are better at languages than others. That having been said, it seems to me that the simple act of cooking often is the best way to become a good cook. If you make a point of cooking every night or most nights of the week, it's hard to imagine that you won't, one day, become a good cook. Only by doing can you figure out what you like, what you're good at, what makes your culinary heart soar, what makes it sink. So the key to successful home cooking, in my opinion, is to cook. A lot!

Q: When returning to visit family in the United States, Germany or Italy, what is one dish you look most forward to eating in each of these countries?

A: In the US: Chinese food. In Germany: Pflaumenkuchen (yeasted plum cake). In Italy: Pizza al taglio (pizza sold by weight)

Q: What is one thing most people would be surprised to learn about German cuisine?

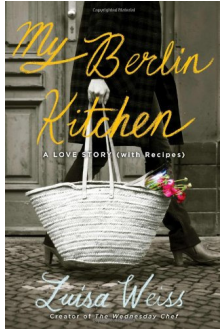
A: That it's a pretty seasonally driven cuisine. I'm not talking about restaurant fare, which seems to not have much variation, but what people cook at home. Plum cakes in plum season, asparagus only in the six weeks it's available in the markets, chanterelles only when you can buy them from people who picked them in their backyards that morning. It's true that the Germans do love themselves some sausages and potatoes, but that's not all there is to German cuisine.

Q: Why did you feel it was important to tell your story with MY BERLIN KITCHEN?

A: I've always felt pretty alone in the world with my weird situation, my parents so far apart, my life so split between such faraway places. I used to think I was the only person in the world who felt such loneliness – in my peer group, there was no one who had grown up like I did. Processing my life was a pretty solitary act. But when I wrote about little bits of it online, my readers responded to it with such compassion, sympathy and understanding that I realized that there were a lot of universal truths in my experience. Then, when I found myself at such a big crossroads, career-wise and in my personal life, and I felt brave enough to make all the big jumps that I did, I wanted to share what I'd learned. That despite terror and insecurity, living your life honestly is the best way to find happiness. Also, if I manage to make only one international mutt like me feel a little more understood and a little less alone in the world, writing the book will have been worth it.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: Keeping my seven-week old son Hugo alive and well! And dreaming of the day when I have time to start work on a novel about an incredible love affair set in 1970's West Berlin, based on a true story.



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