



Audio essayist: Tom Hudgens

Title: Cooking with common sense

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Introduction

Hardly a day goes by without an exhortation – from doctors, foodies, even the government – to change our eating habits.

In this episode of Bookpod, Tom Hudgens talks about the cooking education he received before writing *The Commonsense Kitchen*, a cookbook for budding and seasoned cooks that takes the panic out of preparing and eating food.

Presentation

I had the great good fortune to go to Deep Springs College as an undergrad for my first two years. It's a very rigorous academic program. It's all male and only twenty-four to twenty-six students are there at any given time. And it's on a real working cattle ranch in the high desert in California. All the beef we could ever want, all the fresh unpasteurized milk and cream, freshly laid eggs, amazing orchard fruit, vegetables in season. The food there



that we grew there was really wonderful to work with.

And as a student you go there and you take these very intense college-level courses, and then you also do about twenty to twenty-five hours of physical labor on the ranch each week.

There are students who milk the cows. There are students who feed the animals. There are students who maintain the computers. There are students who work in the office, and so one of my first jobs was student cook.

It was just an amazing challenge for someone my age with my level of experience, which was none at that point, to be expected to cook for forty to fifty people. Eventually I really got into a groove and was able to feed everyone well and with some degree of care and, and I just really loved that that feeling.

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I was raised in a food-loving family, so I was cooking as soon as I was able to. And I was able to do different kinds



of baking. And I was able to cook a meal at home without burning it. But when you're in the pressure of a huge kitchen and the quantities of serving 40 to 50 people that took some adjustment.

I grew up eating sit-down meals with my family but even in my generation of students at Deep Springs, not all of them did. A lot of them had busy working parents and they would eat on their own and the parents would come eat later. Or it would always be take-out. And then when I was the cook there ten years later, I found that phenomenon to be even more widespread. Even fewer of them were raised with sit-down meals.

And so just that wonderful opportunity to have to have eating and meals be shared and, and to sit down and to get to know your fellow community members. To sit down for meals with your, with your professors or with the, with the college mechanic and his wife and hear their stories of their lives which are invariably very different from, you know, if you're a suburban kid from upstate New York, you know, going there to California for the first time, you're going to hear some stories you've never heard before.



And so that's a really wonderful aspect of eating there and the cooking, of course, is connected with that. So as the cook you foster that sense of community. And I think that's why it's such a powerful thing.

And then, and then, growing your own food is a very powerful thing. And one thing I find that, that when students arrive at Deep Springs, many, many of them have this, they suddenly have this epiphany that, "Wow, we could have a meal that's, that's all Deep Springs-grown ingredients. Like, we could have a roast lamb and we could use the greens from the garden. And we can make apple pie with the apples from the orchard, and, and have our fresh milk."

And it's just an inherently very exciting thing to them.

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I think you can cultivate a taste for any good food. When I was in high school, I was tremendously fortunate to be able to go on an exchange program for a whole year. It was American Field Service and they placed me in Slovenia, of all places. I lived with a family that lived just a few



blocks away from the Italian border, and so the culture there was very Italian flavored. It was Slavic and Italian.

For instance, my host mother, when she was born in the farm that was just a few minutes' drive away from the town, that territory was in Italy when she was born. And then it became Slovenia, and then it became Yugoslavia, and now it's back to being Slovenia again.

And the way that they approached cooking and eating was not what I was used to at all. I was used to my mom would cook two or three times a week. And usually she would make a big pot of something and we would eat that a few nights, and maybe someone would take it for lunch. And there it would be the following weekend as leftovers.

But in Slovenia, she made only just enough for that meal. And the portions were not large. And whatever she made, that's all there was. There was no snacking. There was no picking and choosing. You know, I was sixteen years old and I was confronted with a plate of radicchio salad, I think the first night I was there.

And this was long before, well it was at least maybe ten



years before radicchio and those kinds of bitter winter greens became widespread in the United States. So I'd never encountered that before. And of course the first bite was, was not very pleasant. But it was very soon that I learned to appreciate it in the context of the other foods that were served or after a nice salty, savory meat stew with potatoes in it, you want that. That bitterness actually tasted good.

And I remember, in a very short time loving it. And I would be mopping up my salad plate with the bread just like the rest of the family did and getting every bite of that sharp vinaigrette that they put on it and just loving that.

I was the world's pickiest eater before that. And then suddenly I was thrust into this situation where I had to eat what was put in front of me and that's all there was and it was the very first time.

I remember when my host father went and shot some rabbits and my host mother made rabbit stew and I got the head. And that was a little challenging but, but hey, it was lunch and I was hungry. And I dug in my fork and ate those little cheeks and [LAUGHTER] you know, all the meat I could off of



that and it was delicious. And I thought, wow, I've come a long way. [LAUGHTER]

Valedictory

For more information about Tom Hudgens and *The Commonsense Kitchen*, visit tomhudgens.com. And for information about Deep Springs Ranch, visit deepsprings.edu.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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