

## The Sweetness and The Sting

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The lemons languished in an antique crockery bowl scavenged from my dead mother-in-law's kitchen. It was uncharacteristic of me to buy the entire sack. Since reading Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* several years ago, the pleasure of eating fresh fruit in winter has been fouled. I can't help but consider the distance my food has traveled before it ends up on my plate. The lemons had likely been grown in California or Florida and had jostled about for days in the bowels of a fossil-fueled eighteen-wheeler, degreening on the long journey to Tennessee. Their purchase exposed some ambivalence in my locavorian intentions. I typically purchase lemons prudently, one or two at a time, discreetly slipping them into my grocery cart like contraband.

Perhaps their sunny-yellow color and their whisperings about long summer afternoons and creamy pies with golden meringue mountains seduced me. It was November, the long die-off toward winter well underway, and I felt sad about it. The lemons were a hedge against the death of summer, a small, futile resistance to the inevitable.

Of course I couldn't use them all. Tangy and acidic, the small citrusy flavor bombs were aging, the flesh softening, their skins thinning and acquiring brown spots like old women's hands. Whatever culinary concoction they had originally been intended for had not come to pass. The extravagance of their purchase constituted a rare and forgivable indulgence, but letting them go to waste was unconscionable.

Channeling Kingsolver and her kin, I realized that preserving the lemons in a mixture of sugar and salt would set all aright. In the right proportions, the salt would accomplish its preservative deconstruction, and the sugar would work its sweet magic, embalming the cut lemons for a brief perpetuity. A Pinterest recipe touted preserved lemons as a source of *Umami*, a taste said to "round out" the flavor of foods in a "subtle, yet powerful" way. Just speaking the word out loud evokes sensual associations. Try it. *Umami*. To utter the word is to kiss the universe and summon the maternal in one breath.

Measuring out the salt to pour over the lemons resurrected a memory of my father's rough palm, offering me a salt-sprinkled tomato in our backyard garden on an August afternoon when I was five or six years old. The tomato was a Big Boy, his favored variety. He brushed a patina of soil off the fruit with a handkerchief that hung like the tail of a kite from his back pocket. The other pocket bulged with a small round saltshaker. He bit into the warm flesh of the tomato, ripping open a bleeding hole. The juice sluiced down his chin and onto his shirt collar. Then he shook some salt on the raw spot and offered the tomato to me. The salt ran into the little cuts around my fingernails searing the moment into my memory. I have never forgotten that mixture of sweetness and sting.

With a father who gardened and a mother who baked, gastronomic joys were commonplace in my childhood. Each Saturday morning our small house exhaled the aroma of the communion bread my mother made for the Sunday church service she insisted we attend. Communion "bread" is a humble concoction of flour, oil, and water mixed and rolled into thin sheets before baking and represents, to the penitent supplicant, the body of the resurrected Christ. When the bread of heaven emerges from your own oven, the mysteries of the Eucharist are forever altered. My mother sprinkled sugar over any wafers that had broken and ran them under the broiler before giving them to me. I came to believe those sugared wafers, burnished and sweet, were my mother's apology for making me go to church. Our church was evangelical and fundamentalist, two factors which combined to produce a hyper-vigilance about transgressions: hence my guilt about buying the lemons.

My dilemma with the lemons was a private one, as local as the small kingdom of my kitchen counter and my environmentalist's soul, but the metaphor of the recipe reached beyond the sphere of domestic indulgences. The combination of salt and sugar, sting and sweetness, is necessary for preserving lemons, but also for the development of a resilient human being. The continually oscillating balance of disappointment and gratification, loss and love, struggle and triumph, builds a healthy psyche.

Like a fresh cut that throbs with each heartbeat, pain is a constant theme in all our stories. Loss, illness, marginalization, and the niggling awareness of our future deaths are some of the stings sprinkled amidst the sweetness: feeling loved securely, the joy of new beginnings, kindnesses bestowed, and goals accomplished. Without the sting of pain we miss the challenges that grow the ligature of resilience. The magic is in the mixture. If the scale tips to the side of sweetness, even slightly, we consider ours a good life. When the long darkness of suffering relents, and we are touched by the light of kindness or comfort, our capacity for joy can be expanded.

When my children were young, a Mary Engelbreit magnet held photos to our refrigerator door. Under the picture of a plucky girl in calico were the words, “The only way out is through.”

My deliciously extravagant lemons, quartered and pressed close into jars, cuddle among the pickles and chutney in the refrigerator. Bathed in salt and sugar, the lemons are transforming, their flavor growing richer, more complex. I tested them last week, finely chopping one wedge and stirring it into a pan of chicken gravy. The *Umami* flavor worked a magic on the gravy that surpassed the explanations of mere chemistry. The change was subtle, yet powerful.