

The BEREAVEMENT diet

As **Claudia Chung** comes to terms with the sudden death of her lover, food – in particular meat – becomes her comfort

Photographs Christian Miles

Salty, sweet, roasted pork belly bossam, Momofuku style. Spicy turkey and chorizo sausage patties made with fresh sage, rosemary, and parsley. Lebanese kofta kebabs dipped in tangy avocado cream. Lime, chili, and garlic-rubbed flank steak served with freshly made farm stand pico de gallo. And vintage 1960s rumaki served with “oriental” sauce from *Betty Crocker’s Hostess Cookbook* circa 1967 just for shits and giggles. These are some of the dishes I successfully made after my fiancé unexpectedly passed away this summer.

My current carnivorous lifestyle wasn’t intentional but a happy accident, like buffalo wings or French dip sandwiches. Life threw me into a pot full of bacon fat and gave me a freezer full of frozen meats. Chicken, ground beef, pork chops and bellies, sausages, steaks, chicken liver, and salmon. All this including cans of tuna, salmon, sardines, and anchovies all hiding in my cupboards.

What is a despondent widow to do? I created a meatopia for one.

I didn’t invite friends, family, or anyone else to share in my daily fleshy feasts. Instead, I set a fancy place for one at our dining table, overlooking apartments where couples got to stay together and build a life. I hated them. And I ate, laughed, and cried. Bridget Jones constantly nibbled on shredded cheese after Mark Darcy died; I chowed down on ribs and chicken carcass, licked my fingers, and wiped away my tears.

For weeks, I craved animal flesh, fat, organs, skin, blood, and bones. My appetite was that of a tiger, always hunting, gathering, and wanting to tear flesh apart with rigor. If it had a face, I



Above: Espositos Meat Market became her home base – for sausages, leg of lamb, and pig feet.

“If it had a face, I ate it – the bloodier the better.”

ate it – the bloodier the better. Feeding myself homemade, deliciously prepared animals became my sole purpose in life.

Every day, it was a new carnivorous adventure and a 24-hour endeavor. The grocery store became my church and food shopping my worship. Eating was my religious enlightenment. I studied recipes like a born-again Christian studying the Bible for the first time and meditated on side dishes as a Buddhist monk trying to reincarnate



Above: A pit stop at International Grocery, for olives, halva, and dolmades.

himself as Prince Harry II in the next life. Most evenings, after attending a support group meeting, I roamed Whole Foods on Columbus Circle, aimless. My favorite time to go was just after 9pm, when it was virtually empty but still functioning. I found solace in perusing so many upbeat, aggressively bright and perfectly curated prepared foods. It was all so perfect, from the glistening array of chopped vegetables at the salad bar and the steam working its way to the heavens at the soup station to the perky little pastries that looked more like plastic toys than mini-cakes.

I’d work myself up to the raw meats counter and have a chat with the butcher about why Whole Foods didn’t carry beef tendons or pig hearts. Or I’d roam around the produce section reading grandiose descriptions like the history of what was basically a radish from upstate New York. Perhaps I would imagine myself making something out of what they called “limited edition” tomatoes and a lettuce mix named Zen. “Would a blanquette de veau (really just a veal stew) really go well with my couture salad?” I’d wonder. “Do they sell veal tendons?” Anything was possible.

But I always walked out empty handed as Whole Foods felt like cheating. It was too easy, too pristine, bourgeois. You take what you fancy and throw it on a plate, a pan, or the oven – clean-up minimal. No thank you. That wasn’t what I needed. I wanted to get down and dirty

in my kitchen. I longed for a labor of love on my plate as well as flesh. Otherwise, what’s the fucking point?

Every few days, I made a pilgrimage along 9th Ave to food shop.

Espositos Meat Market, between 38th/37th St, was my home base and first stop. My mornings felt incomplete if I didn’t consume four to six of their original breakfast sausages with my scallion scrambled eggs and coffee. Once, I even carried a whole leg of lamb for more than 25 blocks, as I wanted to recreate an Easter supper I’d made with my deceased beloved. Hailing a cab wasn’t an option. I wanted the blood, sweat, and tears marinating my lamb leg. Anything else would have felt lackluster. Since that ordeal, I have graduated to pulling a squeaky, beat-up little red wagon.

I also learned Espositos stashes unsavory cuts in the back, like unsmoked raw ham hocks. You can’t make pig feet terrine without it. Whole Foods doesn’t understand me like these guys.

Of course, if I needed the truly weird bits like tripe, four kinds of livers, hearts and beef tongue, I moseyed on to the Big Apple Meat Market, between 39th/40th St, where most edible animal body parts are butchered and displayed in clear plastic for your cooking and eating pleasure.

To round out my culinary pilgrimage, I made a few side dish pit stops. First, to the International Grocery, between

40th/41st St where spices, a cornucopia of olives and house-made halvah, yogurt, and feta cheese will blow your mind. They also have dolmades (stuffed grape leaves that one must especially ask for) that had me coming back a few times a week.

Poseidon Bakery, between 44th St/45th St, is where I got my breakfast and lunchtime pastries. While most people buy their superb spanakopita and baklava, it’s the beef-stuffed kreatopita that has my heart.

I’ve only been to one eating establishment that didn’t have the word diner in its name since I became a widow – Gallaghers Steakhouse on W52nd St - 7th/8th Ave. Upon approaching the front door, you’re met with a window display featuring tons of aging, rotting, drying beef. I couldn’t have felt more comforted.

It felt like home.

Vintage 1960s rumaki with oriental sauce

From *Betty Crocker’s Hostess Cookbook*, 1967

Oriental Sauce ingredients

¼ cup soy sauce
¼ cup salad oil
2 tbsp ketchup
1 tbsp vinegar
¼ tsp pepper
2 cloves garlic, crushed

Method

Mix all ingredients to make about 1 cup sauce.

Rumaki ingredients

6 chicken livers, halved
1 can sliced water chestnuts
6 slices bacon, cut in half
brown sugar

Method

Pour the oriental sauce over livers and chestnuts, cover dish with plastic wrap. Refrigerate for four hours. Set oven control at broil and/or 550 degrees. Remove livers and water chestnuts from marinade. Wrap 1 liver and water chestnut slice in each piece of bacon, secure with toothpick. Roll in brown sugar, broil for 10 minutes.