

When I don't know what to say, I cook

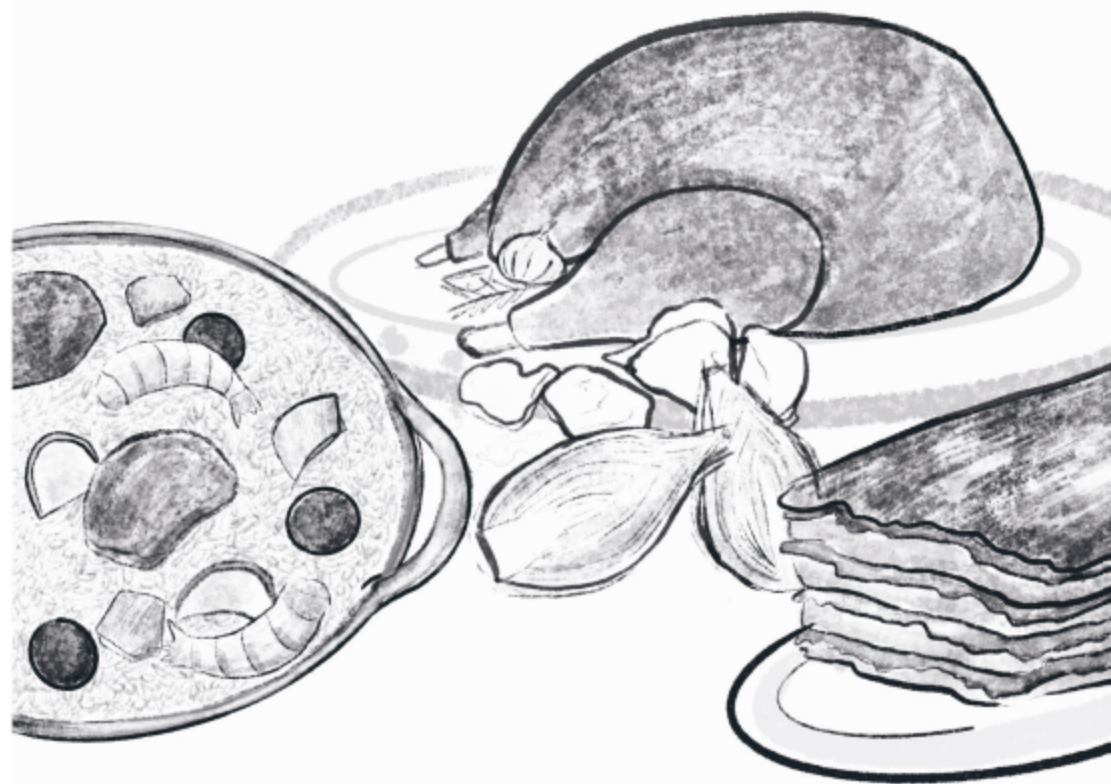
by Tom Flanagan

"How about your lasagna?" asked my boyfriend, on one of those anonymous nights in quarantine that blend into so many. We'd fallen into the inevitable quagmire of what to have for dinner, something that throughout the pandemic became the north star of our day, the current that kept us moving. "That is, if it's not too much trouble. I'm happy to help", he added.

I nodded. It would never be too much trouble really, but I felt more eager to make it detecting the gentle plea in his voice. I knew it was his favourite dish of mine. Not because it was anything particularly ground-breaking but for the opposite; because it represented something

comforting, something familiar. While the act of making lasagna—dutifully chopping up the veg, simmering the ragu, whipping the bechamel into excruciating smoothness and carefully layering the golden cuts of pasta one by one—might seem like a labour of love for him, in hindsight I can see it's always been more gratifying for me.

Over the years, I've noticed a trend with my partners; a ritual of finding a meal catered to their palates and peculiarities, while being one that's intrinsically caught up in my own. I don't think it's ever been a conscientious decision, rather a wish to comfort, to be present, and with that give a bit of myself away.



Communicating in love is so deeply personal and so it seems natural that I've coded my own language of affection into the food I make. Looking back now, these rituals are incredibly insightful, as much for the food I made and loved, as for the way I saw my partners.

When I've not known what to say, I've cooked.

My first meaningful adult relationship was at 21, my first out as a gay man. I felt so out of my depth with a partner who was older and more experienced than I was, so much so that I tried desperately to fit in at every turn. Naively I thought that was the approach to take and naturally I ended up failing.

Everywhere, that is, but the kitchen.

This was somewhere which wasn't ruled by experience—at least in the everyday cooking sense—but rather informed by care.

I still remember the dish I made for him that would become “his dish”, or “ours” depending on how you frame it. It was a baked Spanish risotto; a take on a traditional risotto mixed with courgettes, red peppers, garlic, chicken thighs, prawns and chorizo baked in the oven. I'd never been much of a risotto fan and that's likely why I made it; it was an expression of my willingness to be adventurous and prove that here, in this arena, I would make for a worthy partner.

He loved it and soon requested it (almost) every time I came over, which was often as a student in a flatshare. While there were only so many times two people could eat risotto and move gracefully on two feet afterwards, it became a source of comfort to me as much as it did for him. I knew this recipe and moment, if nothing else.

A few years later I was in a new relationship. One I approached more confidently and with somebody the polar opposite of my last partner. Yet their attitudes towards food were uncanny - they both loved comfort, the feeling of indulging in a dish that immediately centred them. This was especially true for this relationship which was split over two countries; he worked in one, I in another. The need for familiarity was more crucial than ever.

We found that through food. Specifically a dish of roasted garlic and rosemary

chicken, crushed oven potatoes and braised fennel. It was a perfect encapsulation of what we had; more adult and more deconstructed in its components, compared to the coddled close nature of the risotto.

Whenever my partner would land after a week away, this dish would be on the menu. I was happy to oblige; happy because I could massage the distance between us, inching it closer in every pinch of salt I scattered over the chicken and every sprig of rosemary that fell into the bed of potatoes.

And now we're at lasagna. Universal in its reputation, timeless in its appeal. The most classically familial and familiar of all dishes, the most earthy and warm. In many ways it's the embodiment of my current relationship. Another partner yes, but the one I have always felt the most comfortable in and the most love for.

It's telling that this dish would be our dish. I first made it for him at that delicate stage in any relationship where the promise of something special is close, but the words aren't there just yet. Lasagna, it turns out, will do that for you.

These dishes have served me well and others too. They've been as much a language for me to lean on as they have been company, the wordless rituals that say what needs to be said.

I realise that I started this saying that when I don't know what to say, I cook. But I see that's not true. It's when I don't know how to love, I cook.

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