Cooking, Together: Why Fusion Cooking is Here to Stay

The first time I tried bitter melon wrapped in a pita, I knew I would someday love you. It was so terrible a culinary representation of the cultures represented on the table: Chinese, Indian, and Persian. But, we tried, and we didn't make apologies for letting unlikely ingredients and flavors mingle together on the stovetop. We stumbled upon something momentous, even though it didn't taste as much: we had mastered the art of fusion cooking, together. It was May, in the midst of a global pandemic, and you invited me over to your house for dinner. "Let's cook a bunch of weird things together" you said. I didn't know what you meant by weird. I assumed it wouldn't be weird at all; my culinary expectations were low at that point, my appetite spoiled by crunchy insects on sticks in Southeast Asia and dark mystery meat stews in Ghana. What's more, cooking with a partner is usually tragic, with chaos ensuing the moment you criticize someone for oversalting the pasta water, or under seasoning the chicken. Maybe we'll realize just how incompatible we are when one suggests searing the steak meat and fat cap down, and the other suggests simply oven baking it (blasphemy), I thought. We had only been dating for a while, but I knew kitchen dynamics are a good measure for how well-matched a relationship might be. I was also aware that we had vastly different food preferences, based on our previous discussions. Was this going to work? I wasn't confident. But as a food blogger who lives by the mantra "I have no clue what I'm doing, but I have fun doing it," I was ready to cook with you.

I arrived at your apartment, and you ushered me into the kitchen. There was an old wooden table pushed up against the left wall of the kitchen, and linoleum squares on the ground that from tile to tile, varied in shape and form. You showed me the wooden table and told me "I stopped by the Indian store and grabbed a bunch of stuff earlier. I thought we could just play it by ear and make a few different things." You grew up with an Indian father. I assumed you knew

about the ingredients, and that you had a plan for cooking a specific dish, like Palak Paneer or Chana Masala. I spent twelve years in Ireland, and I had a rustic approach towards cooking, using vegetables in unlikely ways. Working in various restaurants after college, I fell in love with Ethiopian cuisine, Korean Food, and Sushi. You probably assumed I knew what I was doing in the kitchen, as you followed my Instagram and mentioned how you liked my Chickpea Tostada with beet hummus recipe. I saw heaping piles of jars of sauces with names I was unfamiliar with, unrecognizable vegetables with spikes and furry bits, elongated pita bread, a pack of veggie dogs and bags of pulses and legumes. You must have noticed the way my eyes became wide as I picked up some of the items at random, inspecting them quietly, deciphering their origin and imagining what we might do with them. "We can order pizza, if it turns out bad," you said.

It did turn out bad, but we never ordered pizza. We sipped on Pineapple White Claws as we chopped, opening up jars, smelling them, wincing and then closing them. The first dish we decided to make was a wrap, or a burrito, of sorts. We started with the spiky green thing. "What's this?" I asked. "I have no clue" you said. "Let's cut into it and see," you said. In the middle, there were seeds surrounding a furry white center. "Hmm.. I can't tell if this is a fruit or a vegetable. Maybe we should sauté it?" I said. I chopped it up into little rounds, shaped like the jarred jalapenos you get with bar nachos. Meanwhile, your roommate walked in. He peered over the cutting board and said, "oh, you're cooking bitter melon?" I asked if he had any advice on how to cook it. "No, but my mom used to make it, it's a traditional Chinese vegetable." You heated a pan, and we watched the green rounds of mystery vegetable dance around in olive oil, mesmerized. Next, we sliced veggie dogs and added those. It was all going well, until I picked up a jar of something with Hindi writing on the label, and the translation "lime pickle." "Should we?" I asked, hesitantly. "Let's do it," you said.

What we were creating in the kitchen that day was Fusion Food, a term popularized in the 1970s when pop-culture valued experimentation and breaking away from cultural norms. Wolfgang Puck is mostly credited for starting this culinary shift, when he invented dishes like Buffalo Chicken Spring Rolls. But Fusion Food has been a part of our history longer than the invention of Barbeque Nachos. Put simply, Fusion Food is the combination of two or more regional cuisines.

We were almost ready for showtime. “Pita! Let’s serve it on pita” I said. We plated the pita and put the mixture into the center of the pita, wrapping it like a burrito. We each tried a bite off of the same pita. “I’ve never tasted anything like it,” I said. We both laughed. “I think we were onto something, until we added the lime pickle” you said. We plated two more Bitter Melon Pita Burritos and served it to your roommates in the room next door and watched their faces as they ate it. They took one bite from the end of the makeshift burrito and looked at one another. Finally, someone said something like “that’s awful, but I’ll eat it.” Onto the next dish. We returned to the kitchen to create a kind of lentil dahl, Irish vegetable stew mash-up. The texture was grainy with undercooked lentils and the flavor was too powerful: probably too many sauces, spices and our lack of attention to the food at this point. I was focused on you, the way you dumped various ingredients into the pot without questioning. You were asking me questions about my family, and what it was like to grow up in Ireland. We probably ate two bites of food that night, opting for a liquid diet of tropical White Claws instead.

Fusion cooking borrows flavors, ingredients and concepts from different cultures and creates something entirely new. It has resulted in some odd culinary mash-ups in recent years. Take Dominique Ansel’s Cronut, for example, a blend between a Croissant and the Donut that came into existence in 2013. Almost overnight, people in New York City were lining up around

the block to bite into the flaky layers of the Cronut, remnants of the sugar-coating falling to the ground with each bite. The Korean Taco, first conceptualized by Mark Manguera and Roy Choi in an LA food truck in 2008, uses the Mexican taco as a vehicle for Korean meats. The food truck made over $2 million in profit the first year, but now you can find the Korean Taco in any city. The ingredients are usually things like barbeque short ribs and bibimbap, topped with kimchi and shredded cabbage, with drizzles of aioli on top.

Then, there's the less obvious Fusion Foods. Many of the dishes we associate with a particular country are perfect examples of what happens when cultural backgrounds meld. For example, Corned Beef and Cabbage is not, in fact, a national Irish dish. Recently, I discovered this after researching the history behind it. Growing up in Ireland, there was no Corned Beef in sight, so I wanted to find out more. When Irish immigrants settled in the United States, they went to local kosher butchers to buy meat. They wanted to recreate a dish they ate back in Ireland, known as Bacon and Cabbage. It consists of boiled bacon, a fatty cut served with boiled potatoes and boiled green cabbage. Irish bacon comes from the back of the pig rather than the belly, and it's served in large hunks, similar to a pork chop, rather than in thin slices. Since bacon wasn't available, corned beef was an alternative for Irish people living in America. Corned beef became associated with Ireland because it was the next best thing that was available in America. It's delicious, and it's an example of a kind of covert Fusion Food.

A few weeks after cooking together, you told me you loved me for the first time. It took me a while to say it back, but I started to love the way you spoke in secret code to me in public places, your analysis of reality TV shows, and the way you woke up on a Saturday and asked me "where shall we go today?" Almost a year later, we are still finding our way in the kitchen together. After many failed attempts, we found what our strengths were and we went from there.

I'm the sauce and marinade girl, the presentation expert, and you the technique guy. If we were held hostage and asked to prepare a steak Sous Vide, and I'd be confident that you could master the timing, the vacuum sealing, and I the compound butter for basting the steak. Cooking, with another, is an intimate act that allows us to negotiate our preferences—you, preferring to cook with pats of butter and that really red paprika from the Indian store in your cupboard, me with light oil in the pan and simple, vegetable-forward dishes. One of your biggest gripes is that I undersalt my food: that's from years of eating boiled potatoes and cabbage for dinner in Ireland, before the culinary scene really took off. Our cooking is far from "authentic", and we sometimes argue about how much butter to use, and how to prepare the asparagus. But, every now and then we stumble upon something weird, wonderful, and delicious. It's the amalgamation of our preferences, our cultural backgrounds, and what's available to us. And sometimes, it tastes good.

Elitists find Fusion Food problematic, calling it "inauthentic". But who gets to decide what's authentic? According to Bon Appetit, American food is fusion food. Natasha Geiling, food and travel writer for Smithsonian Magazine, writes that there is "nothing sinister about the combination of kimchi and hot sauce, nothing terribly iconoclastic about bulgogi wrapped in billowy tortillas." It's also not easy to trace the exact origin of dishes. Dishes we might consider "national dishes", or "authentic", have actually been created through the blending of cultures. Take spaghetti, for example. Without the Chinese perfecting the noodle first, dishes we consider "authentic", like Cacio e Pepe and Spaghetti Pomodoro, wouldn't exist. There's nothing problematic about the Korean Taco or the Cronut because there is no attempt to claim authenticity. There's a nod to the flavors, ingredients, and methods that have become melded together. So the next time you eat a Sushi Pizza, a Crab Rangoon or a Bahn Mi Sandwich, think of how "authenticity" is a shaky concept. Calling one dish "authentic" and another "inauthentic"

is exactly the kind of elitism that plagues the food industry, and we should all stop doing it, starting in our own kitchens.

Recently, I've been on a Shakshuka kick. There's something about the marriage of cumin, paprika, and chilli powder in the simmering tomato sauce; and the egg yolks bobbing their heads out of the top layer of the sauce that speaks to me. One day, you put leftover Chicken Tikka Masala into a cast iron skillet and cracked eggs on top, placing it in the oven to cook. "What are you doing?" I asked. "I'm making Shakshuka," you said. "But with Chicken Tikka Masala? I've never seen that done before. You do realize you're onto something? The foodies would go crazy over this!" I said. I grabbed my camera, layed down a towel underneath and took some pictures of your invention once you removed it from the oven. We sat down with the dish, a plate of naan between us, tearing up bits of naan and eating it with the Chicken Tikka Masala Shakshuka. I think about this culinary beat you're on, using Indian ingredients and borrowing concepts from other cuisines. I think about our Indian-Irish stew mash-up, and how much fun I have with you, fusing things together in a way that makes something entirely new. Maybe we're onto something, or maybe we're just having fun. And if not, as you told me that first night we cooked together, we can just order a pizza.