

Read & Feed *Cornelius O'Donnell*

## Starting from Scratch

Review of Adam Roberts. *The Amateur Gourmet: How to Shop, Chop, and Table-Hop like a Pro (Almost)* NY: Bantam Dell, 2006. set.

Here's my theory: if you can read, you can cook. That philosophy worked for me way back when. Of course you have to *want* to cook. And that compulsion to spend time shopping, chopping, and stirring my way to a satisfying meal is still with me.

In my case, I came from a family where cooking and dining together were very important. Mom was a great cook—nothing fancy, just good home cooking—and she was a natural at pie-making. Dad, an insurance agent, must have been a frustrated scientist. He loved the discipline of baking. Mom never measured a thing; she cooked by instinct. To Dad, accuracy was the key. His cakes were (mostly) terrific. He was also a whiz at whipping up breakfast for his four kids on weekends.

As the oldest of the brood, I got to help in the kitchen, but it was only after years away at school and finally living in my own little apartment in Corning that the latent cooking/entertaining gene kicked in. Dining out was not the option it is today. In those days there was very little variety in the restaurant scene. What you got was mainly Americanized-Italian. Chain restaurants were still mainly on the drawing boards. And the frozen meals back then were pretty awful.

I just got tired of eating out (I did enough of that when on business trips), and even Mom's meat loaf—a recipe she gave me over the phone that I still use to this day—became repetitious. I wanted to really cook and invite friends over, particularly those who had taken pity on a bachelor and had hosted me for meals in the past. I tried out the meat loaf on my then-roommate and his girlfriend (later his wife) who was a home economist. They raved, and I was hooked on cooking.

So I picked up some cookbooks, and that was how I really learned to cook. And now I'll be writing in this space with news of books, old and new, that I hope will be of interest to food lovers.

### How I Learned to Love Cooking through Reading

At first I barely knew which end of a knife to use, so I bought a book written by Craig Claiborne, then food editor at the *New York Times*, called *Kitchen Primer*. (Craig later became a friend, but that's another story.) Looking at the book's line drawings, I learned, among other things, how to cut an onion. I swear that cutting up ingredients and carving the finished product are the main impediments to cooking for many people. I call it "knife-fright," and I was its victim.

As I learned a few rudimentary skills, I moved on to other cook books. My mother chipped in and presented me with a vinyl-covered copy of *Joy of Cooking* ("easy to clean," she said) that I had to hide in a drawer, as the cover proclaimed it "The Bride's Edition."



Neal O'Donnell at his home in Corning, New York.

In a reactionary move, the next two cookbooks I bought were designed for the macho male. One was Esquire's *Handbook for Hosts*, from whose pages I still make a hard-cooked egg and ham dish napped with a cheese sauce. (Brunches were my life back then.)

The second book was called *A Wolf in Chef's Clothing*. I found it a Cunning's on Market Street. I made a couple of dishes from it, and, to paraphrase Sally Field, "They liked it! They liked it!" I've since reread it and now wonder what I could have possibly made from those pages that caused such a fuss.

That brings me to a cookbook I wish I'd had back then.

### The Amateur Gourmet

I truly cannot remember how I happened to obtain a copy of Adam D. Roberts' book *The Amateur Gourmet: How to Shop, Chop, and Table-Hop like a Pro (Almost)*. This Bantam Book came out in hardcover in 2006. In 2008 the paperback appeared. It was on a stack of books waiting to be read, piled on the stairs leading to my little den/office. I passed it several times a day. It looked so lonely and, well, unread.

Having finished a Dona Leon mystery, I needed a bedside book. So I finally picked up the lonely little book. Surprisingly, I found it difficult to put down. So much so that I rationed the chapters and enjoyed drifting off to sleep, chuckling, for many evenings.

It's a "coming of age" book about how Roberts discovered

his inner cook. He was a law student in Atlanta, and the refrigerator in his first apartment held little more than a stack of frozen pizzas. *Amateur* is not only a humorous read but a good guide for anyone who wants to really learn how to cook. It's full of the author's experiences as he negotiated the path to seriously good cooking.

Along the way we meet several of his "teachers." This guy had connections! He moved to New York City where he was persuaded to forget his law degree and get a master's in dramatic writing. But he never stopped cooking. Along the way he met up with Amanda Hesser, the *New York Times* food writer, who passed him advice: "Never shop with a list; buy what looks best that day in the market." Easy for her to say.

He learned all about knives, such as how to use and care for them, from a famous sous-chef, and his book gives a blow-by-blow on that universal stumbling block: how to cut an onion. Roberts even got to have lunch with Ruth Reichl, the editor of *Gourmet*.

Roberts became so immersed in his gustatory pursuit that he started a food blog, which is still going: [www.amateurgourmet.com](http://www.amateurgourmet.com). On the site, he's related his culinary ups and downs. He's compiled them, and now we have the book. While it has a few recipes, none of them are his. They're taken from books by the likes of Ina Garten, Alice Waters, and Mario Batali.

My epiphany was Mom's meat loaf; Roberts' first culinary

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success was the tomato sauce from Batali's *Babbo Cookbook*. Thus emboldened, he went on to cook for a date, then small dinner parties for friends, and he even prepared a Mother's Day dinner for his mom, who rarely cooked. She made reservations.

The book starts by describing small triumphs and builds to his larger culinary achievements, with a couple of diversionary "how-to" chapters on restaurant dining thrown in. This slender 200-pager ends on a triumphant note as he describes the trials and tribulations of hosting a multi-course "feast" for his best pals and the euphoria he felt when it turned into a boffo banquet.

#### The Book's Audience

The book has a great deal of charm for the average reader, but if you know someone who is starting to think of Food Network chefs as rock stars, is tired of take-out or Uncle Ben's rice bowls, is always stopping for roadside produce stands or farmers markets—well, they'll eat this up. It would be a great gift for a recent graduate now living in a place of their own. I'd add a really good chef's knife and wrap it all up in butcher's paper and kitchen twine.

Who knows, there may be a dinner in it for you. If you're lucky you may get Mom's meat loaf napped with Mario's tomato sauce.

*Corning epicure Cornelius O'Donnell is a new Mountain Home columnist.*

#### Genevieve's Meat Loaf

Here it is—a pretty basic meat loaf. I wrote it down, circa 1963, on the back of a Time, Inc. envelope that had contained a subscription invoice. I ran out and bought the ingredients at the old A&P in Painted Post, then came home, chopped, lined up all the ingredients, and called Mrs. O'D. With the phone wedged under my chin, I mixed the ingredients in the bowl and formed the loaf.

- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 1/2 pounds ground beef chuck (or the equivalent "meat loaf" mix of pork, beef, and veal)
- 1 carrot, scrubbed but not peeled, then grated
- 1 celery rib finely chopped
- 1/3 cup plain dried breadcrumbs (today I'd use Panko)
- 1 extra-large egg, lightly beaten (2 large eggs wouldn't hurt)
- 4 tablespoons freshly grated Parmesan cheese (imported Reggiano is best, but back then who knew?)
- 1 teaspoon Tabasco or dried red pepper flakes
- 1 tablespoon mixed dried Italian seasoning (today I'd use 1 tablespoon of julienned fresh basil, 1/2 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary, and 1 teaspoon of dried and crumbled oregano)
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 1 (8-ounce) can plain tomato sauce, divided
- 3 strips of lower-salt and fat bacon

Preheat the oven to 350-F.

When I first made this I used a standard glass meat loaf pan. Today I'm likely to form this into a loaf shape and bake it on a rack in a shallow roasting pan.

Heat the oil in a small skillet and cook the onion on medium heat until the onion is just translucent but not brown – about 3 to 4 minutes. Add the garlic and cook an additional minute, or until fragrant. Remove to a plate and let it cool.

In a large bowl, combine the meat, carrot, celery, breadcrumbs, egg, cheese, the seasonings, and HALF the tomato sauce. Use your hands to gently combine the ingredients. Plunk the mixture onto a shallow baking pan, and shape this into a roughly 9 1/2 -inch by 6-inch loaf. If you have a shallow rack, maneuver the loaf on top of this. If not, bake it as it lies! Drape the bacon over the top of the loaf.

Bake for about 50 minutes, spoon the rest of the tomato sauce over the top of the loaf and cook for an additional 15 – 20 minutes. Let the meat loaf rest, loosely covered with foil, about 15 minutes before serving. This is great hot, at room temperature, or chilled. Remove the bacon or not.

There – you just read a recipe. Now call 4 to 5 friends and have a feed!

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