

A Lingering Flavor



IN SEPTEMBER, WHEN I first move to Malawi, what I miss the most are apples. In September in Virginia, where I am from, I frequently visited apple orchards. I went with my family or my friends, taking a brown paper bag and heading out to the orchards to pick the apples straight from the trees. Later, we made them into sauces, or baked them into pies, or pressed them into cider. The ritual became so much a part of my life that I always associate the coming of fall with a chill in the air, the colors changing on the trees, and the smell of apples and spices.

In Malawi, September is not the beginning of fall. September is the beginning of the dry season, when green fades away from the earth, dust hovers in the air, and heat is visible in shimmering waves. Having just moved to the country to teach in a village school for two years I am unused to the heat,

FIGURE 1: A view of the Malawian village where the author lived. Photograph by Margaret Sessa-Hawkins © 2013.

and every day from twelve to two I lie in the small mud hut that is my new home and think of apples.

I am unprepared for this. In getting ready for my big move to Africa to join the Peace Corps I thought about missing electricity, about missing running water, about missing my friends and family, but I never once thought about missing food. I begin to understand that food was never just something to eat, but an element that grounded me traditionally, geographically, and culturally. This is perhaps why, from the very start of my time in Malawi, I gravitate toward the kitchen.

I spend most of my time in my neighbors' kitchen. Their kitchen is circular, constructed from hardened mud. The



FIGURE 2: *Girls frying peanuts over a fire. Photograph by Margaret Sessa-Hawkins © 2013.*

kitchen houses three giant clay cisterns holding water, a collection of varying sizes of pots and pans, and a family of chickens, who hide between and behind the clay cisterns. In the center of the enclosure is a shallow charred pit in which fires are lit, and around that are three large stones on which a pot or pan is balanced for cooking.

Three different families use the kitchen to prepare food, and around and after mealtimes, the women and children fill the space. I like to sit among them, to listen as the laughter and chatter flow around and above me, even though in the beginning I can't understand what people are saying. I hunker down low to the ground as the kitchen fills with smoke, staying inside as long as I can until my eyes and nose are streaming and I have to duck outside and suck in cool breaths of air. "Njosi," the women laugh. Smoke.

I go to the kitchen not just for the company, but also to learn. I have cooked before I moved to Malawi. When I was a child, in Maine, where my family lives during the summers, I always made blueberry pancakes with my dad. I picked the blueberries myself from the bushes outside our cottage, then stirred them and the milk into an instant pancake mix. Then I

would stand on a small wooden stool so I could reach the stovetop, spatula in hand, and flip the pancakes over one by one. Around Easter every year my mother and I, too, used to spend an evening in the kitchen, mixing together flour, water, butter, and eggs into hot cross buns. When we finished, the smell of them baking always permeated the entire space.

These are my strongest memories of cooking in America, but they are also close to my only memories of cooking in America. Back there I had first my parents and then my college meal plan to take care of my culinary needs. In Malawi I have nothing but a fire, and raw ingredients.

Fortunately, there are plenty of villagers around me who understand the position I am in. There is a saying in Malawi, "food is not clothes." It means that no matter how little food there is, there is always enough to share. It is also just one example of the wider ideal of communal living that exists in the country. Not able to cook, I find people inviting me over for dinner, handing me plates of food to eat. I find my kitchen



FIGURE 3: *The author in class, here listening to a guest lecture from a fellow Peace Corps volunteer. Photograph by Margaret Sessa-Hawkins © 2013.*



FIGURE 4: *A stall at the local market. Photograph by Margaret Sessa-Hawkins © 2013.*

stocked with logs, sticks, and tinder. Neighbors lend me embers to start a fire, teach me to fan a plate in front of the blaze to keep it going.

They teach me how to cook traditional Malawian foods. I learn to boil water and add cornmeal, handful by handful, stirring the mixture with a long thin wooden stick until it bubbles and congeals, until it can be formed into the *nsima* patties that are the staple food here. They teach me to harvest bean, pumpkin, and mustard leaves, to fry them with onions over a low blaze so they do not burn.

I have to relearn to eat as well. Sitting with my neighbors during dinner I learn to roll a small piece of *nsima* into a ball in the palm of my hand, to dip it into a pile of beans or tomato sauce, to pick it up with a small helping of cooked greens.

The more I learn about working with food, the more I enjoy the position it occupies in my life. I enjoy walking to



FIGURE 5: *The author with the younger members of her Malawian family* © 2013.

the village market—a set of stalls and small stores—to purchase my daily necessities. There I buy rice and beans by the cupful and pick out tomatoes, onions, greens, and eggs from small piles. I have a relationship with the sellers, who are most often also the growers, and I like practicing my language skills with them.

I enjoy, too, the way food ties me to others in Malawi. If ever I pass by someone cooking or eating while I am walking through the village I will hear the familiar cry of “*karibu*”—come share my food. In the kitchens, at night, families will cook together, and I will join them, contributing by cooking a side dish for the meal, and then gathering with the rest of the group on woven reed mats, eating with my hands while sitting under the stars. As the end of the dry season rolls around I help the women remove dried kernels of corn from the husks, taking the ears into my hands and using my thumb to flick rows of the kernels into large reed baskets. We spend the entire day like this sometimes.

Even with my newfound relationship to Malawian food, with my newfound ability to cook, something is still missing. I wake up in the middle of the night craving fresh berries that

I used to eat on picnics with my family. In the mornings I miss my routine of eating cereal while reading the comics section of the *Washington Post*. For every plate of *nsima* and beans I eat with my Malawian friends, I still long for the rice and pinto beans I would routinely consume at home.

In April, at the end of the rainy season, after I have been in Malawi for a little over half a year, I get a surprise. Apples appear in my local market. They are grown by a woman who lives just out of town, who cultivates enormous orchards full of pineapples, lemons, oranges, bananas, avocados, and even apples. I buy an entire basketful before I even think what I will do with them.

In the end, I decide to make an apple crumble. I had wanted, initially, to make apple pie, that most American of dishes, but pie is hard to bake over a fire. Crumble is far easier, and it is one of the many dishes I have learned to make in Malawi.



Carefully, I cut up the apples. I mix them with sugar and cinnamon and put them into a pot. I stir together flour, cinnamon, and sugar for the top of the crumble, adding in the makeshift butter I form by placing milk in a jar and shaking it until it solidifies. I pour the crumbling concoction on top of the apple mixture and cover up the pot, placing it on three large stones so it is balanced over some dying embers, then pile more embers on top.

Twenty minutes later I remove the pot, and carry it over to my neighbors' kitchen, there to share it with the people

FIGURE 6: *The author's leaving ceremony at the end of her time in Malawi* © 2013.

who have become my family in Malawi. Together, we all gather on the reed mats outside, spooning the mixture onto our plates and eating it in the cooling night. Even though it is April, even though the landscape around me is one of tall grasses, mud huts, banana and mango trees, it still feels a bit like September to me, like the Blue Ridge when the apples begin to ripen and fall. ©