

It takes a village

Charlotte Hastings writes about her first experience of becoming part of a group

This autumn, I wondered if you would join me down memory lane to see where *Kitchen Therapy: How To Become a Conscious Cook*¹ began – how a pack of playing cards evolved into a set of recipes, each with a story to tell.

My great grandmother (1900–1987), the oldest in the household, and I, the youngest, would happily spend our private nine-to-five hours playing cards together. It began with the simple card game *Snapp* and grew into an old French court game called *Bezique*.

Years later, as I peered into a fridge full of potential ingredients for a meal, I remembered the feeling of having a hand of cards to get creative with. Something clicked and an idea emerged: to make a pack of playing cards each with a recipe to share. At the time, I was in a transition between teaching drama and therapy training, while studying the tarot. The idea of developing archetypal recipes connected with the collective unconscious began to simmer.

Several years later, I was attending a course in systemic family therapy at St George's University Hospital as part of my ongoing therapeutic journey. We were asked to go over our own backgrounds and I remembered a specific moment from my childhood. My great grandmother always had plenty of time for me, except when the members of her knitting circle were due to meet – a devastating rupture. One day, the idea came to me that I could make them a tea party – I asked my grandmother, who was a wonderful cook, to help and she said, 'Yes, that's a lovely idea Charlotte'. Looking back, this was my first kitchen therapy event.

Invites were made, tablecloths laid and the knitting circle came to enjoy a truly good tea. I had lost the safe dyad, as every child eventually must, and gained access to the wider group, as every child needs. Melanie Klein proposed that weaning represents our first experience of loss.² However, as we move onto solid food with

more substance, variety and connection with our tribe, the loss is rewarded with growth. The secure base becomes earned security. I had lost my beloved card partner for the afternoon, but in return had become part of the party, offering what I had to give in the shape of food.

Unable to knit and too young to be friends, I remained outside the group, while also being central to the activity. There is a resonance with my work today when I co-ordinate Chomp family cooking events (<https://tinyurl.com/zh49h6pr>). Although I have been part of this

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community for more than 15 years, I remain separate from it in many ways. This allows me to notice and elicit people's skills and strengths, which they can then offer each other. The feminine principle of co-operation and the human basis of reciprocity and communication emerge around the campfire and shared watering hole where we build our community casseroles, as I have come to call them.

Today, I like to cook with a cast iron saucepan. The heat is then held in by a Wonderbag – a no-plug, slow cooker. This means that in the beginning you can add plenty of attention to each ingredient. The flavours are sealed into the pot, the sauce gradually built and then the whole dish is cosily wrapped up to simmer ready for dinner. Meals cooked in this way have the taste of unhurried trust which is truly delicious. Nature has a menu plan that lasts from cradle to grave, if we can just slow and listen, trust and honour the wisdom in our feeding cycles. It takes a village to raise a child as it does to raise a meal.

Each card in a pack plays an essential role, from the ace of spades to the three of diamonds, just as each ingredient in a recipe, from the garden herbs to the black-eyed beans, in the following recipe, plays an essential, personal part in the party. ●

Get your stove to table casserole dish and set the scene by sizzling crushed green pepper and fennel seeds with a bay leaf. Meanwhile, chunk celery, onion and carrots, adding each to the pan separately, sealing in its flavour with your one-to-one attention, and perhaps some spicy grated ginger. Now some more glamorous guests arrive: peppers in various colours, aubergines perhaps, courgettes and mushrooms a must. Add them one by one. In goes a tin of tomatoes flavoured with stock, mustard, soy sauce, more lemon juice, garlic and perhaps some other ideas of your own. Previously you will have soaked and cooked your beans of choice or simply opened a tin of the ready-to-go variety. Do a quick taste test before bringing it all to the boil and popping it safely in your no-plug, slow cooker, the Wonderbag, ready to offer you dinner when you walk through the door after work.

References

1 Hastings C. *Kitchen therapy: how to become a conscious cook*. London: Ortus Press; 2024.

2 Klein M. A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 1935; 16: 145–174.

Charlotte Hastings has been a psychodynamic practitioner since 2010 and BACP accredited since 2015. *Kitchen therapy* emerged through her childhood, marked by complex family dynamics, often expressed through food (as her chapter in *Attachment Relationships and Food* and book *Kitchen Therapy: how to become a conscious cook* describe). www.therapykitchen.co.uk