



Photo by Brigitte Lacombe

# Ruth Reichl

## taking a bite out of life

by Lisa Richmon

**R**uth Reichl was born an old soul in the kitchen, but her path from Berkeley commune to *New York Times* restaurant critic to editor-in-chief of *Gourmet* magazine was not a tightly scripted story. Ruth didn't really choose a career in food any more than she chose her parents. She was driven there. Her mother's taste-blindness and bacteria-friendly offerings sensitized Ruth's young palate. Ruth began cooking at age 5, as an act of self-defense against her mother's frightful "everything" stews.

By 8, Ruth had learned that cooking the right meal was a way of expressing love. From a beloved housekeeper, she learned how to pound the veal very thin and get the oil just the right temperature for Wiener schnitzel, her father's favorite meal.

Ernst Reichl was a book designer, who passed on to his daughter the value of laughter and imagination. He could doctor up the day's minutiae by re-arranging a few details and breathe new life into an old story in much the same way. Ruth would use the skills

she learned from her father to advance her career as a food critic, and also to pen two memoirs. Her first, *Tender at the Bone*, was a 1998 bestseller. It chronicled her unconventional upbringing.

Her mother, Miriam Reichl, was a woman stricken with mental illness. Dealing with her was one of Ruth's greatest challenges. "There are two responses for children dealing with a parent's mental illness," says Ruth. "It can either crush you or make you stronger. In my case, I wake up every day grateful I don't have the problems she had. I feel so blessed to know the joy of doing a job well and completing tasks. My mother's bi-polar disease prevented her from doing that, even though she really tried and wanted it for herself.

"She did crazy things like send me off to French boarding school on a whim. It was horrible, but it was an adventure. I learned to speak French. It took me a long time to see that it was an experience of great value. I had to be out of my mother's orbit for about 20 years to get far enough away from the pain and to just stop being angry."



At a young age Ruth learned to make sense of her world by paying attention to food, especially as it related to her mother. “Most mornings I got out of bed and went to the refrigerator to see how my mother was feeling. You could tell instantly just by opening the door. One day in 1960 I found a whole suckling pig staring at me. I jumped back and slammed the door...hard. Then I opened it again. I’d never seen a whole animal in our refrigerator before, even the chickens came in parts. The pig was surrounded by tiny lady apples and a whole wreath of weird vegetables. This was not a bad sign: the more odd and interesting things there were in the refrigerator, the happier my mother was likely to be.”

Though her mother was known to be crazy and dangerous with food—poisoning 26 guests at her son’s engagement party, and scraping the mold off three-week old turkey for dinner—Ruth found an upside to the madness. “We had things in my house that were unusual for a middle class family in the 1950s. If she found something interesting, like lobsters, alligator pears (avocado), cactus fruit, or baby goats, my mother would buy it. Her unconventionality made me open about food. And though I longed for a white bread sandwich kind of mother, her way sure beats being brought up on tuna noodle casseroles. I had a lot to be thankful for—it just didn’t occur to me then.”

A few years after graduating from the University of Michigan, Ruth felt lost. She was a lunch waitress at the Sheraton Hotel, living fearfully by herself in a decrepit apartment, when a guy named Doug appeared at her door looking for a former roommate. To make a connection, Ruth cooked for this perfect stranger. She cooked again the next night—sauerbraten, potato pancakes and homemade applesauce—for an artist who would later become her first husband. Many years later, she also cooked to ease deep pain when they parted ways.

**R**uth cooked her way into print. In the 1970s, when organic food proliferated in Northern California, a budding San Francisco magazine called *New West* emerged. They took a chance on this chef and co-owner of The Swallow, and asked her to try her hand as a restaurant critic. It was the first time writing about food occurred to

Ruth, but she enjoyed it tremendously. It gave her a chance to eat at great restaurants, even though she and her husband were scrounging for dimes. Freelancing with other magazines, Ruth was able to get paid to travel to Japan, Thailand and China with her husband. She had the opportunity to educate herself in a variety of different food styles and exotic spices.

Ruth’s biggest influence at the time was Mary Francis Kennedy Fisher, one of the first of the new breed of food writers, who wrote with a passion for eating well. Ruth read her works while she was still young, and by the 1970s had reread *The Art of Eating* so many times that the tattered pages fell from her paperback copy each time she picked it up.

“Can you imagine how I felt when Ms. magazine called me to write a story about Mary Francis? The editor actually asked me if I have ever heard of M.F.K. Fisher!” recalls Ruth. “She was quirky and bright. We connected very early. We learned we had a lot in common—family mental illness, cats and a shared contempt for honey. She offered me tea with honey. I must have made a face that told her how I loathed it. She was delighted and said with mock disgust, ‘I hate it too.’ From that point we were off and running.

“As far as that story, our idea (Mary Francis and mine) and the editor’s idea for the piece were two different things. Ms. wanted to know about her experience as a single mother and we wanted it to be about the food experience.

“She gave me advice: ‘Go work at a newspaper. You’re spending too much time polishing your words like each one is a little jewel. You have to get to the point where you just hand it in even if you don’t think it’s perfect.’ I took that advice, and six months later I was at *The Los Angeles Times*.”

At the *LA Times* Ruth conceived an irreverent column called the “Reluctant Gourmet,” which was so popular it even prompted a call from actor Danny Kaye.

Who was the reluctant gourmet?

“Before Michael and I were married,” remembers Ruth, “he reluctantly joined me for dinner at a very formal Los Angeles restaurant. It was dark and intimate, and the tails on the maitre d’s tuxedo were bobbing up and down as he escorted us to our table. After the maitre d’ shook out my napkin and

spread it on my lap, Michael looked up at the chandelier and said, ‘I wish I were at home watching the football game.’ Given the choice between the finest food imaginable and a Dodger dog, the reluctant gourmet always picks the dog.

“I started to insinuate him into my columns. He said everything a critic can’t—questioning authority, commenting on ridiculous prices. People loved him. He got more mail than me, as well as the call from Danny Kaye. Danny asked if he were my boyfriend. When I said yes, he suggested I marry him. ‘What are you waiting for?’ is what I think he really said.”

If Danny Kaye was intrigued with her daughter’s column, Miriam Reichl was almost impressed. At least Miriam wasn’t complaining about Ruth’s career choice anymore.

Years of eating with Michael haven’t created a blend in their sensibilities. He still has total contempt for the notion of sitting down to a fancy meal for a really long time, and she never gets tired of it. But the inclusion of Michael’s irreverence, as well as her own, has shaped Ruth’s career, and her impact on the food world.

Ruth moved from the *LA Times*—where she had worked her way up to food editor—to the *New York Times*. As a *New York Times* restaurant critic she is credited with broadening the paper’s horizons, from French-only cuisine to a more inclusive haute cuisine. She enjoyed the job, and enjoys New York, tremendously.

“You cannot have great restaurants unless you have great diners. One of the reasons New York City has great restaurants now is that it’s a city of people who are demanding and knowledgeable. Chefs have to wise up to their standards. On the other hand, if you go in and accept mediocre food, why should a chef bother to make great food? The clearer diners are about what is good and what is not, the better the restaurant will be. Don’t just accept a bad table. Say to the management, ‘I don’t mind waiting for a better table.’ And sometimes it’s appropriate to put a waiter in his place.”

What does she consider the kiss of death in a restaurant? “If I owned a restaurant, I would have the most fabulous bread and butter. After all, you’re spending a good half-hour with nothing but bread and



butter, why wouldn't you give it more thought? It continues to stun me that so many restaurateurs don't understand this. I don't mean butter flavored with garlic or something soft and sweet. I like a square of really cold unsalted butter. I hate when the butter tastes like the refrigerator."

In 1999 Ruth moved on to a new challenge. She became editor-in-chief of *Gourmet* magazine.

"People used to say, 'Is this what you're going to do with your life?' implying there was no value to being a restaurant critic. That I don't agree with. But before I took this job at *Gourmet*, I could write restaurant reviews in my sleep. I didn't know anything about running a magazine. Now three years into the job, I feel I'm still reinventing it every day.

"So many of the things that fascinate me about food are found on the pages of the magazine. For example, we had a really fine writer (Anna Quindlen) writing about another beloved writer (Laurie Colwin) and re-connecting our readers who loved Colwin back with her. Then, there's a beautiful piece about a black woman embarrassed to eat watermelon in public. There's some great writing in a story about celebrity chefs. This is just one slice of what is going on in American food today. It could never be boring. It's too hard, but never boring."

Ruth was hired to breathe new life into *Gourmet*, something she works hard at doing. "I wanted to recapture more of what the magazine was like in the original years, when writers like M.F.K. Fisher, James Beard, and later E. Annie Proulx and F. Scott Fitzgerald espoused opinions on everything from truffles to tuxedos. I wanted to put great writing back into the magazine.

"In recent years, the recipes, which were on the complicated side, were squeezing the writing out. We're approaching recipes with the understanding that the way we cook is different today. *Gourmet Every Day* was conceived for people whose cooking habits are diversified. We understand that the same person who will spend days on a meal also needs to create meals in fifteen minutes he or she can be proud of. There's balance. It's not mutually exclusive."

Have her own horizons expanded?

"Writing about restaurants is a small part of what's interesting to me about food. What I'm doing now is dealing with everything you can think of: organic farmers, food policy, the fantasy of food, and self-perception through food."

Ruth sees a world that is changing, food-wise. "The explosion of separate organic aisles already in groceries indicates the country is ready for organic food. There's so much money in this now that the big corporations are going after it. The problem is, we're trained to think apples should look big, red and tasteless. All you need is for people to taste the real thing once. If people didn't want it, Whole Foods wouldn't be New York's biggest grocery store."

Where are a chef's skills most important, in intervention or the ability to forage high quality, hard to find ingredients?

"Today, a chef needs both. Haute cuisine is all about transformation and technique. Ethnic food like the Italian we love is about ingredients. In the last two years we're seeing a melding of the two. That's because when you had chefs developing haute cuisine, all ingredients were good. There were no factory foods like modern chefs deal with. Today chefs have to go out and forage for good ingredients. There was a time when it was enough for a chef to have vegetables from his garden or just caught fish. Now, we've come full circle. Today any decent chef needs both.

"We're getting more and better foods in this country because immigration patterns have changed. Immigrants once came here with the intention to assimilate. They sent their kids to school with peanut butter to become American. Today, immigrants come with the intention of returning to their homeland and passing on a sense of pride in their native foods. Today kids are going off to school with sushi and tacos. What happens next is grocery stores spring up and interesting little restaurants open to feed that population.

"We had Cantonese to please the American palate 100 years ago. Now we have Fuzhou restaurants to feed their own people. And the chefs go and taste the foods and bring these flavors back and start making global cuisine at higher-end restaurants. We're seeing a parallel rise of exotic ingredients coming in to create a global cuisine at the same time."

Despite her busy schedule at *Gourmet*, Ruth found time to pen a second memoir, *Comfort Me With Apples*, published in 2001. The story line takes up where *Tender at the Bone* leaves off. It is a provocative book, revealing all sorts of personal things for the first time, like her affair with friendly competitor Colman Andrews, editor of *Savuer* magazine, the details of the break-up of her first marriage, and the romance of her second marriage. Why expose such intimate details?

"I truly believe that privacy is overrated. Under the skin most of us experience the same emotions and I think it's useful to know that. One of the great things about reading is the opportunity to feel as someone else feels. Fiction puts you in someone else's skin. If you're coy about the unpleasant details, then I don't know that there's a lot of use to what you write."

Did those she wrote about share her openness? "Doug is one of my favorite people on earth. He was completely okay with it and said to me, 'this is your truth.' The one person I felt I had to ask first was Colman. After a couple of weeks, he told me to go ahead and put it all in. I think my mother would have felt very exposed, which is why I waited until after her death to write it. But ultimately she would have been very happy."

The book ends with the birth of her son, Nick, now 13. Do the many references in the book to preparing one's child for the world relate to culinary preparation for Nick?

"I swore I would not make eating an issue for my son. I believed that if he sees us eat with pleasure, he would eventually do the same. Until he was 8, he never ate a vegetable. At 10 he says, 'Where's the salad?' or, 'Hey mom, why don't you make something you've never made before.' For his 10th birthday I took his friends to Chinatown. I thought we'd have a safe menu like egg rolls. He said, 'No mom, let's try something they never had before!'"

Does she have a formula for raising her child? "Well, children are really different. All you can really do is teach them to learn to live with themselves whoever they are. Some children are just born responsible. Nick is a child who makes being a parent pure pleasure. Of course he's only 13 and in a few years I could eat my words."

**lifestyles**