

COOKING IN THE NUDE

From Barbara Morningstar

Stephen cooked in the nude. It looked dangerous. But he said the small hand towel over his shoulder could be wrapped around his waist when he was frying in hot oil; or if his hair caught fire, it could be used to slap out the flames.

That's not what I wanted to say, though. Stephen loved to cook. Yes, in the nude, but only when it was hot.

It was hot that Labor Day. The valley was in the 110's, but Benedict Canyon was only 103 or so. I thought he'd be in the pool or upstairs with a fan on and the sports channel. But he was in the kitchen when I arrived, and it smelled fantastic.

"What is that wonderful smell?" I whiffed the aromas as I walked in the door.

"Never mind!" he yelled. "And don't come in here! Just give me a minute."

With that came the sound of sizzling and lids crashing down, and the smell of roasting chilies, and what? Cinnamon? Yes, and something I couldn't identify. Chocolate?

I dropped my things in the entry, and he appeared with a towel hastily wrapped around his middle. Smiling, slim and boyish, and sweating from the heat, he carried a pitcher of drinks and led me to the living room.

Hours later we ate the food he has prepared by candlelight in front of the fireplace. Holy Mole! I understood where that phase came from. It was delicious, a work of art, an act of love.

I know he loved me then, after all these years, because of that Chicken Molé he made for me that very hot Labor Day. I'll never forget it, though I'll never know what went into it. It was pure love, and that's why it was so delicious.

He poached pears in champagne for dessert. Topped with cream, they looked like Mt. Fuji in a snowstorm.



That was a year before he came home from his brother's funeral and collapsed in bed with a backache. The backache became kidney cancer, and then he had six months to live.



He comes to me now, when I'm not expecting him. I'm usually hungry, and thinking about making something to eat. He never comes when I open a bag of nuts and sit on the couch and watch a video. It's when I start to think about cooking. I'll remember the purple-black Japanese eggplants I bought at the Farmers Market, and the pizza dough; or the tart apples from See Canyon I had cut up for lunch and not eaten, and the two slices of pork loin that needed to be cooked. I drift into the kitchen, maybe putting some music on, and a joy takes over.

I wash red peppers and slice onion and heat coconut oil in a skillet, humming to the music, maybe opening a bottle of wine. I sauté the onion and peppers in toasted sesame oil, then throw in the wedges of green apple. I remember the assorted cherry tomatoes and toss them in another skillet with a smidge of coconut oil; the tomatoes start sizzling and the pan of onions, peppers, and apples calls out to me-cinnamon! and Chinese 5 spices! or that Masala spice mix! it calls. And I answer: yes, my love, si' mi amor. The pork gets careful trimming, then tossed into the pan on top of the spices, it gets crackling; after a few minutes of shaking the pan around, I turn off the heat and prepare a plate.

The yellow and red tomatoes are still intact, but the juices are flowing and the flavor is screaming: YUM. I place the pork and red peppers and green apples with cinnamon next to the tomatoes. Greens, his voice says; tender romaine leaves and some of that home-made cranberry sauce and a spoonful of Greek yogurt for dressing. It's beautiful.

I taste it. Divine. Then I thank him. Thank you for cooking for me today, Stephen. I'll write the recipe down and take a picture of the dish, but I'll never make it that way again. I won't remember what I did, what mysterious spice I added. I never know what he'll think up next, or when he'll show up.

Oh, yes, I should say I don't usually cook in the nude. Only when it's very hot. Or when Stephen is cooking.