

Eating with Your Hands

While in the West eating with the hands usually conjures up pictures of a child smeared from head to foot with food, in the East, using the hands as utensils is a highly refined art.

— Maya Tiwari, author of *Ayurveda: A Life of Balance*

The first hands I remember eating with were not my own. They were fligid, wrinkled, and smeared with sin – dollops of oatmeal-raisin cookie dough. I'd lick it off, that smooth yet gritty marriage of butter, brown sugar, and cinnamon studded with raisins. No metallic, spoony aftertaste – just ruckled, grandmotherly skin. Poking my own finger in the mixing bowl was improper and strictly verboten, but she knew I'd do it anyway. So Nanny allowed me to partake of her own, more trustworthy, finger.

That dough-smeared forefinger, raised like a conductor's baton, is my most vivid recollection of Nanny – the prelude that cues the symphony of hazier memories. I doubt I would remember half as much if she'd made me lick from a fork. Utensils don't have the redolence of skin. But the finger does trigger a memory of her spatula. Whenever my brothers and I misbehaved or stole more cookie dough, she'd shake that spatula and shout, "I'm gonna get you!" while we giggled because we knew she'd never spank us, and, anyway, it was just flimsy rubber. We'd dash around the room, and she'd manage to scuttle a few feet and shake it again, her mouth and cheeks playing tug-of-war between sternness and smile.

But that was in the days when a kid could get away with the tug-of-war between civility and unabashed stickiness, before eating with hands was shamed out of us by the Stares of Disapproval.

At first we rebel: Why, Mom, do we have to use a fork to repeatedly stab at that last, unstabbable, Kleenex-thin frill of lettuce glued to the plate with Thousand Island dressing when the whole thing could be conveniently eaten with fingers?

Because that's the way it's done, honey.

And then we get confused: We eye the people around the dinner table, assessing their possible reactions. Can I eat spare ribs with my hands in front of these people? What is the proper way to manually eat ribs? *With three fingers – the thumb and the middle two.* Why those fingers? *So your index finger stays clean. It's ladylike.* Why is it more ladylike to have a clean index finger than a clean middle finger? *Because that's the way it's done.* Can I pick up the asparagus with my fingers? *No, use your fork.*

But then other people's voices chime in: *"I read that it's perfectly acceptable to eat asparagus with your hands in polite company."* *"That's true. As long as it isn't covered in hollandaise sauce."* *"What if it's a simple shallot butter sauce?"* *"Good question."* *"How about bacon?"* *"Bacon must be eaten with a fork. Unless it's crispy, of course."* *"How crispy is crispy?"*

So then we sneak, shamefully, while denying we have a problem.

It's the Friday morning after Thanksgiving, and I shuffle semiconsciously to the kitchen. It is calling out from the refrigerator – silent, like a dog whistle – but my mouth hears it. I look over my shoulder and casually tug open the fridge door. There it sits on the shelf, inadequately draped in plastic wrap, as if caught midway through getting dressed. Leftover pecan pie. Overnight, the topaz-colored goo has oozed out from beneath its pecan roof, and lonely bits of crust rubble cry out, “Eat me, I’m yours!” I crouch in the open door and pinch up flakes of crust, pluck pecans, and nibble them between my front teeth. Then I drag my finger through the filling and suck the cloying nectar like a hummingbird. It’s a full-body experience: the mahogany sight of it, the cold viscous texture on my finger, the soft crunch of pecan, the vanilla scent, the listening for footsteps from the next room, the burgeoning ache in my knees from kneeling.

Chilled, post-Thanksgiving, early-morning, pilfered pecan pie cannot be eaten from a plate: that would require commitment and deny the giddy thrill of possibly being caught. Under no circumstances can it be eaten with a fork. To separate yourself from that buttery syrup with four inches of impersonal steel? As the Shah of Iran once observed, “Eating with a fork is like making love through an interpreter.”

Quick – close the door. Someone’s coming...

Then, slowly, we begin to forget: We keep our elbows off the table, slurp silently, daub our lips dispassionately, make love through interpreters.

But then we discover we’re not alone.

By a stroke of luck, my college roommate was from Sri Lanka, an island that practices the noble art of hand eating. One night, Tui sat down to a mound of rice surrounded by a palette of curries and condiments. Then neatly, femininely – as was her way – she mixed each ricey bite *with her hands*. A smidgen of eggplant curry massaged between the fingers with chunks of mutton and oh, say, lime pickle and a pinch of onion sambal... then into her mouth. And then the next bite: completely different. Potato curry with lashings of mango chutney and rice. More onion sambal sprinkled over egg curry, its yolk soaking up the saffron-colored sauce. Then lime pickle with just the mutton, no rice. And on and on. It was a revelation. The earthiness, the sensuousness, the freedom to mix and match and birth new flavor combinations with each morsel. The sheer fun of it.

In Sri Lanka, India, and other eastern countries, eating with the hands is a highly refined art. Ask most people from these regions and they’ll tell you the only way to truly enjoy their food is by eating it with your hands, coalescing the various curries manually so that each bite is unique. Hindi even devotes several words to the various types of hand eating. *Ghronikah mudra*: the formation of five fingertips into a “petal” that

cradles scoops of rice or dhal. *Annabhakshana mudra*, where four fingers form a spoon and the thumb slides blends of curries, sambals, and chutneys into the mouth. Selecting long, slender foods like asparagus and celery with three fingers is *Kangulah mudra*. There is even a term bestowed on the shape of the hand when it cups a whole, ripe fruit for the biting: *kadambah mudra*.

As it turns out, as much as one-third of the planet – from Tanzania to Laos, India to the Middle East – eats the majority of their meals with their hands. And up until a mere couple of hundred years ago the whole non-chopsticked world ate with their hands, and wouldn't have it any other way.

Does this mean we should turn back the clock and just say no to silverware? Not necessarily. Certainly there are meals and occasions when the fork is invaluable. Fettuccini alfredo comes to mind. The job-interview Chef Salad. The meeting-the-future-in-laws dainty bites of cutlet.

But just as there is a specialized silver oyster fork, so we have our own fleshy, five-tined forks for the ultimate food experiences. Picking up a crab leg and putting our opposable thumbs to task cracking open the shell, prying out the roseate flesh with our fingers, and dipping it into a puddle of butter. Slicing an orange peel with a fingernail and sliding a thumb under the pillowy pith so that (once in a blue moon) it twizzles away in a perfect, seamless spiral. Cradling a burrito in two palms as the salsa juices seep out the bottom and trickle in cilantro-flecked rivulets down our wrists. The simple satisfaction of dunking a chocolate chip cookie or ketchuping a fry or pinching off a spindly pink clot of cotton candy. The carnal gnawing of meat clinging to greasy rib bones. The classic, summer-between-two-skewers munching of corn on the cob, gripping it with buttery fingers and sliding your mouth back and forth like a harmonica player. And the utter genius of Ethiopian food: ripping off a triangle of the injera bread tablecloth and wrapping it round lamb *wat* or *yataklete kilkil*.

Eating with your hands is a sensuous indulgence, a meeting of soul and skin. Satisfying on a deep, animal level. It's getting soaked in a monsoon, taking off your shoes and squishing wet sand between your toes, making mud pies, impaling raspberries on your fingertips and kissing them off one by one till your mouth is juicy and full. It's squashing grapes underfoot, playing music instead of hearing it, slapping fistfuls of your first birthday cake into your mouth. The mutual giving and receiving between fingers and tongue. Primal and earthy and natural.

The first time I eat with my hands in an Indian restaurant in the U.S. I am with Tui, my Sri Lankan friend. I am about to scoop four fingers full of carefully blended *saag paneer*, basmati rice and chutney into my mouth, when the waiter stops dead in his tracks. His expression is admiration mixed with a teaspoon of intercultural disapproval. "You eat with your hands?" he asks. I just smile and nod.

I have two words for him: *Annabhakshana mudra*.