

From Whisk to Microphone

The Evolving World of Evan Kleiman

Some people are so well known that they're readily identifiable by a single name. On the Los Angeles food scene, one of those names is Evan.

In the twenty-five years since she opened Angeli Caffè, Evan Kleiman's Thursday-night family-style meals have become legend. First there is the feast, which centers on a theme, perhaps a seasonal item like tomatoes, or a calendar event like Thanksgiving or Passover. Then there is Evan herself, the executive chef who slips out of the kitchen to schmooze with diners, discuss the evening's themed meal, and greet those eager to meet the voice of *Good Food*, which broadcasts across the country each week on KCRW Radio. In fact, we once brought friends visiting from Chicago to Angeli for one of Evan's Thursday-night meals. They were thrilled to meet the woman whose radio show they listened to faithfully.

When Evan wearies of chat, be it at the restaurant or on the radio, she can always retreat to the kitchen, to her garden, or to her computer, where she has produced four cookbooks. But then the urge to explore food, ideas, geography, history, and culture strikes again, and she's off to Italy with a group of culinary travelers in tow. If she elects instead to do her exploring at home, she has an entire radio audience to listen to her adventures as she interviews guests from across the spectrum.

Because of all these hats she wears, Evan increasingly is coming to identify herself as a culinary voyeur, a title she says has described her since childhood. Growing up as the only child of a single mother, she spent a lot of time by herself, reading and dreaming of large families and of other cities and other countries, and what it would be like to have different lives in different places.

"Reading defines me about as much as cooking does," she says. Some food books are not just collections of recipes but narratives that reveal a lot about the cultures from which they come. "I'd read about Viennese food, the grand black-and-white balls, pre-World War I life. Food was like theater for me. I still love vintage books."

Could you also name her passion "culinary anthropology"? Quite possibly. Naomi Duguid and Paula Wolfert are certainly food anthropologists, and it is writers like these whose work intrigues and inspires Evan. Anyone listening to *Good Food* for the first time might wonder why she interviews so many people whose business is not specifically some aspect of food production. But what these people have to say reveals how food is central to our lives on many levels, from the cultural to the religious, from the political to the sociological.

"People reveal a lot about themselves when they talk about food, and sometimes they even give you a twist on your own life," she says. "Often it can be through something as simple as a family recipe."

In addition to her work at the restaurant, Evan interviews anywhere from four to ten people each week for her radio program, including artists, writers, scientists, and doctors—people whose connection with food may be tangential, but whose opinions on food are no less important than those of chefs or food producers.

"This is what makes me different from other food people," she explains. "It's not just about what's on the plate, but how food conveys the totality of society and culture that fascinates me."

Food politics is of especial interest to her, so she not only reads the works of writers like Raj Patel, author of *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*, and Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, but she invites them onto her program to discuss those crucial connections between the science of our food and the living of our lives.

It's much more than an idle, pedestrian interest that drives Evan to learn about other cultures through food.

"When you know what your 'enemy' cooks and eats and you envision him sitting down to a meal with his family, you're more inclined to see him as a human being, not as some evil person to be fought," she explains.

It is apparent that being a culinary voyeur involves considerable breadth and depth of reading and

research, all of which Evan loves. At some point, however, equilibrium must be maintained.

"When I get too much in my head, I go cook," she says.

But whether she's in the kitchen or at the farmers' market, Evan's thoughts never stray far from the sociology of food. In fact, she recounts the wake-up call that the events of September 11, 2001, sounded for her personally: "9/11 happened on a Tuesday, and the next day was market day. I had to shop for the restaurant, but I didn't want to go out. I went, though, and it was the best thing I could have done. Everyone was subdued, but they were making eye contact. I think we all realized that it was important to make a connection with others. What a life-affirming place to do that! The farmers are feeding us, and we're buying their food and supporting them. I remember weeping, feeling touched by this sense of community around me there at the farmers' market. I didn't want to take it for granted anymore."

And she doesn't. While, sadly, many people have no clue where their food comes from, few remain oblivious when Evan is around.


"Several years ago when I was first beginning to get involved with Slow Food, I spent a lot of time visiting farms and talking to farmers. One day I was at a farm with a kid who worked for me, and he asked me, 'What do they do to this food to make it edible?' I asked him what he meant. He said, 'It comes out of the dirt, right? What do they do to it? Do they nuke it or what?' I had to explain to him that dirt isn't actually *dirty*."

As for the realities of a harsh economic climate, Evan sees a silver lining in people developing a closer link with their food supply.

"I hope more people are encouraged to plant a garden at home," she says. "Growing your own food completely alters the way you think about food and feeding your family. It really changes you." She notes that charitable agencies that assemble groceries for the poor are realizing the value of including fresh produce whenever possible. For a long time food pantries accepted only sealed boxes and cans of nonperishable food. Evan takes it as a great sign that they now welcome fresh produce and meat, too, and sees it as a great opportunity for more people to become educated about good food. WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) vouchers now make up a significant amount of the currency used at the Hollywood Farmers' Market, and she feels this is



Evan shows off one of her delicious creations.



a good indication that the message is getting out there about the value of incorporating fresh fruit and vegetables into the diet.

"The name 'Hollywood' evokes a world of glitz and glamour, but the reality is that a lot of the people who live there are the working poor," she explains. Evan finds this kind of turnout at the farmers' market encouraging. So are the increased opportunities for farmers to visit children in the classroom and to invite them on, quite literally, *field trips*, to see what the farmers are doing and how it affects them. This is an important step in helping children connect the dots between the farm and their own plates.

While Evan owns up to enjoying a favorite (but unnamed!) junk food now and then, she emphasizes that it's only an occasional digression. For those who are interested in weaning themselves off of a steady diet of mass-produced and overprocessed foods, baby steps are typically what's needed to set them on a successful path toward better nutrition.

She identifies this progression: A guy may start out microwaving a frozen hamburger in a bun from the store. This encourages him to try something else, something a little more challenging, and he continues until he sees that cooking for himself is not arcane or difficult. In fact, it can be downright enjoyable.

Regardless of what they decide to call it, she hopes home economics will soon stage a comeback. The Food Network is helping make the business of cooking more visible and acceptable, especially among men. Evan says she's amazed—and amused—by how men are attracted to making salad dressing in particular.

"What is it that draws them to it?" she asks. "Is it the whisk!"

While Los Angeles can certainly be a scene defined by trends, Evan feels that "trend" doesn't apply in the same way to this city's awareness of sustainability and eating in season. She explains:

"The thing about Los Angeles and California is that we're way ahead of the curve when it comes to health. Local cookbooks from the early part of the twentieth century show a preoccupation with fresh fruit and vegetables. I think the idea of seasonality and freshness was already there, although perhaps dormant in the minds of Californians. Now that the light bulb has gone on, people are flocking to the farmers' markets.

"Appearance and health concerns are not a trend out here, because so many people in L.A. earn a living

with their faces and bodies. There's a recognition that fresh, seasonal food is necessary for maintaining their health and good looks. It has made a deep impression on these people."

Evan is encouraged by the younger generation's attitude toward food, noting that the children who come to Angeli tend to have sophisticated palates and know what they want to eat.

"It's like it skipped a generation," she says. "In the fifties women stayed home and kept house and cooked. In the sixties the thing that suffered was the family table, as more women entered the workforce—not that I'm at all against women working. For a while, gourmet food became a way of expressing status in society, but it was disconnected from daily life. That's gone now, and the younger generation is cooking—it's just a natural part of how they express themselves. And the family table is becoming important again.

"Younger food professionals take for granted the world of food diversity now. They support the players in this effort. I came to organic and farm-fresh late, not until I was in my forties. They're in their twenties, and they get it already. So I don't think it's a trend—it's an actual turning of the page."

And Evan Kleiman most definitely has had a hand in turning the page for Los Angeles.

Angeli Caffé sits in a stretch of Melrose Avenue that's dominated by the edgy and the hip. In fact, the front of Angeli wraps around the entrance to a body piercing and tattoo parlor, which can be a little disorienting for first-time visitors to the restaurant. But there's great symbolism in this, as the restaurant began a quarter century ago as a super-trendy place to eat. Over the years the edges have smoothed, and it has become what she describes as a more egalitarian, family-friendly place, while never letting go of its appreciation of a good time.

"We've established a tradition here," Evan explains. "When children come, they get dough to play with while they wait for their meal, and we bake it." For many of these kids, it's their first time to handle food in its unfinished, potential-food form, and it makes a deep impression on them and on their parents as well.

"It's important to have a good food experience, not something that's intellectually taxing," she says. "Angeli is unfussy. We serve simple food that's to be enjoyed. At the end of the day it's about an inviting place and a good meal."

While Evan loves her restaurant and cooking, she finds that she doesn't identify as completely with her role as chef as she once did. "What I do is a combination of cooking in the restaurant, which I've done for twenty-five years, and then having the radio show for ten years now. It's interesting to see how full circle I've come."

As she has moved beyond feeding individuals to informing entire communities through her weekly broadcasts, Evan has begun making plans to venture beyond cookbook writing to narrative writing. Even fiction is on her mind for future projects. She notes that blogging has been a valuable entrée into this new phase of writing and credits it with helping her experiment

with different styles so that she can find the right voice through which to explore the world by way of its food and food traditions.

Evan notes that a lot of people who don't deal with food daily have no idea how deeply it runs through everything. In response to this, she says her life goal is to be the culinary love child of Charlie Rose and Jon Stewart, "to understand the reality of food in its many facets while seeing how silly it all can be."

Balancing depth of knowledge with a light touch is what she hopes to achieve, and listening to *Good Food* reveals that Evan Kleiman is already succeeding at this goal.

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Photo by Carol Penn-Romine

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The lunch recess bell rang, putting an abrupt end to the din of yelling, laughing, running kids on the playground. I waved to my twin daughters as they trudged back to their third-grade classrooms, wondering how they were adjusting to their new school in Ojai after our move from Oakland. As I walked across the now-deserted lunch area, a slight gust blew an empty potato-chip bag around my ankles. I headed for the nearest trash can. Peering in, I surveyed the aftermath of school lunch: piles of Styrofoam trays laden with chicken nuggets and mashed potatoes, unopened bags of baby carrots, dozens of half-full cartons of chocolate milk, Lunchables trays, apples with a single bite taken out of them, chip bags, plastic water bottles, paper napkins, candy wrappers, plastic sporks, soda cans, and other fast-food refuse. I continued walking past the chain-

link fence surrounding the school garden. It was clear that at some point, the little garden had been loved and nurtured, but faded signs sitting askew in beds filled with weeds and crabgrass attested to recent neglect.

Over the next couple of weeks my daughters and I grew comfortable with our new school—there were, after all, wonderful teachers, a caring principal, great kids, and stimulating programs. But, like persistent gnats, thoughts of overflowing trash cans, weed-filled garden beds, and bad food going into little bellies kept buzzing around in my head. How could it be that in the midst of all the fresh fruits and vegetables I saw growing all around me in this agricultural county, kids in school were eating so much highly processed, artificial food? And was it necessary to generate so much trash at lunchtime? Why was the garden abandoned?