

A TENDER LEGACY OF GREEN BEANS

Simple rituals forge memories and
connection across generations.

BY TARA BETTS

MARCH 2020. IT WAS ABOUT ONE WEEK after city officials issued the shelter-in-place order in Chicago, and I wasn't sure what my life (or my livelihood) would look like. As a Midwestern girl who did not grow up in the city, I automatically started thinking about what would I need in order to be able to eat in the long term. I bought nut butters, rice, beans, yeast, flour, canned goods, seeds, potting soil, and vegetables, both fresh and frozen.

I had stocked up, and I had already declared a very tight bubble of people as my safety net. Jennifer and her then-seven-year-old son, Evan, were in this tight bubble. Since Evan calls me Auntie Tara, I was happy to watch him one night while Jennifer tended to her last errands before we were all sealed into our homes. Evan is giggly with eyes like bright, brown chestnuts. That evening, he played one of the many games that he's always introducing me to on his iPad, while I completed a more time-tested task: snapping green beans.

That simple chore reminded me of childhood, especially being in my grandmother's orange kitchen in Kankakee, Illinois. The light that shone through the huge kitchen window danced past the white and orange drapes and illuminated the tile's orange marbled pattern. My grandmother and I ate and

laughed together around her glass-topped table. We'd cover the table with newspaper to enjoy watermelon there, and it also served as a theater—we watched many episodes of *Wheel of Fortune* together and witnessed the crowning of the first Black Miss America, Vanessa Williams, there.

My grandmother Charmaine, frequently called "Charm," was raised in Tennessee. She was tall and brown-skinned, with a round birthmark on her cheek that reminded me of Marilyn Monroe's beauty spot. When she spoke, she turned her long fingers to make a point. Her laugh was a full cackle, and I loved making my grandmother laugh. I don't know how she came to be in Illinois. She didn't talk much about Tennessee, where she and my great-uncle L.D. grew up. I wondered if she thought her young granddaughter might not care, but I learned a great deal from her, including a serious respect for food. I learned to shell peas, shuck corn, and snap the ends off green beans at her kitchen table. I remember how the tough stems made the undersides of my thumbnails sore, and I thought I'd never get to the bottom of the basket, but I did. Pleasing my grandmother with little tasks like this made me happy and proud. Then we would make dinner together and eat with my grandfather.

Illustrations by Delphine Lee



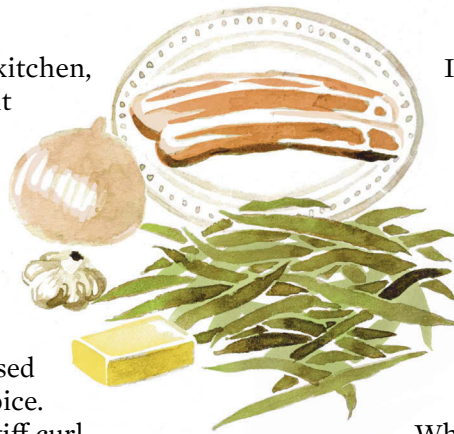
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That night in my Chicago kitchen, I told Evan how I used to sit with my grandma at a table like this. When I asked him if he wanted to help me snap green beans, he simply asked, “Why would I wanna do that?” I imagine many kids would have said the same thing. His young ears might have missed the twinge of sadness in my voice. He wasn’t familiar with the stiff curl of stem; the skinny little points like leaf tips; the tiny, woody, dark circles before stems become beans snapped off to discover the glistening deep green inside.

At first, I felt a little hurt that he didn’t understand how food could be precious like that, or how doing a simple, repetitive act could bring two people closer. I realized that I was asking a lot of my seven-year-old visitor, who often cooks with his mom at home, but it also made me think about why I was sad. I think it was because, that evening with Evan, I wanted to share the care that I experienced with my grandmother. I quietly kept snapping the ends off each bean, knowing that good food takes time. And I found myself thinking about how so many adults build memories with kids by going out to eat. Instead, the memories I made with my grandmother were domestic. Cooking at home with her meant that I grew up eating healthful foods. And just as importantly, it was also an expression of mutual love and care.

Many of us feel hampered by demands on our time and choose more convenient, processed food or have someone else we don’t know make our food because we work so much. And so many of us are working so much, we don’t have time to unpack and explain to younger people why certain things are important—access to fresh vegetables and other healthy foods. Landownership. Being responsible stewards of the environment. Sitting at my grandmother’s kitchen table gave me time to listen and talk to her.

That night, I bottled my shock and disappointment that Evan didn’t want to snap string beans with me. Maybe later he would. In the meantime,



I let him be the bright-eyed, energetic boy he is, jumping around like a junior parkour master.

There are so many ways to fill the gaps now. I hope I can learn to do a better job of sharing with my little nephew Evan and my other young friends. There’s so much I want to pass on about Black people’s resourcefulness and thriving.

When I was a kid, I had my grandmother’s cooking, my grandparents’ tavern full of Black people, ripe with the sounds of a jukebox. I had rib-tip shacks, and even moments like watching *Eyes on the Prize*. Today, Evan and his peers can see so many more representations of Black foodways. I can share Black cookbooks, or eventually watch *High on the Hog* and *Eyes on the Prize: Hallowed Ground* with him. Maybe I can tell him the little-told story of Dr. Alvenia Fulton, a Black woman who cowrote a vegan cookbook with the comedian Dick Gregory and opened Fultonia Health Food Center, the first health food store and vegetarian restaurant on Chicago’s South Side.

Thankfully, we’re also at a point where Black communities are staking their claim as vegans and vegetarians. We can prepare vegan meals inspired by the vegetables that formed the foundation of soul food and, I hope, practice healthier eating overall. In doing so, we continue a tradition that was often based on the scraps of slavery and poverty, but also built from a deep legacy of cultivating the land. We follow in the footsteps of expert foragers, herbalists, and midwives who learned how to care for our community when no one else would.

My grandmother has been gone for years now, and no one knows where her cookbook went. I wish I could hold that cookbook, with its red and white cover, and study the recipes clipped from newspapers and tucked between its pages. Nevertheless, she passed her love of cooking on to my brother Marcel and me. The act of snapping green beans still soothes me. Making meals and putting hands on the beans ourselves is a love we can transfer, an act we can remember long after the teachers have moved on to other planes. 🍴

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