

Dietary requirements? Granny didn't get the memo.

My grandmother is a culinary genius. Each and every meal, snack and nibble is a gastronomic delight. "Why"? I ask. She claims "Sunshine gets the ball rolling and love takes care of the rest". Cryptic, isn't she? The mysterious and enigmatic ways of the Balkan Granny have served me well in stockpiling anecdotes to regale my western friends with. To elaborate – by "sunshine" she means the glorious setting of the Balkan countryside and "love" refers to her unparalleled skill honed by decades of practicing the ancient wisdom of her Balkan Granny predecessors.

1. Setting. My grandparents live in a small seaside town in the Balkans where the fish at market was caught in the early hours of that morning, the beef is veal from that field over there and the oranges were plucked, leaves and all, from the tree outside the kitchen window. The cheese, butter and milk from grass and herb fed cows, is hand delivered by Ana, whose family have perfected their dairy technique over generations. The mushrooms are collected from the mountain forest that encircles the fjord. Their house even has it's own spring. Everything is locally sourced. But the food I love most, my vice, my love, my Achilles heel, is Granny's homegrown tomatoes.

Growing up in London, I believed that a tomato was a vegetable, a component of a dish but certainly not the star, the Goose, never the Maverick. I was peripherally aware of the "is tomato a fruit or a vegetable" debate but couldn't understand the fuss over the boring little non-starter. The tomato didn't seem to have the chutzpah to claim fruit status. Vegetable = sustenance, fruit = treat.

I looked into it, and according to the Vegetable Research & Information Centre, a vegetable is the edible portion of a plant: leaves (lettuce), stem (celery), roots (carrot), tubers (potato), bulbs (onion) and flowers (broccoli). A fruit is the mature ovary of a plant. Or, as my sister learned at nursery: vegetables grow in the ground, fruit grows on trees. A tomato is therefore a fruit. One bite of a Balkan tomato and it all makes sense. A Balkan tomato is a treat, a legitimate snack and has unquestionable fruit status, with its fragrant skin and its sweet, tart, tangy juice. Nothing compares to a Balkan tomato. Thank you, 'sunshine'.

2. Skill. Granny belongs to a generation that valued process. My grandparents built their house from scratch, they made their clothes from scratch and, naturally, they make their meals from scratch. Given the abundance of organic ingredients at their disposal, it would be a sin to even consider the alternative.

I say 'organic', but the word has no resonance with Granny. "Natural, pesticide-free food straight from the source", I explained. "Normal", she replied. To this day, she still thinks I made up 'organic' to mess with her. As a result, she tends not to believe me when I use terms like: vegetarian, vegan, meat-free, gluten-free etc. I tried especially hard to explain the term 'vegetarian' when I invited my vegetarian friend and her vegetarian family to lunch one summer.

“Granny, please prepare something meat-free”, I asked.

Granny giggled and replied, “Yes, dear, meat-free and organic.”

“Granny, it’s no joke. They don’t eat meat. They won’t eat meat.”

“So what do I serve? Vegetables? And have our guests think we don’t know how to receive people at our table?”

Communicating across the culture and the age gap, we finally agreed on a sufficiently elaborate meat-free meal. As far as I was concerned, we could have served tomatoes and everyone would have been happy as a clam. No such luck.

“Granny, I’m certain they won’t be offended by the lack of meat! Quite the opposite, actually! Please, oh, please stick to the menu.” I thought we were on the same page. I should have made sure.

The day of *The Lunch*. Our vegetarian guests arrive, we take our seats at the kitchen table and lunch smells amazing, just like it usually does. Granny ladles out the soup and I set it before our guests. My friend inhales, frowns and asks if the soup contains meat. I assured her it didn’t, convinced it didn’t. Granny doesn’t speak English but she understood perfectly what we were saying and didn’t intervene. My friend wasn’t convinced by my protestations. I turned and asked Granny directly. Sheepish, Granny stirred the pot without meeting my gaze.

“Let them try it, they should try it, it’s good. Doesn’t it smell good?”

Enough said. I took the plates away and juggled apologising to our vegetarians (*Have you tried these lovely tomatoes? Did you know tomatoes are a fruit? These certainly are! – Pause for laugh...*) and getting Granny to stand down with the meat platter.

“They have never tried my cooking. How could I serve vegetable water? I took the meat out after an hour so it is ‘meat-free’. Maybe they like meat. How do they know if they’ve never tasted Balkan ‘organic’? Let them try! Let them try!”

Imagine our terrified vegetarians, listening to this foreign monologue peppered with “Organic! Organic!” delivered by an impassioned chef balancing half a carved kid in one hand and brandishing a knife in the other. Needless to say, our traumatised vegetarians never returned to eat at Granny’s table. But, as traumatised as they were, their lunchtime trauma doesn’t hold a candle to that of my aunt’s at the hands of her Granny. The grannies in my family get stranger further up the family tree. The stranger the granny, the juicier the anecdote.

My aunt Lili spent summers on her grandparents’ farm as a child, where her Granny taught her to cook. Balkan cuisine differs from region to region. In the

mountains, German influence differentiates the delicacies of the mountain villages from those of the Mediterranean coast. We do sauerkraut and strudel especially well in the Balkan Mountains. Incidentally, Kefir, the yogurt drink newly beloved by the western world, is native to the Balkans. All Balkan grannies harbour a 'mother mushroom' converting a keg of milk into Kefir: ultimate peasant drink – cures any and all ailments, including, but not limited to old age. Imagine the grannies' faces were you to tell them the young people buy Kefir for £20/litre. "Screens have eroded the collective millennial common sense," sayeth the grannies.

Tending to the animals was the foundation of Lili's culinary training. She got along with all the animals except for the rooster, who lived in a coup at the bottom of the garden. They had a special relationship did Lili and Rooster. Rooster would fly onto Lili's shoulder, peck at her head and Lili would cry. Naturally, the cousins convinced little five-year-old Lili that:

1. Rooster could sense how clever Lili was and wanted to eat Lili's brain so that he could become human.
2. Rooster wanted to peck out Lili's brain so that Lili would become a chicken.
3. 'City child brain' was a delicacy among the poultry community.

No wonder my Granny doesn't believe me when I try to teach her things. Clearly this culture of mistrust stems back generations.

Notwithstanding the ambiguous motive, Rooster had a special instinct for making Lili miserable. He plucked Lili's t-shirts from the clothing line and gifted them to his chicken wives. He broke out of his enclosure to screech bloody murder beneath Lili's bedroom window at the crack of every dawn. He punctured Lili's bicycle tyre on more than one occasion and always just before school. Lili spent years building alliances with the other farm animals so she could go about her business protected and undetected. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not. Regardless, Lili fed the tyrant every single day. All summer long. For years.

Once summer, the family gathered in the garden to celebrate Lili's ninth birthday. Imagine a suckling pig on the spit, dripping fat onto a tray of golden roast potatoes and fresh fluffy white bread on the table next to those juicy tomato fruits... But first, as we know, a Balkan lunch begins with soup. The family sits down to eat the non-meat-free soup, chatting and dipping bread. Granny asks Lili's verdict on the soup. Lili shrugs and says it tastes just like always. Was she sure? She was sure.

"But where is Rooster?" asks Granny, a coy little smile playing on her lips.

Little Lili tucks her head under her arms, bracing for a peck. Nothing. Lili looks up at the smiling faces of her nearest and dearest. No Rooster? Granny points to Lili's empty soup dish and says,

“Your enemy. Finished.”

An enemy? A worthy and beloved adversary! Lili hasn't eaten soup in almost five decades. In fact, she hasn't touched poultry since although she isn't quite a vegetarian. We've seen how un-navigable that is even as a one off.

Needless to say the grannies in my family struggle with dietary boundaries. Ironically, my Granny was recently diagnosed with gluten intolerance. She and her doctor agree to disagree over a slice of home baked bread and fresh forest strawberry jam.

This summer, we have vegan guests. Granny is roasting a lamb she named 'Tofu'. She calls this progress. I suppose we'll have to disagree over a slice of lamb and tomato salad.