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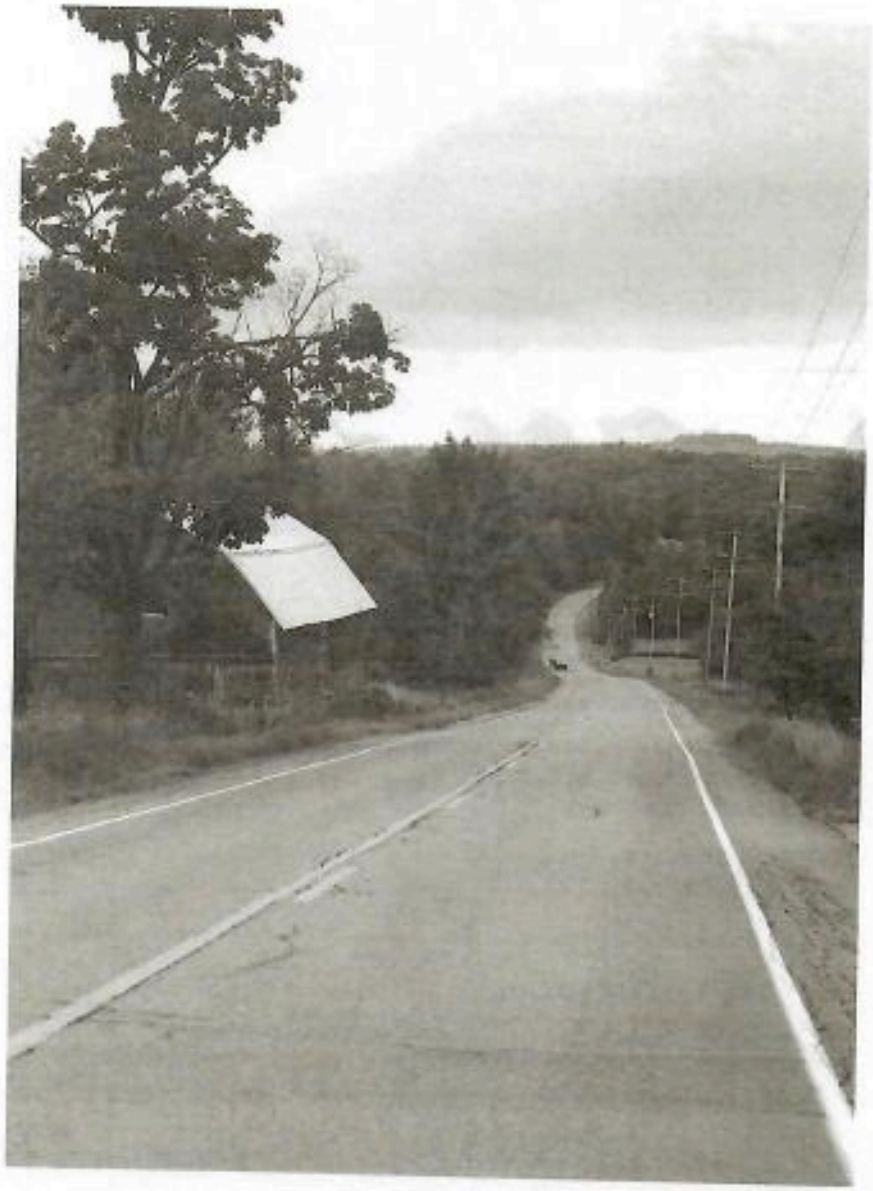
THE LOST KITCHEN, FOUND

Sixteen miles west of the midcoast Maine town of Belfast lies a rural village called Freedom. Drive inland along Route 137, leaving behind the salty breezes of Penobscot Bay, and you pass little ponds, farmland, and wooded lanes. A singular flashing traffic light (the only one for miles) signals that you are nearly there. Once you've driven by the tractor shop, convenience store, and little diner on the corner and descended the hill into the heart of the tiny village below, you've found Freedom: population 719.

This is my home. It was on the back dirt roads of Freedom that I first rode a bike and at Sandy Pond where I learned to swim and ice fish and skate. It was along the old network of hiking trails where I discovered a love for nature and, in the soil of my family's farm, the magic of growing things. I sold eggs by the roadside with my sister and made mud dams in the streams with the farm boys next door, and battled potato bugs, armed with a Mason jar filled with a couple fingers of gasoline.

Growing up in rural Maine, I came to understand the value of a home-cooked meal, the joy of gathering around a supper table, and the importance of timeless dishes that form the fabric and culture of this place. I first noticed the simple pleasures of whole foods through the taste of fresh green beans, the cool and prickly crunch of a baby cucumber, the smell of a perfectly ripe tomato, the treasure hunt of digging for new potatoes.

As I grew older I found my place at the stove in my family's fifty-seat restaurant, a rural greasy-spoon diner that my father owned for twenty years. By age fourteen I had learned how to cook fish to perfection, get a hamburger to a nice pink medium-rare, and run the lunch and dinner line between soccer practice and book reports. I was my dad's replacement, giving him a break from a grueling sixteen-hour workday. He could finally lounge on the back deck of the restaurant with his friends, drink a beer, and sometimes use the cornfield in the distance as a golf driving range while inside I prepared platters of perfectly fried clams with mayo laced with diced bread-and-butter pickles. Occasionally I made a few extra bucks retrieving golf balls; after a few beers, my dad's friends would gladly pay me a dollar a ball.



By sixteen I was seriously cooking on the line. It was hard work, but it paid (I was one of the only kids in school who could afford her own car, a 1984 VW Rabbit), and I found pleasure in cooking—especially when Dad wasn't around and I was the boss. I created evening specials, garnished the lobster rolls with nasturtiums and violets I had harvested from my mother's garden, and played around with desserts like tart rhubarb crisp with buttermilk ice cream—even though the locals seemed to prefer the graham cracker pie and instant chocolate pudding with aerosol whipped cream. I sometimes snuck a bag of brightly colored mixed baby lettuces into the diner's produce order to replace the standard chopped iceberg in the house salad. I can still picture the melamine bowls that came back to the dish station with all of the red lettuces thrown aside. "Why do you have to be so *groovy*?" my dad would ask. "There's a good living to be made here!" I did as any normal teenager would: disregarded everything my parents said because I knew better.

Living in a small town in Maine didn't exactly promise enormous possibilities. During my twenties, I bounced from job to job, waiting tables and bartending, each gig ultimately leaving me feeling empty and lacking purpose.





I tried conjuring up different entrepreneurial ideas. I baked and delivered treats to people's homes. I took familiar family recipes and made them my own, elevating my grandmother's soft molasses cookies with a handful of candied ginger, or using beets in place of carrots in my mother's carrot cake recipe, topping it with a soft, sweet, and tangy goat cheese frosting. This led to a catering job where I taught myself how to make wedding cakes. I fell in love with the process of creating a piece of edible art, soaking layer upon layer of spongy vanilla cake in sweet basil syrup, stacking them with tart lemon curd, meticulously slathering the whole thing with a fluffy buttercream, and dotting it with soft pink peonies. My heart began to sing.

Deep into my twenties, the dream of a formal culinary education burned inside me but was further than distant. I was married and home raising my young son. I didn't have the option to run back to college, and anyhow, I was way past the appropriate age where Mom and Dad would pick up the tuition bill. Instead I found my own way. Working at a local kitchen-supply store, I slowly built a collection of culinary equipment to play with by day and amassed a library of cookbooks to read by night. I picked up more catering gigs to learn new skills and keep on my toes. My mind was constantly churning with what I would do next, how I'd put all this stuff into practice.

And then, one cold and snowy December eve, I opened my apartment door to twenty-four strangers to host the first of a long series of "secret suppers"—and the Lost Kitchen was born. Saturday nights, the light at the bottom of my apartment stoop would flick on and the private door would open, letting in a flood of friends, strangers, and curious food lovers, wine bottles in hand along with a donation to help pay for the cost of the evening. Word spread quickly. People whispered of a new chef, a hidden venue with a blackboard scribbled with the night's menu. The suppers became popular with both locals and out-of-towners. It was there, at the four-burner electric stove in my tiny apartment, that I began to hone my visions of food, inspired by my Maine roots. I infused simple syrup with rosemary and combined it with apple cider and apple brandy to make smooth sorbets. I brined baby chickens with juniper and bay leaves, roasted them in hot skillets with good salty butter and lemon, and served them atop beds of spicy arugula. I roasted beets and pureed them with dill and buttermilk to create cold summer soups that I garnished with borage blossoms and olive oil. I perfected pastry dough and filled the tender crusts with any and every seasonal fruit or berry I could get my hands on.

After a year of rogue suppers, I finally found the courage to open a formal restaurant. I raised the funds from family and friends who believed in my ability and drive. Months later, the Lost Kitchen officially took shape in the commercial space below my apartment. It was beyond my wildest dreams. I had found my footing and made a name, established my place in this world. One evening, at the peak of service, Polly Shyka walked in. She and her husband own Villageside Farm in Freedom. She told me that her father-in-law was spearheading an effort to revive the old mill in town and was toying with the idea of including space for a restaurant. She asked if maybe I'd come check out the space. Who knows, maybe I could even open another spot there. I quickly dismissed the idea—I was working twenty-hour days just to stay afloat.

But life is unpredictable. In May of 2013, the Lost Kitchen took on a new meaning for me: I literally lost the kitchen in the messy end of my marriage. One simple change of the locks and the restaurant of my dreams was gone—along with everything inside. Every skillet, whisk, table, chair, fork and spoon, even my grandmother's dishes. Everything I had worked so hard for and put so much love into. It knocked me on my knees.

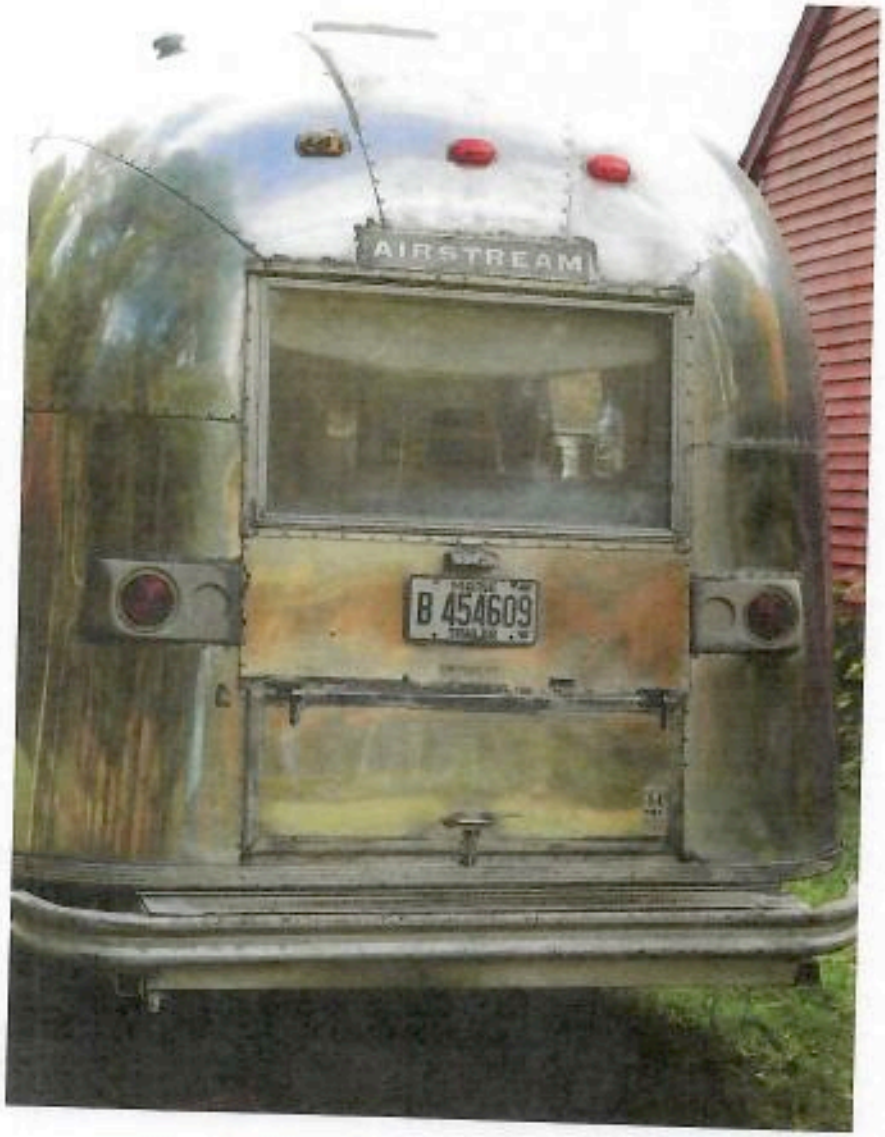
So I did the only thing I knew how to do: I kept going. I realized that the heart of my cooking is not defined by the walls of any building, that the Lost Kitchen is defined by my heart, my soul, and my hands. I would rebuild.

Polly's words about the mill echoed in my mind, but the possibility seemed distant and abstract. I needed something real, and real soon—especially if I was going to find work during the rapidly approaching busy summer season. And as is typical for me, change happened in atypical fashion. The ad read:

> FOR SALE: 1965 AIRSTREAM TRADEWIND
> PRICE: BEST OFFER
> LOCATION: BAT CAVE, NC

There was only one thing to do . . . "To the Bat Cave!"

I spent a month gutting the twenty-foot vintage trailer with a sledgehammer (talk about aggression-release!) and my bare hands. I outfitted it with a galley kitchen, collected mismatched dishes and flatware from tag sales, built farmhouse tables from old barn board and cast-iron pipe, and learned how to hitch up and tow a trailer solo. I also went back to my



roots—back to the e-mail list from my supper club. I reached out to all those strangers-turned-friends, a total of five hundred people who would travel to the ends of the earth to eat my food.

The Airstream and I traveled the state, hosting elaborate dinners of farmed and foraged Maine fare in fields, orchards, barns, and greenhouses. I collected wild mustard greens and sea beans to add zing and crunch to lobster salads.

I gathered tiny berries to fill ginger scones and topped them with dollops of fresh whipped cream for summer shortcakes. I filled galvanized buckets with wild rose hips and then pickled them to garnish martinis. I slaughtered dozens of chickens and ducks, using every bit of them—grilling the tender meats over open fires, preparing confit with tougher parts to serve over a bed of lentils with herbs and fried potatoes, making pâtés with sautéed apples and brandy, and simmering flavorful stocks with the carcasses and gizzards for silky root vegetable soups.

As inspiring and fulfilling as this was, I longed for a place where I could put down roots again, a little hole in the world that I could swab, scrub, and paint into new life. I would adorn the tables with handmade runners and arrange them with my vintage plate treasures, along with antique bone dishes filled with olives, old glass milk bottles as water pitchers, and flea market goblets arranged with tulips and pussy willows. It would be simple and elegant, personal and intimate—a place where friends, family, and neighbors would feel at home. Not just at home, but at *my* home. That's when I remembered Polly's visit. I assumed someone else had already filled the empty spot at the mill but decided to check it out anyway.

On my way to Girl Scout meetings as a kid, I used to pass the 1834 gristmill, wilting by the side of Freedom Falls, given life only by the ghosts of the men who had worked there lifetimes ago and the teenagers who assembled there with cans of spray paint. It had once served as the backbone of the farming community but, left to time and the elements, threatened to crumble into the stream below. It looked about as dilapidated as I felt inside.

Now it too had gone through its own transformation. A group of historians, architects, and tradesmen (coordinated by Tony and Sally Grassi, Polly's in-laws) decided that poor mill should be destined for more than kindling. So they came together to bring it back to life—and were still looking for a tenant. When I walked into the empty space, floor covered in sawdust, I knew this would be next. I pitched them my idea, and, despite the fact that my life was in worse shape than the mill, they listened. They paused. "We believe in second chances," they said.

Now the mill stands strong and proud, part of the National Historic Register. It serves as a symbol of old ways found relevant once again. And at its heart is my restaurant, the Lost Kitchen, finally found, in Freedom.





