

Excerpt from The Gastronomical Me
By M.F.K. Fisher

Ora was a spare gray-haired woman, who kept herself to herself in a firm containment. She took her afternoons and Sundays off without incident or comment, and kept her small hot room as neat as her person. The rest of the time she spent in a kind of ecstasy in the kitchen.

She loved to cook, the way some people love to pray, or dance, or fight. She preferred to be let alone, even for the ordering of food, and made it clear that the meals were her business. They were among the best I have ever eaten . . . all the things we had always accepted as food, but presented in ways that baffled and delighted us.

Grandmother hated her. I think it was because Ora was not like the friendly stupid hired girls she thought were proper for middle-class kitchens. And then Ora did things to “plain good food” that made it exciting and new and delightful, which in my poor grandmother’s stern asceticism meant that Ora was wrong.

“Eat what’s set before you, and be thankful for it,” Grandmother said often; or in other words, “Take what God has created and eat it humbly and without sinful pleasure.”

“The girl is ruining you,” she would say to Mother when Monday’s hash appeared in some new delicious camouflage. But the bills were no larger, Mother must confess.

“The children will be bilious before another week,” Grandmother would remark dourly. But we were healthier than ever.

“Their table manners are getting worse,” Grandmother observed between belches. And that was true, if you believed as she and unhappy millions of Anglo-Saxons have been taught to believe, that food should be consumed without comment of any kind but above all without sign of praise or enjoyment.

My little sister Anne and I had come in Ora’s few weeks with us to watch every plate she served, and to speculate with excitement on what it would taste like. “Oh, *Mother*,” we would exclaim in a kind of anguish of delight. “There are little

stars, all made of pie crust! They have seeds on them! Oh, how beautiful! How good!”

Mother grew embarrassed, and finally stern; after all, she had been raised by Grandmother. She talked to us privately, and told us how unseemly it was for little children to make comments about food, especially when the cook could hear them. “You’ve never behaved this way before,” she said, thereby admitting the lack of any reason to, until then.

We contented ourselves with silent glances of mutual bliss and, I really think, an increased consciousness of the possibilities of the table.

I was very young, but I can remember observing, privately of course, that meat hashed with a knife is better than meat mauled in a food-chopper; that freshly minced herbs make almost any good thing better; that chopped celery tastes different from celery in the stalk, just as carrots in thin curls and toast in crescents are infinitely more appetizing than in thick chunks and squares.

There were other less obvious things I decided, about using condiments besides salt and pepper, about the danger of monotony . . . things like that. But it is plain that most of my observations were connected in some way with Ora’s knife.

She did almost everything with it, cut, and carved, and minced, and chopped, and even used it to turn things in the oven, as if it were part of her hand. It was a long one, with a bright curved point. She brought it with her to our house, and called it her French knife. That was one more thing Grandmother disliked about her; it was a wicked affectation to have a “French” knife, and take it everywhere as if it were alive, and spend all the spare time polishing and sharpening it.

We had an old woman named Mrs. Kemp come to the house every Saturday morning, to wash Grandmother’s beautiful white hair and sometimes ours, and she and Grandmother must have talked together about Ora. Mrs. Kemp announced that she would no longer come through the kitchen to keep her appointments. She didn’t like “that girl,” she said. Ora scared her, always sitting so haughty sharpening that wicked knife.

So Mrs. Kemp came in the front door, and Anne and I kept our tongues politely silent and our mouths open like little starved birds at every meal, and

Grandmother belched rebelliously, and I don't remember what Mother and Father did, except eat, of course.

Then, one Sunday, Ora didn't come back with her usual remote severity from her day off. Mother was going to have a baby fairly soon, and Grandmother said, "You see? That girl is way above herself! She simply doesn't want to be in the house with a nurse!"

Grandmother was pleased as Punch, and that night for supper we probably had her favorite dish: steamed soda crackers with hot milk.

The next day, though, we found that Ora, instead of leaving her mother after a quiet pleasant Sunday in which the two elderly women had gone to church and then rested, had cut her into several neat pieces with the French knife.

Then she ripped a tent thoroughly to ribbons. I don't know how the tent came in . . . maybe she and her mother were resting in it. Anyway, it was a good thing to rip.

Then Ora cut her wrists and her own throat, expertly. The police told Father there wasn't a scratch or a nick in the knife.

Mrs. Kemp, and probably Grandmother too, felt righteous. "I just *felt* something," Mrs. Kemp would say, for a long time after Ora left.

I don't know about Father and Mother, but Anne and I were depressed. The way of dying was of only passing interest to us at our ages, but our inevitable return to ordinary sensible plain food was something to regret. We were helpless then, but we both learned from mad Ora, and now we know what to do about it, because of her.