

“Persimmons Make it Mitchell”: Performing Identity in Pudding¹

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The wide horizontal landscape of southern Indiana is interrupted by small rolling hills, which flatten out as quickly as they rise. Nestled on the edges of property lines, arching over fences, and dotting the twisting roads that pass through the small towns are the gnarled branches of one of the region’s prized possessions, the persimmon tree. Persimmons grow wild throughout southern Indiana. Persimmons are harvested from October until early December and are completely inedible until processed. If you were to pick a persimmon off a tree and bite into it, the astringent and bitter taste would twist your face into a dangerous shape. Persimmons are best picked off the ground, nearly rotten looking, and are baked into fresh, delicious persimmon pudding.

Persimmon pudding is available throughout the fall and, like pumpkin pie, is a symbol of the season. Judy Shaw, a life long resident of Mitchell attests, “It’s kinda a fall dessert, it’s not something anybody would want to take on a summer picnic.” She continues, “There’s a chill in the air and ‘oh man chili soup sounds good and persimmon pudding’ you know, they kinda go together.” Judy Shaw lives alone surrounded by large open fields, cattle, and rolling hills. Her long driveway curves through the landscape, passing cows, persimmon trees, and a cemetery, coming to an end at her large brick

home. The land she lives on is just down the road from the land her parents grew up on, where her mother and grandmothers gathered persimmons for their own puddings.

An analysis of Judy Shaw's recipe for persimmon pudding speaks about social, economic, ecological, temporal and traditional relationships in her life. Judy has been using the same recipe for pudding since she began baking. "My recipe comes from my grandmother, my dad's mother," she explains. When I visited her on December 3, 2006 Judy had a photocopy of her handwritten recipe for me to follow while she demonstrated how to make the pudding. This essay examines the collaboration of the action of cooking with the written recipe. Judy's expertise in cooking, the specifics of how and why she mixes, cracks, sprays, sifts, melts and improvises, combined with the written recipe, is the text I examine.

Judy's recipe takes form as she uses the written text as a guide and employs tacit methods and her own experience to change the recipe. Judy explains, "I watched my mom, and, I just like to cook, and I would just watch my mom and pick it up you know and do it." The ease that Judy feels in the kitchen is reflected in the relationship between the recipe she refers to and the know-how her body possesses. While the written recipe instructs to "sift together flour, baking powder, salt and cinnamon, add to mixture," Judy takes the flour and other dry ingredients and quickly, in a rhythm reflecting her comfort with her tools, sifts them through her antique sifter onto a paper towel.² She then skillfully wraps the paper towel into a funnel shape and holds it tightly in her left hand. The open stem of her homemade funnel points at the bowl. While she uses the electric mixer in her right hand to beat the pulp mixture, she loosens her grip with her left hand releasing the flour. When she has mixed the flour in for over two minutes, she turns the

mixer off. The above actions were prompted by the words “sift together,” and “add to mixture.” Judy’s recipe forms from the paper through her body. Her intimate knowledge of her text is expressed in her methods.

The next written instructions say, “Melt butter in pan and add to mixture.” Judy explains, “Now I just spray ‘em with PAM. Used to... the girls would just melt the butter in the pan, in the oven, and then swirl it around ya know, but I found that you don’t get all your butter mixed up in your pudding doing that so I don’t do that anymore.” Judy’s decision to use PAM, and thus change the form of her recipe is a result of her experience making persimmon pudding. Butter interferes with the uniform texture of the bottom of the pudding, thus rendering the pudding ugly.

Judy’s decision to deviate from the original recipe and her aesthetic standards, I believe, is a direct result of over 45 years of participating in the Persimmon Pudding Contest held at the Annual Persimmon Festival in Mitchell. I first tasted Judy’s persimmon pudding in the 2006 contest. That year Judy was awarded first prize for the second time in her persimmon pudding career. As an honorary judge in the contest, I was able to witness the standard of excellence to which the judges, Mitchell residents and long time pudding eaters and bakers, held the persimmon pudding. By the time the judging started there were almost 200 puddings to go through. The judging began with the discarding of any pudding that did not look right. This included any that were too light, too dark, cracked, runny, or any that were not cut into a 4 by 4 inch piece placed on a Styrofoam plate. This brought us down by almost half. The judges had not tasted any of the puddings thus far. They then picked up questionable looking puddings and examined them at the cross section. Was the batter well mixed? Any pudding that was not uniform

in color on the inside, had any visible lumps, or any intense odors (too sweet or too much spice) were considered below par, and were added to the discard pile. When there were about 20 puddings left on the table, the tasting began. Each of the judges explained to me that they would never eat a persimmon pudding that was cracked, runny, lumpy or too dark. What a persimmon pudding looks like obviously has a large impact on the enjoyment of the pudding. So much so, that the form of Judy Shaw's recipe has been changed to fit this standard of excellence.

At the 2006 Persimmon Pudding Contest women gathered in a long line extending out the doors of Mitchell's Church of Christ. On the table where the women dropped off their puddings there was a sign, which read: "Soy sauce makes it China, Pizza makes it Italy, Sushi makes it Japan, Taco makes it Mexico, Persimmons make it Mitchell!" Persimmons hold an important role as the heritage food of Mitchell, Indiana. The local Mitchell Times is decorated with pictures of persimmons, and at the annual festival a persimmon queen and princess are named. Persimmons are intimately entwined in the social fabric of Mitchell.

These walnut-sized, orangey fruits, which taste bitter when picked, are harvested after they have fallen from the tree. Most people gather their own persimmons for cooking, rather than buy them in a grocery store. Persimmons make their way into the local economy by way of pudding or the occasional alternative dessert (ice cream, tart, or cake). At the festival, Judy Shaw and her sorority, Phi Beta Psi, sell a whole pudding for twenty dollars and each woman gathers her fruit from her own sources. Even women who buy fruit from a farm stand are involved in gathering the produce from their native landscape.

Most people, including Judy, have a specific tree from which they harvest. At the contest, when asked where their persimmons came from different women answered, “from a tree in my yard”, “from a neighbors yard, he’s got the best”, “from my husband’s aunt,” or “from the farm stand down the road.” Judy describes some of her fruits, “Well, I have three trees over on that side of the fence there, and it has the nice big persimmons, and they’re real pulpy and juicy. And I’ve got three trees over on this side of the fence and they are not a big persimmon and their pulp is pasty.” For the pudding Judy made for me she used persimmons from “a man from Bedford.” The following quote from Judy shows how she has to rely on others when her persimmon trees are not producing.

This particular one I am using today came from a man from Bedford, he has the most beautiful persimmons,

And Bedford is just the next town north, between Bloomington, and Mitchell.

And uh, my supply was kinda low,

and I found out he had some, and, he shared them with me,

with me, and he was just absolutely, tickled to death to share ‘um and would not take anything, any money anything for the

[bangs an egg on the side of the bowl three quick times and easily cracks it open while continuing] for the pulp, so, I was glad to get it. [takes a breath and bangs a second egg on the side of the bowl three quick times and cracks it open as she speaks] I usually have always got my own persimmons, off the farm, but my son had cattle where the persimmons were this year and I kept telling him ‘you gotta get those cattle [bangs third egg on the side of the bowl three quick times while she continues] outta there.’ So he did [cracks egg] but a little later than, I needed

it to be because I didn't get as many, many cups of pulp, and it takes two cups of pulp to make a whole pudding and one cup to make a half.

The meaning of the recipe Judy uses is embedded in the relationship between land (Mitchell) and food (persimmon). By making her pudding using produce from the landscape (as opposed to a store-bought product from a warehouse) and by making the produce into a favorite dessert, Judy's pudding is part of Mitchell identity. In the case of this particular pudding, she explains Bedford's proximity to Mitchell, "just the next town north," to maintain the association between the persimmon and her own landscape.

Judy Shaw's recipe, her method of making pudding, has won her two first prizes at Mitchell's annual Persimmon Festival, once in 1988 and again in 2006. Her sister, using this same recipe, (but perhaps different "text") won in 1960. The recipe she uses, beyond meaning Mitchell, means success. Her recipe is an appropriate reflection of her involvement in the Mitchell community. Judy has lived in Mitchell her entire life. Her parents are from Mitchell and her grandmother, the very one whose recipe she uses, harvested her persimmons just down the road from Judy's brick home. Her prize-winning recipe affirms her identity as a resident of Mitchell who makes an accurate and tasty persimmon pudding.

Judy sets an example for her community when she wins the contest, when she is elected president of the Phi Beta Psi Sorority (dedicated to doing community service), and when she teaches other sorority members (the newcomers) how to bake a persimmon pudding. In fact, she is passing on the Mitchell identity to these newcomers as they are initiated into Mitchell culture when they are required to bake puddings to sell at the festival each year. While she is showing me her text, her recipe for persimmon pudding,

Judy is showing me a way she expresses her Mitchell identity, both as a baker and as a baking teacher.

Here we have explored the context surrounding one Mitchell resident's recipe for persimmon pudding. Ongoing interviews and repeated visits to the annual festival may reveal a more solid link between baking a good pudding and identifying as a member of the Mitchell community. The social, economical, ecological, temporal and traditional aspects of persimmons and persimmon puddings in Mitchell reveal a complex system of relationships between people and land. An in-depth exploration of these relationships will lead to an understanding of the way people identify themselves through their foodways. Further, this study will facilitate an understanding of the social structures that work to insure the perpetuation of foodways through time.

Notes

¹ This paper was written from fieldwork I conducted in a town called Mitchell, just south of my home in Bloomington, Indiana. This report is useful to the community of Mitchell, as a profile of one of their residents and as a recognition of their traditional foodways; to the state of Indiana as a record of traditional practice; and to the scholarly community as a way to learn about the ways people make meaning through the art they create. The theoretical framework for this essay comes from lectures by Henry Glassie and is reinforced by his publication, *Material Culture* (1999). Lectures by and discussions with Pravina Shukla have expanded my notion of text in the kitchen, and discussions about fieldwork methodology with Richard Bauman influenced the shape of this essay. Here I consider a text that is created during a cooking demonstration. There

are several topics that I am excited to explore within foodways. They include the interaction between a written recipe and the performed recipe, the way sound communicates in a kitchen, and how multiple identities interact and are communicated in a dish.

² Here Judy talks about her recipe while sifting flour: “My recipe comes from my grandmother, my dad’s mother she always used heavy cream [sifting for 3 seconds and three short bangs of the sifter against her palm] but [sifting for 3 seconds and three short bangs against her palm] I don’t use the heavy cream cause I don’t always have it, I always have just milk.”

Work Cited

Glassie, Henry. *Material Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1999