



# Edible Complex

Like Marcel Proust's madeleines, early tastes and smells can trigger powerful childhood memories. They can also set off a lifelong desire to re-create—or avoid—a sensory experience.

My re-create takes the form of a slim half ear of sweet corn—still warm from the grill and glossed with melted butter. The sweet-salty kernels burst in my mouth. I'm transported.

My avoid takes me back to Tiny Tot Nursery School, where inexplicably I'm staying for lunch. That would be fine, except instead of food we're getting plates of small rubber tubes in orange goop that smells a lot like feet. It takes only a few bites to confirm that macaroni and cheese is not for me.

After lunch, we're assembling by the door for recess. From the front of the line, I hear the sound of a donkey braying. Then I see it: Arnie Jarvis's tiny shoulders heaving up and down and the dramatic splash that follows. Just moments before he'd been sitting right across from me at lunch.

"Quickly, children!" As we're herded out to the playground, I can't resist a last look back. There's poor Arnie, crying as he's led to the bathroom, and the lumpy beige puddle he left behind.

After that, I never gave macaroni and cheese another thought until I became a mother and the self-appointed steward of my toddler's developing palate. "Just one bite," I'd nag as Julian eyed the morsel of saffron-laced shrimp I'd placed on the tray of his high chair. I wanted him to grow up with an open mind about food.

At the park, other moms would compare notes about the foods their kids ate and didn't. "Olivia ate raisins for the first time yesterday." "Chicken nuggets every night—that's all Sam

will eat." And then those three words started popping up: macaroni and cheese. Of course, I thought. A childhood favorite! How unfair of me to deprive my son just because of a ridiculous memory that should have been long repressed.

I went at it with all good intentions. With each of my three attempts, the quality of the ingredients went up. Julian's interest did not. For my final try, blending genuine Italian macaroni with aged cheddar I grated myself, I set down the bowl with a forced smile and the word "Delicious!" It may have been an accident, but seconds later bowl and contents were on the floor. As I scraped up the goop with a damp paper towel, I found it difficult not to gag.

That was my last experience with mac and cheese, and I can safely say there will not be another—despite recent elevated pairings on restaurant menus. But Julian, who's in grad school, tells me he now enjoys it. Good mac and cheese, he insists, is delicious. The bad stuff sucks. That I can imagine.

"When did you start eating it?" I asked.

"When I got to college," he said. "Basically as soon as I left home."

It's good to know the aversions of the parents don't have to be visited on their children—in food or, I'm guessing, just about anything else.

As for me, each summer I'm still on the hunt for that perfect ear of corn: pulling over at farm stands to feel the moistness of silks, lifting husks to peer at kernels and experimenting with distance from the coals. When I hit it right, it's sublime. But like so much in life, you can never re-create the rush of the very first time.

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