

Comfort Food

Her parents' breakup left 5-year-old **Adrienne Brodeur** bereft. Then her mother gave her a recipe for solace.

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Y EARLIEST memory of Cape Cod is riding with my brother in the back seat of our

parents' Oldsmobile—the Big Blue Car, we called it. Forty-plus years later, I still take that road trip to Nauset Bay each summer, these days in our family Subaru alongside my husband, our son and daughter buckled in behind us. The distance from New York City seems as endless as it did then—until a few miles before the canal, when the landscape starts to change. Maple trees and murmurings of starlings give way to scrub oaks and seagulls. The air turns brackish. Soon we'll cross the bridge, windows cracked, and follow the curved arm of the Cape, stopping just past the elbow—in Orleans, where my mother lives full-time and I've spent every July and August since I was a baby.

I was 5 when my parents divorced and we stopped making the trip all together. My mother, Malabar, had fallen in love, upending us all. My brother and I would still go to Cape Cod, but our time would be split: one month with our mother, the next with our father. While my mom remained an expert consolable to assuage anxieties with homemade tapioca pudding, back scratches, and carefully placed Band-Aids—she also had one eye trained on her glamorous new life of dinner parties and exotic travel. My father, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, was often distracted, likely absorbed in his latest article. Following the breakup, he fished obsessively, casting from the shore at dawn and drifting in his skiff during the day, waiting for bass to nibble. I loved him dearly, but the prospect of 31 days without my mother loomed as an eternity. Plus, I was secretly scared she might never come back.

Attuned to my fears—even the unspoken ones—my mother suggested my brother and I each come up with a dish to prepare and gather around as a goodbye ritual. Malabar had studied at Le Cordon Bleu, worked as a chef in Time-Life's test kitchens, and begun to write cookbooks. I would watch, rapt, as she conjured feasts that enthralled our dinner guests, silencing conversations amid sighs of pleasure. I could have picked any recipe, but I wanted something simple that I could help with, and that would remind me of our idyll by the sea. I chose linguine con vongole.



The author and her mother, Malabar, on Cape Cod, 1969.

The first time we made what would become my annual farewell dish, my mother and I put-putted through the harbor in our family's motorboat, powered by a puny engine. A bright orange life jacket encircled my neck as I lay across the gunwale, draping my fingers into the salty spray, lost in the coastal abundance enveloping me. It was low tide, that still hour marking the ocean's withdrawal and illuminating the teeming life below: moon snails pushing plowlike over the sandy bottom, horseshoe crabs coupling, camouflaged flounder fluttering away from our boat's shadow.

Our destination was the largest island of marsh in the bay, home to dozens of tidal pools. We anchored, walked gingerly across the prickly grass, and eased waist-deep into water as warm as a bath. My mother instructed me to shuffle my feet, which clouded the pool with plumes of silt: "When you feel a stone with your toes, pick it up." Almost every lump I stepped on turned out to be a littleneck or a cherrystone, but when something startled me—landing unexpectedly on a spongy sea cucumber, or a crab crawling over my foot—I leaped into my mother's arms and stayed still as she held me close. When our basket was heavy with clams, we placed it in the bow of the boat and made our way home.

Just a few ingredients were all it took to create my dish: clams from the bay, garlic and parsley from our garden, a healthy splash of olive oil,

pasta dough slid through rollers and transformed into shiny strands. The smell alone lit up a synaptic pathway to the pleasure center of my brain. In every forkful, I tasted love. "Please don't go," I whispered to my mother when we were done, as I wiped my plate clean with a hunk of crust. But I knew she would.

In the years that followed, Malabar became involved with yet another man, creating a rupture even deeper than the one before. By the time she married her new paramour, when I was in my late 20s, she and I were estranged. It took more than a decade for us to settle into a wary peace, by which point I'd started a family of my own. That's when I noticed something amiss at my mother's—undercooked meat, charred

vegetables, bread forgotten on the counter. She needed my help in the kitchen. That downward trajectory has continued, and now my mother is in her late 80s and the last stages of dementia. "Please don't go," she says. And, "When will you be back?"

During our long summer days, I clam with my husband and children, mining the very tidal

pools my mother and I explored. We've forged our own annual tradition: a clam-a-palooza at the end of each August. We catch an early tide to fill our buckets and spend the rest of the day cooking. Friends arrive in late afternoon, and we serve them baked stuffies, chowder, clams on the half shell. As the sun sets, we scatter the emptied shells onto our driveway and crush them under the tires of our jeep, a satisfying crunch.

My mother enjoys clam-a-palooza, too. But it is when I make linguine con vongole, the dish intended to shore up a younger me for a month without her, that we're able to revisit, however fleetingly, a misplaced moment in time. The aroma of the sautéing garlic and parsley

lights up her face as she anticipates a twirled forkful of pasta with briny bursts of clam. At the first bite, she closes her eyes in pleasure, lost in the past. A minute later, the memory is gone.

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ADRIENNE BRODEUR is the author of *Wild Game: My Mother, Her Lover, and Me* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, October 15).