

Questions from Deep in the Heart of Texas

Dear Boots, My roommate thinks it's a safety hazard to burn wood in our fireplace. What could I do to help her see the light?

- From, All Fired Up

Dear All Fired Up, Let's paint a picture. You're out to dinner with your friends, at least two of whom are married. Appetizers come, and while the husband of the married couple is pulling a bruschetta onto his plate, he comes up with what he thinks is the best idea he's had all day: He's going to tell the story about when his wife tried to make bruschetta. As he sets the scene — it was their first anniversary — you watch as the expression on his wife's face becomes guarded. By the time he starts talking about how long she spent slicing and preparing all the ingredients, what was guarded becomes downright hostile. When he gets to the punchline — "But there's no mayonnaise on bruschetta!" you're pretty sure she's ready to punch him.

All Fired Up, tell me, when his wife very calmly and coolly turns and tells him where he can stick a jar of mayonnaise, what do you imagine you and all the other adults at the table are doing?

I'll take your silence as your answer. And you better believe your answer is absolutely correct — every single one of those people will suddenly be real interested in examining either their own pieces of bruschetta or the fabric count of the tablecloth. No one is going to get in the middle of that dispute because while it sure does seem the husband has made some poor storytelling choices, there's also unknown information in the equation, such as the wife's entire side of the story.

That's where I land on this dispute with your roommate. As I've got zero information on why she might be against your idea for a cozy winter fire, I'm not going to help you plead your case. There's the chance your living partner is being irrational, sure. But there's also the chance you made poor storytelling choices and didn't mention details that have led to her oversensitivity about letting

you near fire such as, let's just say, a longstanding, deep-seated revulsion for fireplace screens. It's worth mentioning that as recently as a few years ago, I might not have taken this stance. Because there are few things I love more than a winter night curled up in front of a fireplace, I would have jumped feet first into your dilemma, giving all my opinions without waiting for the whole story. It's a different time now, though. Waiting for details on small things like fireplace disputes and mayonnaise-doused appetizers helps build that muscle for the weightier conversations that are coming up fast. We're nine months from November 2024, which is enough time to make a baby and a whole lot of enemies. Being well informed ensures we're all fired up for the right reasons.

- Love, Boots

Dear Boots, Do you change up your chili when you're cooking it in the winter?

- From, Spicing It Up

Dear Spicing It Up, Do you remember being 16 and looking at your mother walking through the grocery store the way she always did, pulling the same cans off the shelf, maybe even humming the favorite song she'd loved since you were a wee lass and you thought to yourself, I'm never going to be so set in my ways. Was there any question in your mind that the only thing holding you back from starring in the most adventurous life on the face of the earth was the fact that you were not yet living under your own roof?

Someday you would dance through the aisles, sometimes even going down some of them for no reason at all except to explore. Breakfast for dinner? Check. Spices from other countries? Check, check. Never, ever getting stuck in a rut? Obviously.

But now, decades later, here we are. Basking in the glow of adulthood that has, ever so suddenly, turned into a bit of a fluorescent light. And how long has that same fluorescent light been shining on our faces? Two weeks? Two months? Don't blame yourself if you don't know - it's hard to keep count, with the way days roll into months and years. I myself was just a few hours away from opening my grocery app to do the same old finger dance to order the same old food my family will eat for the week. All that has changed now.

Not only did your question jog me out of that lull. It also has helped the 16-year-old dwelling somewhere inside me save a little face. We eat chili pretty regularly in our house, but the only variation I typically make is whether the batch is huge or gargantuan. Because I, like many Texans, believe my take on chili to be the best, it's never occurred to me to mess with a good thing. I should, though, I absolutely should. To someone from Iowa or even our neighbors in Arkansas (bless their hearts) a chili change may not seem so risqué, but you and I know that in Central Texas circles such alterations border on scandalous. I plan to start with some heavier spices, but really the changes could take me anywhere. Anywhere except beans, that is. Even the most adventurous lives have boundaries.

— Love, Boots