

Spoonful

A GUIDE TO 
HOME GATHERINGS

WHEN WE GATHER: Dinner with Abigail Boehm and Mahesh Mantha

by JENN HALL 7 DEC 2016



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In this new column “When We Gather,” contributor Jenn Hall drops in on one family’s dinner each month to observe traditions, listen to stories, and learn about the pathways by which ingredients and recipes travel across maps and generations.

When dinner is nearly ready, Abigail Boehm beckons her granddaughter Tavia to the dining room. The precocious eight-year-old girl climbs atop the table crafted by Abi’s father from antique floorboards. White candlesticks go into candelabras adorned with intricate patterns. Then together, grandmother and child light the wicks.

This ritual traces back to when Abi was raising her own children.

“Candles and meals have always gone together,” Abi says. “When the kids were little, we found that it would calm them.” Tavia concurs: “We light candles, have dinner, eat cake, and go to bed.” I tuck this jewel of a mantra away, a new life goal articulated. It’s not time for bed yet, however. As if on cue, Tavia’s younger sister Freya whirls past, her

hair a shock of blue. She'll have you know that it's Manic Panic-brand dye, a name which makes her giggle.



Tender moments like these infuse dinners with Abi and her partner, Mahesh Mantha. In an art-filled Victorian in the quaint river town of Lambertville, NJ, three generations gather for dinner on Sundays. It's about food, and even more so about the energetic stream of chatter that infuses the space.

Abi and Mahesh's love story includes sweet details like an annual New Year's plunge into the Delaware River, a shared passion for yoga, and a generosity of spirit that makes everyone feel welcome at their table. Long-time vegetarians, they also have a joint dream: to roam the country in a tricked-out RV, helping restaurants up their veggie game. With a front-yard edible garden, serious spice collection, and belief in the nurturing power of food, they understand what it means to eat seasonally and very, very well.

As for the impulse to roam, perhaps it's hereditary. When Abi's son Dion shares details on a bus he recently saw for sale, his sister Jessie smiles with a raised eyebrow, her infant son cooing. Jessie's husband Andy immediately suggests going halvsies on the bus and begins mapping out a two-week summer road trip. "We're not going halvsies," Jessie says with warm authority. The crew turns toward Abi and Mahesh.

"Thirdsies?"



Abi, a nurse midwife, artist, and yoga teacher, grew up in a large family where cooking responsibilities were shared, and farm-raised foods were standard. Her childhood sparked a fascination with the alchemy of cooking.

“We had a big, stainless steel bowl to make bread in, and I remember peering over the edges, watching the yeast dissolve and divide,” she says. Her early adventures included stints living in Vermont, New Jersey, Ireland, and Spain. Her current projects include working on a series of paintings based on mudras in her backyard art and yoga studio.

Mahesh, an IT pro and fellow yogi raised in Bombay (now Mumbai), carries deep memories of his mother and grandmother’s traditional South Asian cooking. A mutual love of food created an initial spark between the couple.

“Abi seduced me with cooking,” Mahesh says with his infectious, honey-tinged laugh. Together, the two started exploring his trove of family recipes, originally shared with him by an aunt.

Tonight, the meal is a riff on those recipes.



There is cilantro coconut chutney and roti, plus *pav bhaji*, a thick vegetable curry. There is *sambar*, a lentil-based chowder, and homemade chai enriched with earl grey tea and goat's milk. The "Scorched Earth Cake" is a take on *idli*, a savory mung bean and rice-flour pastry. Made here in a pie dish, its surface evokes the cracked geometry of the desert floor.



Another main dish at the family dinner is *pulihora* (sour rice), a dinnertime staple and festival food in India, classically made with tamarind and peanuts and spiced with turmeric. In a twist, Abi uses an urud-dal khichdi rice base, swaps in lime, cashews, and almonds, and flavors it with *popu* spice. As the dish is passed, its layered fragrance seems to tie together all the narratives of Abi and Mahesh's family like a silky ribbon. And that's the thing about

food, isn't it? It brings people together, giggles and stories and jokes creating the sweetest kind of music as the meal unfolds.

Pulihora



Serves 6-8

Recipe by Abigail Boehm & Mahesh Mantha

Total Cooking Time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Active Cooking Time: 45 minutes

Popu Spice Mix

2 teaspoons black mustard seeds

2 teaspoons cumin seeds

2 teaspoons coriander

Heat dry skillet on medium. Add spices and stir until they are toasty and fragrant, about 1 1/2 minutes. Move to a bowl to cool.

Main Dish

1 1/2 cups basmati rice

1/2 cup urud dal

1/4 cup raw organic cashews

1/4 cup raw organic almonds
3 tablespoons + 1/4 cup organic extra virgin olive oil
2 teaspoons turmeric
4 cups water
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
Large pinch + 1 1/2 teaspoons pink Himalayan salt
20-25 fresh curry leaves, torn
2 tablespoons dried cranberries, roughly chopped
2 tablespoons dry-roasted popu spice (see recipe above)
2 dried red chilies, torn into pieces
1 medium onion
3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice
Garnishes: Chopped cilantro, finely chopped onion, organic kefir or Greek yogurt

Wash rice & dal until the water runs clear. Soak in cool water for 20-30 minutes, and then drain. Set aside. Dry roast the cashews and almonds. Preheat pan on medium, add nuts, and stir until fragrant, 3-5 minutes. Cool before chopping coarsely. Set aside.

In rice pot, melt 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Add turmeric and cook for 30 seconds, stirring constantly. Add the rice / dal mixture and stir until coated. Add the water, pepper, and large pinch of salt, and bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat to low, and cook 15-20 minutes until soft but not mushy. When done, remove from heat, stir in curry leaves and cranberries, and set aside for 5-10 minutes.

While rice is cooking, heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a large skillet. Add popu spice and dried chilies. Stir until mustard seeds just begin to pop. Add onion and sauté until soft, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat.

Transfer rice / dal mixture to a large bowl. Add quarter cup olive oil, onion-spice mixture, roasted nuts, and lime juice. Stir to mix. Add 1 1/2 teaspoons of pink Himalayan salt or to taste. Top with cilantro, raw onion, and kefir or yogurt. This tastes even better the next day.

Earl Grey Goat's Milk Chai

Serves 4

Recipe by Abigail Boehm & Mahesh Mantha

Total Cooking Time: 7 minutes

Active Cooking Time: 2 minutes

1 teaspoon black peppercorns
1 teaspoon cloves
2 teaspoons cardamom
3 cups water
3 earl gray teabags
1 cup goat's milk, warmed to remove chill
Optional: maple syrup, palm sugar, or agave

Combine peppercorns, cloves, and cardamom in a spice grinder. Pulse to break up the green cardamom. In a small saucepan, bring water to a boil with peppercorn / clove / cardamom mix. Lower the heat, simmer for two minutes, and then add the tea bags and return to a simmer. Let it go two minutes more, and then remove from heat. For each serving, combine 1/4 cup goat's milk and 3/4 cup tea. Sweeten with maple syrup, palm sugar, or agave, if desired.