
ARTISANS

BY EVAN HARRIS

NO MORE NOT COOKING

Turn on the oven.

Editor's note: Last year, Evan Harris confronted a phobia that might be foreign to many of Edible's readers: a fear of cooking. In the past, the writing of this author, who lives in Springs with her son and husband, sculptor Hiroyuki Hamada, has focused on overcoming mental blocks. Her treatise on changing one's life—The Art of Quitting, recently re-released by Barron's—offers essential encouragement on cutting losses, pulling up stakes, moving on, and even burning bridges (gracefully and not so). Quitting isn't always easy, but it usually changes your life. In the case of Harris' not cooking habit, the journey brought her closer to some friends, her family, and the landscape that surrounds her. This excerpt from her new, handmade, limited edition book, No More Not Cooking—which grows as the author hones her culinary skills—shows that there is hope even for the most deviant non-cook.

Two things I didn't think would change for a very long time, my smoking and my not cooking, were cruising along on parallel tracks. Those tracks had a clear shot, nothing in the way until they hit the horizon line of my personality, where the present meets the future. At that point: change.

I had been very glad to be smoking like crazy—smoking absolutely as much as possible—and not cooking was certainly doing me no harm. The not cooking never, for example, interfered with eating. For one thing, I like crackers, and they come cooked. And for the other thing, other people can cook, and cook with generous abandon. Hooray for the good cook!

Here is a contingency that has been a working contingency of mine for a number of years: If the good cook likes you then he will cook for you. If you have the excellent fortune to marry the good cook, the contingency gives rise to a steady diet of yumminess. Years pass.

It was the smoking that zagged south first. If you marry the good cook who is also in your opinion the coolest person on the planet, and that person thinks smoking is uncool, it really puts the cigarette in a compromised position. So after 16 years of glorious and unmitigated smoking, I started trying to stop. Can you imagine? That went on for about four years, the trying. A case of long drawn out quitting. What a drag. Unrewarding and impossible. Then I got pregnant, and I was happy and not smoking was easy.

However, the not cooking persisted. In fact, it entered a wild and indulgent phase during my pregnancy, when I would wake up in the middle of the night starving to death and Hiroyuki, my husband, would disappear into the kitchen and return with a fully delicious,



thick and frothy banana smoothie. For him, making something like that is like peeling a carrot. Nothing to it. Hiroyuki delivers meals that are magic to me, completely outside my range of ability—like gold medal figure skating. I could never.

The focus, the style! He doesn't make it look easy, but he definitely makes it look cool.

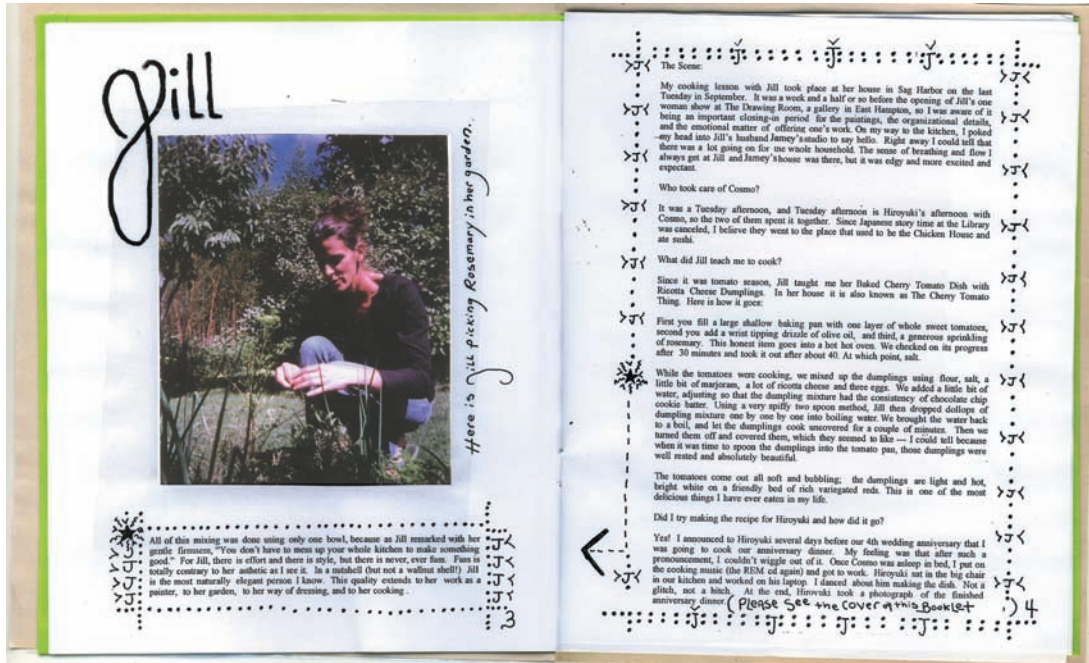
Yet for years the not cooking has been nearly perfectly preserved. I think I might be getting a reputation among our friends as Not the Cook. It's starting to seem extreme, a weird posture, a crazy persona I can't possibly perpetuate. I'm

growing uncomfortable with the deliberate helplessness. There's an embarrassment factor that's beginning to teeter on shame. And finally, the not cooking is beginning to feel—unfortunately yet motivatingly—uncool.

So in the winter of 2005, I decided: No more not cooking. Then nine months passed. My son Cosmo started eating things other than mush; Hiroyuki planted a garden, spinach, peas; Cosmo started running all over the place; it turned hot; guests came and went. Then it was the end of summer and I really decided: No more not cooking.

The second time, I made a real true plan.

Part One: In spite of a considerable fear of imposition, I would ask five of my really good cook friends to show me a recipe—to invite me over or come to my kitchen, to put up with my ignorance and help me own the recipe so that I could fearlessly cook it for Hiroyuki. I chose five because that is a good number of stars. None of the five really good cooks would be Hiroyuki because it is Hiroyuki who I am trying to impress. Also none of the five really good cooks would have



What did Jill teach me to cook?
 Since it was tomato season, Jill taught me her Baked Cherry Tomato Dish with Ricotta Cheese Dumplings. In her house it is also known as “The Cherry Tomato Thing.” Here is how it goes:

First you fill a large shallow baking pan with one layer of whole sweet tomatoes, second you add a wrist tipping drizzle of olive oil, and third, a generous sprinkling of rosemary. This honest item goes into a hot hot oven. We checked on its progress after 30 minutes and took it out after about 40. At which point, salt.

While the tomatoes were cooking, we mixed up the dumplings using flour, salt, a little bit of marjoram, a lot of ricotta cheese and three eggs. We added a little bit of water, adjusting so that the dumpling mixture had the consistency of chocolate chip cookie batter. Using a very spiffy two spoon method, Jill then dropped dollops of dumpling mixture one by one by one into boiling water. We brought the water back to a boil, and let the dumplings cook uncovered for a couple of minutes. Then we turned them off and covered them, which they seemed to like—I could tell because when it was time to spoon the dumplings into the tomato pan, those dumplings were well rested and absolutely beautiful.

The tomatoes came out all soft and bubbling; the dumplings were light and hot, bright white on a friendly bed of rich variegated reds. This is one of the most delicious things I have ever eaten in my life.

Did I try making the recipe for Hiroyuki and how did it go?
 Yes! I announced to Hiroyuki several days before our fourth wedding anniversary that I was going to cook our anniversary dinner. My feeling was that after such a pronouncement, I couldn't wiggle out of it. Once Cosmo was asleep in bed, I put on the cooking music (the R.E.M. CD again) and got to work. Hiroyuki sat in the big chair in our kitchen and worked on his laptop. I danced about him making the dish. Not a glitch, not a hitch. At the end, Hiroyuki took a photograph of the finished anniversary dinner. (Please see the cover of this book!) 4

more than one child or run a business because it would be too much of an imposition to even ask. And then of course there are some really good cooks I am too shy to approach. Don't ask me why.

Part Two: After five lessons, I would make what my friend Jamey Ellis termed a “non food product” to document the experiences. This is that.

Now the plan is to continue, recipe after recipe, until the not cooking can do nothing but give up, leave my kitchen, and creep outside for a smoke.

No more not cooking!

ONE BOWL WITH JILL

The Scene

My cooking lesson with Jill took place at her house in Sag Harbor on the last Tuesday in September. It was a week and a half or so before the opening of Jill's one-woman-show at the Drawing Room, a gallery in East Hampton, so I was aware of it being an important “closing in” period for the paintings, the organizational details, and the emotional matter of offering one's work. On my way to the kitchen, I poked my head into Jill's husband Jamey's studio to say hello. Right away I could tell that there was a lot going on for the whole household. The sense of breathing and flow I always get at Jill and Jamey's house was there, but it was edgy and more excited and expectant.

Who took care of Cosmo?

It was a Tuesday afternoon, and Tuesday afternoon is Hiroyuki's afternoon with Cosmo, so the two of them spent it together. Since Japanese story time at the library was canceled, I believe they went to the place that used to be the Chicken House and ate sushi.