
FARMGIRL ANGST

BY MARILEE FOSTER

THE ORIGINAL ENERGY BAR



Fad diets are not actually an attempt to diminish waistlines. When Dr. Atkins died I drew a cartoon of Mr. Potato Head pushing him. The doctor had slipped and fallen on the ice and, at the height of his fame, he was gone. I felt bad about my sketch, but then the Atkins diet had done just about as much harm to potato farmers as NAFTA had.

One bad year can be buoyed by a good one and sometimes two bummers must cling to a lone, stellar harvest. But it had begun to seem like we were waiting too long for that good year to come along. It was not only financially imprudent; it was depressing, too. We went from bad (having to contend with Canada flooding the market) to worse (Canada flooding and nobody eating potatoes). Diners who abided by the Atkins rule tastelessly—unappreciatively—referred to the potato as a “carb-bomb.” Where do they get off villainizing the potato to sell more foil-wrapped nutrition bars?

I work in the potato-grader all winter. We’ve got a big steel wood-burning stove for heat; you can shove half a pallet through its wide door. There are several battered, second-hand toaster ovens at various outlets throughout the building for making meals, but someone fashioned a wire basket to hang on the inside of the stove’s door. First thing in the morning, when we’re getting the fire started, a few guys will get themselves a potato or two, selecting a nice big one from the conveyor belt, and put them in the basket. When the stove is really blazing, the door gets shut and that potato begins to cook.

When the trailer of spuds is finished, we take a break. Everyone generally congregates around the stove to warm up and eat whatever they brought, or, if they didn’t bring anything, whatever is being shared. Joe

gets his potato out of the stove. One side of its skin is blackened, but the rest is toasted and tough, moist like the flesh of a vegetable should be. And Joe knows it, so he’ll wind his way through the small crowd, rolling the potato back and forth, from hand to hand, taunting those who don’t have something as good as he has. “Ouch,” how hot it is, and “ouch,”

how good it is going to be, making those who are eating sausage from a can envious. He sets the potato down on a paper plate and with a pocket knife splits the ready skin, gently turning the two halves away from each other and steam, a remarkable cloud from such a tidy meal, rises up and, once touched with salt, begins to carry the aroma—the enticing, hunger-stirring aroma of a baked potato.

Even those who are presumably eating better than Joe—last night’s pork chop reheated—want some of that potato. They inquire as to how he came to have a potato, while Joe, now working his way back out of the crowd, answers, “And people who are too lazy to put a potato in for themselves can’t have any of mine.” He gives me a very long, because-I-said-so look, and holding the still steaming half up in one hand, with the other he grabs ahold of the bagger and pulls himself up to the wooden platform where he stands, sometimes two hours, sometimes all day, hanging bags.

The climb is a bit of an effort for him, so when Joe turns back to face me he is trying to take deep, even breaths, which helped with the memorable cadence of his unintended reassurance: “This is my energy bar.” □

The writer is a farmer in Sagaponack.