

Onions are one of my favorite foods. Cheese is my favorite. As a result, one of my favorite snacks is something I like to call “onion nachos,” a personal take on the popular dish. It is, quite literally, onions cut up, peppered with cheese, and marinated in the microwave. This is a source of great derision in my shared home. My roommates are appalled, concerned, and, generally, very unhappy about it.

As you might expect, I am asked, often with a lot of disdain, why I like and am doing this.

To say I have been raised to have an adventurous appetite is an aggressive understatement. My father is a truly phenomenal cook. He is the third of three French boys born on a French farm to a relentlessly French woman. She owns one pair of scissors that are used for three very distinct purposes: sewing, trimming her nails, and cutting the throats of her smaller animals, an act which she insists is the most humane way.

As soon as my father was confirmed not to be a girl, his mother resolutely decided enough was enough; she was not going through any of that again for yet another boy. She would just have to raise my dad like the daughter she was never granted. This upbringing endowed my father with a certain confidence and flair in the kitchen that he felt was his duty and moral obligation to share.

I learned early on that any resistance to foods was not an option. In the summer, my grandmother would unapologetically serve me the rabbits I had adopted that past spring. “*Tu te rappelles de ton petit lapin, Remi?*” (“Do you remember your little rabbit, Remi?”) Once, she waited until the first bite was already in my mouth to tell me that dinner that night was cow tongue. This news was much more difficult to process while feeling the bovine tastebuds on my own human ones.

I developed a kind of passive Stockholm syndrome.<sup>1</sup> I ate Remi. I finished that cow tongue.

My best friend Lily had a slower learning curve. She would come over after school and often stay for dinner. A typical dinner might be sautéed scallops with peppers and shallots in a cream sauce or maybe a bernaise-coated steak served “bleu”, referencing the blue and cold that remained after the cooking process. There were no “kid-friendly” dishes: no pastas, no chicken fingers, no pizza, and, certainly, no dessert. My father had long since forbade all carbs and sugar as if they were the devil’s music and he a concerned housewife from the 50’s. “I’d rather they gave my kid crack cocaine than that poison,” he’d grumble every Halloween. The one remaining vestige was the Costco chocolates he claimed were prescribed by a doctor and, therefore, strictly for his consumption.

Lily would sit nervously at the table as my dad tried to wear her down on particularly adventurous dinner nights. “Come on! You just have to try one tentacle. You’ll love it!” he’d persist in his unapologetically French accent with the flamboyant gestures to complement it.

Lily would glance at my mom or me for support. I would already be halfway through my plate of octopus and look at her helplessly with only a shrug to offer. Sometimes, my mom would come to the defense, but we both knew it was pretty hopeless. My dad had a unique, but disarmingly effective, argumentative strategy. He didn’t waste time on the rationales for an argument. Rather than debate the claim, he would just deny its validity.

Lily would politely explain that she had tried the octopus last week and really was fine with just the zucchini and salad.

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<sup>1</sup> Stockholm syndrome is a psychological phenomenon in which hostages begin to identify with their captors. Though I was not literally held captive by the intimidating figure of a woman I’ve painted for you, this standard of dining was ingrained at such a young age that the normalcy with which I consumed these horrors was inevitable. By the time I could understand the strangeness of what was expected of me and how counter intuitive it was to acquiesce to those expectations, I still did.

“You’ve never tried it before. You loved it last time,” he’d retort, categorically ignoring facts and blatantly contradicting his own argument. You couldn’t reason with someone who rejected both reality and rationality.

Lily eventually learned to ask my mom discreetly what was for dinner. If my mom couldn’t help her get out of it, we would stage a phone call to her parents, and they’d help to create a diversion that would get her safely away from our kitchen before dinner.

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My fifth birthday party is the first I can remember. This is partly because I had invited Cannon McCracken, the fire of my five-year-old loins. He had a beautiful, slightly reflective, blond bowl cut that bounced whenever he moved. I would write about it on colorful sheets of construction paper and then rip them into pieces so no one would ever know of my scandalous infatuation. I’m sure my mom found them all.

He arrived fashionably late, well after the living room had filled, and in a suit and tie. He stood in my doorway with flowers in one hand and his mother in the other. I realize now that five-year-old boys do not dress themselves in suits and ties, and they most certainly do not buy flowers. Our mothers must have had a giggly conversation about how to optimize the cuteness of the encounter. In the moment though, I was thoroughly swept off my feet.

My mother took care of the cake and left my father in charge of the snacks. Snacks are vital to any kid’s party. They made or broke the whole thing. It was what any function was remembered by: Zoe Zakin’s birthdays were renowned for the Vermonster, a literal bucket of twenty kinds of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream with unlimited toppings. It was her good fortune to have parents from New England.

My mom had suggested grilled cheese sandwiches because they were quick and easy. They were going to have thirty-plus little monsters running around, so “Please, Pierre, don’t make anything weird.” He had agreed, and he partially followed through; he just made his French adaptation: *Le Croque Mousieur*. To his credit, *Croque Mousieurs* are traditionally grilled bread with cheese like the good, American version. He just happened to use an aggressively pungent *fromage*<sup>2</sup>; his specific kind smelled a lot like feet.

My mom freaked out when she saw and, more importantly, smelled his creations. She was pretty gifted at hysteria—very convincing. “They’ve never had this before! They’re five-year-old kids! They’ll never eat it!” My dad met each one of her exclamations with his conviction that these pre-schoolers would love it once they tried it; they would surely thank him vigorously for their precocious understanding of the fine culinary options of French cuisine. He was relentless; it were as if he believed each repetition made his theory more true and convincing.

*“Oh non, Karen, tais-toi! C’est pratiquement la même chose. Ils vont l’adorer.”* (“Oh no, Karen, shut up! It’s practically the same thing. They’re going to love it.”)

My family friend Will Veitch, who was born and raised in France and thus accustomed to the peculiarities of my father’s cuisine, and I were the first to grab a sandwich. I went first because it was my birthday. Will went second because he was the only other person who would eat one.

My dad accosted every single one of my guests, including my golden-haired *love*, insisting they try at least one bite. When they invariably refused, he tried to “reason” with each recalcitrant kid about why he or she would not eat the sandwich—his glorious concoction that smelled like feet. I sat in a corner with Will, foot sandwich in hand, avoiding Cannon but also confused about why no one else could appreciate this snack.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the French word for cheese, but, in my lexicon, it connotes a pungent smell ripe enough to clear your nostrils.

If I would have been a more courageous and individualistic five-year-old, I might have joined my father with a hand welded to my hip to scold the ignorance of my party's patrons. But, alas, like most children, I cowered in nervous embarrassment realizing I might be a little bit different than my peers with a painfully clear explanation of why.

I never came valiantly to Lily's defense. I couldn't understand why she didn't like or, at least, wouldn't try the octopus. *Think about what you're missing out on, Lily.* Somehow, my dad's twisted and seriously flawed logic resonated with some ingrained part of me. *We liked it, why wouldn't she?*

There's often a moment of paralyzing terror to accompany the recognition of something of yourself in your parents. My maternal inheritances have similar side-effects. My cheeks flush when I see my mom gesture violently, oblivious to all the breakable ware around her. I picture her teetering between heel and toe when I stand up after one or four too many glasses of wine. My voice starts to shake when I hear in it the unwarranted hysteria that I roll my eyes at in hers.

I don't know why a parental mirror engenders such embarrassment. I have no shortage of other traits that should prompt greater concern: reckless driving, awkward failures in simple social salutations, and, yes, excessive onion consumption. But, for some reason, I can painlessly accept these as inevitable and immutable parts of my identity; I'm not happy that I sometimes throw finger guns as greetings instead of the more socially standard wave or head nod, but, short of an internal *Goddammit, Madi*, I keep moving, unperturbed. The chagrin is far more distressing and persistent in the presence of hereditary foibles, patterns that I can remember cringing at when I see them in my parents.

This is the unsettling realization that your traits or actions are defined by a process in which you have little to no agency, that "passive Stockholm Syndrome" I experienced in the wake of processing the tongue, pet, or worse what I had eaten. I can't say that I look back on those meals with any of the horror I see in the faces receiving the tale, but I can understand the sentiment. I

know that little kids don't love octopus or suspiciously scented cheeses, but something between my emergence from the womb and first bites of scary foods made me immune to this knowledge.

Though I have made excuses for or ignored it, I have never suppressed my paternal inheritance; my palette is insatiably curious and decidedly explorative. Although some of these adventures admittedly terrify my roommates, some (again, not all) of these culinary pilgrimages have yielded something special that I have been able to share with people I love. In appreciation of this gift, I will never apologize for my onions or my weird cheese or any of my treasured but questionable foods.

I have thought a lot about other answers to this recurring onion-nacho question: one that would do justice to my cause and unapologetically defend this inheritance. As of yet, I have not been able to provide any kind of definitive, let alone validating, response. All too often, I hear myself saying, fairly insistently, something along the lines of "No, it's so good. You really have to try it. You'll love it!" All the while, an unapologetically French accent with accompanying flamboyant gestures haunts me.