



ETCETERA

I'm Glad The Whole World Isn't Macrobiotic

by Frank Arcuri

I was excited about cooking nearly 200 meals a day for Michio and Aveline Kushi's five-day seminar, but when Miami Foundation Director Sandy Pukel told me I would be sharing the kitchen—literally the same stove—with the staff of the Sheraton Royal Biscayne on Key Biscayne, I'll admit, I saw disaster! Call it youth or blindness but neither of my assistants, Peter Parker (a seasoned study house cook from Boston) nor Theirry Lamoureux (a wonderfully energetic Frenchman who wanted to help with the cooking so he could "meet Mr. Sushi") felt there would be any problem.

I had questions: Could I really stand for five days side by side and pot-to-pot with hotel cooks preparing all the foods we macrobiotic enthusiasts are told might kill us? Would they laugh us off as a crazy bunch of chop-happy-rice-busters? Would that boiling pot of canned Vienna sausages splash into my gentle miso soup; and when that second cook finishes dressing his bloody side of beef, would I make riceballs at the same table?

There were a few raised stovepipe hats that first day we began the parade of stainless steel pans, chopsticks, sushi mats, and fifty-pound bags of organic brown rice. Our produce had preceded us: Piles of beautiful collard greens sat boxed and cool next to a rack of especially—and not quite naturally—pink mousse. "Stay cool even when you're not in the walk-in," I told myself.

Slowly the questions began. "What is that?" Hokkaido pumpkin. Pumpkin . . . calabaza. "Yes, calabaza," the chef whispered. My partially bilingual tongue had made a bridge, and down the line from the chef to the broiler man, from the pantry back to the range, they whispered, "Calabaza." The hokkaido lay there—a slice of golden oratory telling its story. It wasn't hard to understand.

These cooks were anxious and friendly, and as an older second chef told me one day while I cut matchstick carrots, "we used to cook that way years ago, all fresh stuff. Now all cans. Cost, you know . . . Running a hotel is all cost." As he disappeared behind the ranges, I thought, "Yes, the cost." I didn't have answers but I thought it a little sad to see the health of people fall victim to something so limited, ungenerous, and graceless as cost. There are hotels and restaurants that artfully prepare nouvelle cuisine with absolutely fresh ingredients but most of America must be eating like this. Time . . . Cost . . .

I can't pretend that I spent much time pondering the philosophy of macrobiotics versus other eating because I had limited time, space, and staff and a lot of food to prepare. People had to eat. All people have to eat, and here it came together for me. The hotel cooks stood their part of the heat to prepare food their guests came to eat and I was doing the same for mine. In separate dining rooms people waited for our preparations and depending on our choices, as cook or diner, we would eat or prepare a kind of food and would live some sort of life because of it. Here it was—all cooking in the same room. My mind bubbled like a soup. Everything Michio had said in classes in Boston the previous summer rolled up like the hot liquid before me: no duality, just a complementary antagonism that within itself creates life. No good food. No bad food. No guilt. No sin. Just food. I wished that everyone in both dining rooms, the ones waiting for the brown rice, the ones waiting for that unnaturally pink mousse could all come into one kitchen and see everything cooking at once as surely it does in the stars and planets of our universe.

What need was there to introduce my kitchen mates to yin and yang? The introduction of different

foodstuffs into their workplace made its own statement. What better way to begin learning than to instigate the words, "What's that", "Why do you use this?", or "I didn't know it could be done like that." From the first day I realized that these simple, crude, colorful vegetables, boundless grains, and our way of handling them could lecture for themselves more concisely and more eloquently than the most learned teachers of macrobiotics. And, what's more, the entire course is free.

I realized that we who are involved in the macrobiotic way of life often become more involved in macrobiotic trappings than in life itself. The cooks with whom we shared the kitchen might not remember so much about amino acids and yinyangery as they would the presence of the vegetables and all those bottles of spring water that narrowed the hallway to the kitchen. Most of all, wouldn't they remember how we behaved and worked in the kitchen? Could it be the actual task was in the sharing?

Perhaps out of sheer necessity, or through the grace of God, we were never upset nor unpleasant about any of the food that was prepared there. I looked at much of the hotel food like old friends I could chat with but didn't have so much in common with anymore. By the time the parade reversed and we were loading out the huge new pressure cookers and our incongruous wooden spoons, I felt that so much more could be learned from sharing differences rather than isolating them.

As we received thanks from Mr. and Mrs. Kushi and all the people who had eaten the meals we prepared, it seemed that the seminar had actually taken place back there through those two swinging doors into the kitchen. I'm sure glad the whole world isn't macrobiotic.

Frank Arcuri manages a macrobiotic guest house in Tequesta, Florida.