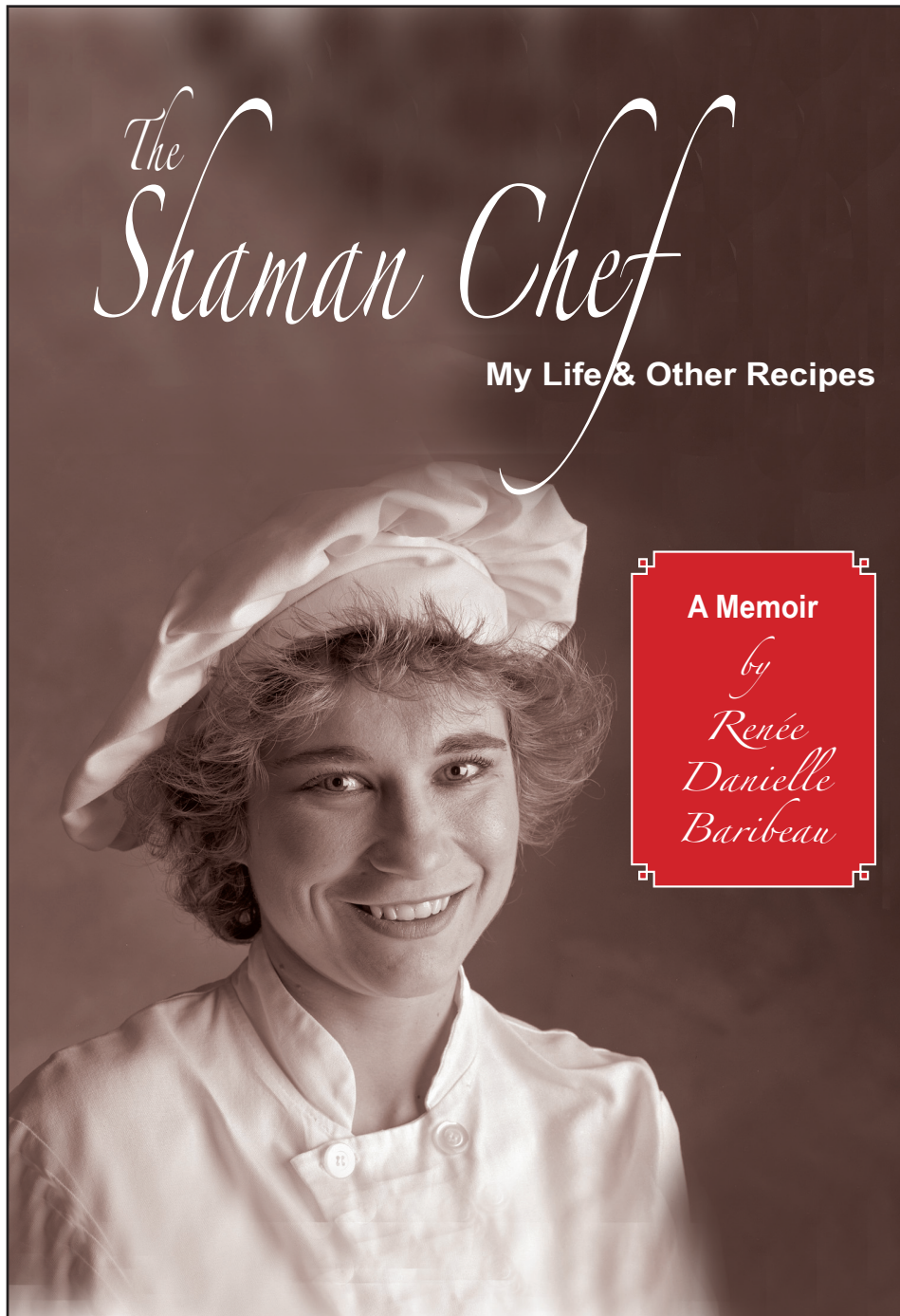


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Introduction

Autumn Leaves

Where I grew up – in the inner city of Springfield, Massachusetts – the community did not gather in the park upon my birth to find and sing my song as they do in some cultures. The elders did not gather at the local Temescale (sweat lodge) waiting for my birth in order to chart my destiny. If my teenage parents celebrated at all, I am sure they ended the day with a drunken fight.

Those conflicts were my first initiations into this life. Some children are born into the South on the Medicine Wheel, where they are allowed to be children and remain innocent long into their youth. In my life this was not the case. I immediately moved into the West, which, being governed by the Thunder Beings, was filled with loud hostility and angry lightning strokes. I was born to parents who clawed their love to shreds. This, my first, but not my last, wounding was also the event that set me on the path to becoming the shamanic warrior I am today.

On the day of my birth, the universe gave me the Life number 9¹ and my parents gave me the name Renée Danielle Baribeau. When people asked why I became a chef, my response has always been that I was destined for it. What other profession could I choose, given my name? Unlike my sisters, Cheryl Lee and Christine Carla, *I* had a name that called out to be embroidered on a chef's coat.

Nine is generally interpreted as indicating the completion of a cycle. In the Tarot deck the number nine corresponds to the Hermit who walks alone in the darkness holding a single lantern to light the way. One might not think that these two parts of my life coincide, my life's number and my name, but they do, and therein lies my story.

Eating together is the ritual that holds families and communities together through sickness and health, through good times and through bad, for better or for worse. As a chef, I have had entrée into the finest kitchens, including a United States President and Hollywood celebrities. I have cooked to seduce lovers, and I have made thousands of dollars catering one meal.

¹ To find your own Life number, add up the digits of the month, the day, and the year of your birth, and reduce them to a single or double number. Numerology texts will tell you the meaning of the number you get.

I cook with no regard to race, religion, politics, or social limitations. For many years, cooking was both my security and my ticket into the larger world. But in 1990 something happened and my life imploded.

Like a charred potato on the bottom of the cast iron oven, I was burnt out on cooking, and yet I did not know how to survive without the talent that had been my life preserver. Maybe, if instead of cooking like a painter, I could somehow paint like a cook, I might be able to restore the delicate balance that had fueled my gift.

And, indeed, the gift did return, but not before my walls filled up with color-splashed paintings, and I came to understand why it is that the foods of Autumn are among my favorites.

Apples and pumpkins and late summer corn all feed me with their colors. Complex flavors have replaced the bologna sandwiches and cheeseburgers that were the staples of my youth and now my autumns are filled with dishes of pumpkin and spicy meat ragouts.

Sweet Pumpkin with a Spicy Ragout (serves 8)

INGREDIENTS

| | |
|---|----------------------------|
| 2 whole pumpkins - cut in half & seeded | salt & pepper to taste |
| 4oz plain yogurt | 2 tsp powdered cinnamon |
| 4 T brown sugar | 4 c. of Renee's Meat Sauce |
| 4 T butter | |

Preheat oven to 350 degrees

Place pumpkin halves in a baking dish, bowl side up. Rub each cut side with 1 T of butter and season with salt and pepper, brown sugar, and 1 tsp. cinnamon. Place in oven, uncovered, and bake for 60 to 80 minutes, or until pumpkin is tender. This varies depending upon the pumpkins.

Cut pumpkin in half again. Place on a platter and fill with the thick sauce. Top with a dollop of yogurt.

Spicy Ragout (serves many!)

This recipe was adapted from one served in a local restaurant in Syracuse. The Grandmother cooking was hesitant to share, but I think I came close! One batch of this will provide meat sauce enough for the ragout listed above with enough left over to make lasagna for eight.

INGREDIENTS

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 2 lb. pork butt, with bone. | 1/2 cup of red wine |
| 1 LB. of spicy Italian sausage | 1 Bay leaf |
| 1 - 1/2 pounds of beef bones | 2 T. salt |
| 6 thin slices of Genoa (dry) salami | 2T. pepper |
| 6 28 oz. cans of plum, or other whole tomatoes | 1 tsp crushed red pepper |
| 2 16 oz. cans of tomato sauce | 3 T. oregano |
| 2 large onions diced medium | 4 T. Basil |
| 1/2 cup of olive oil | 2 sticks of cinnamon |

Preheat oven to 450 degrees

Sauté the onions, garlic and carrot in oil until translucent in a large heavy bottom stock pot. Do not brown.

Roast the pork butt and beef bones for 30-40 minutes. These you DO want brown. Deglaze the roasting pan with the red wine and pour scrapings and juices into sautéed mixture above.

Add the cans of tomatoes and tomato sauce. The quality of your sauce is dependent upon the quality of your ingredients. I prefer organic tomatoes for both taste and health reasons.

Stir in the following ingredients: Bay leaf, Genoa salami, salt, pepper, 1 tsp crushed red pepper, oregano, basil, spicy Italian sausage,

Simmer for 4-6 hours on the stove over low heat. Remove the meat and chop. Taste for seasonings and adjust.



Section One

The Making of a Chef

Chapter One

My Father was a Gangster

I would sit at the window and count cars until his Chevy pulled up to the curb. He was always about forty to fifty cars late. I spent hours waiting for his visits, only to hate him out loud once he came to the door. My smart aleck comments reeked of pain, and boomeranged through the screen door, keeping me separate from my hurt and fear. My father moved from our apartment before my memories became crystal clear. He would reappear periodically, adding facets to my recollections, sometimes bringing more clarity and other times more distortion. You'd think I'd have preferred to count cars than fool myself into believing he wouldn't come home and inflict the inevitable terror over and over again.

Or perhaps my mother had found him again at the bar and brought him home after closing time. It would only be a matter of minutes before Mom's badgering began, and the evening ended with a fistfight and the inevitable police call. In the morning, my mother was always left alone with yet another black eye or bruised rib, and a promise to us she could not keep, that he would not come back again. This was the norm in a household that never healed.

As a child, I learned early that love meant enduring pain inflicted by the people you love most. I grew up believing this definition of love. Undying loyalty was a hard lesson to unlearn and reframe.

As much as I loathed my father, I revered him. His gangster predispositions shaped my moral make-up from a young age. I once believed that all men were part of the mob, carried guns, and had sausage rolls of hundred dollar bills in their bulging pants pockets. His folktales could satisfy a hungry beggar; they were the square patties of ground beef grilled at Harry's Hamburgers, Dad's favorite roadside stand. Bar rooms were his stage and my classroom. Little did I know that safecracking was not an acceptable trade for career day at school.

As a child my father was dirt poor. He was a cowboy who played the guitar and sang in a country band. He never told me the straight story, forever changing melodies as his bulky fingers two-stepped down the neck of his guitar. Watering his thirst for money, he opened a Country Western Bar called the Office Lounge when I was ten. The slogan was, "Don't lie to your wife. When you say you're at the office, be at the Office." That was Dad's variety of honesty.

He was a workaholic, always at the Office, and a ladies' man. Women lined up throughout his life claiming to have borne his offspring; two of these children have shown up in my life since.

When Dad and his younger brother were still in diapers, his father volunteered for a WWII suicide mission with an infamous U.S. Army Paratrooper unit, The "Filthy Thirteen" made of rabble-rousing Canadians, as crazy as they were brave. Six months before their mission, they are said to have exchanged a blood oath to neither wash nor shave until after D-Day. They slept in their clothes - including jackets and parachute boots. They trained in a style then compared to the warfare tactics of Native American Indians, had Mohawks and wore war paint on their faces. "They fought among themselves with their fists until they dropped from exhaustion," one newspaper account reported.

One night my grandfather, Frenchie Baribeau, got into a barroom brawl, left, and came back an hour later dressed in his full army uniform ready to kill. My father apparently inherited these traits from his father. While he would willingly die at gunpoint for his loved-ones, Dad was incapable of living for us.

Gramma Baribeau, as we called her, never remarried, and shared her shack with her brother, my great Uncle Richie, a devout Catholic who missed his calling as a priest. The house had the same construction as the chicken coop in the back corner of her two-acre farm, with rooms tacked on as needed when two more children came along. She was the original entrepreneur in our family who ran a roadside produce stand to supplement her war pension.

My grandmother taught both my father and me that sometimes it is OK to shape the story to fit the circumstance.

I worked for her before I could even reach the counters without standing on a crate, earning a bounty of \$1.00 per day. I grazed all day long, moving from succulent peaches to juicy tomatoes with mayonnaise on white bread, to perfectly cooked Gentleman John's corn that my grandmother simmered for exactly 6 minutes, with just a touch of sugar and salt. The lie I learned to tell was that we grew all our produce in the fields the customers could see from the road. In truth, the only thing growing out behind the house were the four rows of corn we cultivated to shield the dirt acre field. Beyond the flowing golden tops of the façade were abandoned cars under a blanket of weeds.

My early love affair with food began with that job. However, I would double my height before I would ever eat anything at home beside cheeseburgers and bologna sandwiches.



One spring morning, Dad arrived in Syracuse by plane. Tempered by Bloody Marys, looking like a Smithfield ham, his big belly hanging over tacky lime green polyester pants, his fist-size gold nugget on a neck chain bobbing up and down off his belly, he climbed into my lemon colored Ford. We set out to inspect the building where I would soon build my first restaurant. I was ecstatic – thrilled for once that he showed up to do something special for me.

After an instant appraisal, he gave his conditional approval, but insisted that I buy the building solo, authoritatively shutting out my business partner and beloved mentor Lena. Inside I was anxious, although I exhaled excitement. I knew the consequences of not speaking up for Lena. But I swallowed my truth. I accepted his offer.

Up until then, the only way he knew to show his love was by doling out money, and for a long time, my willingness to accept his signature on anything had been rare. At fourteen, my animosity erupted, and I stood before this giant, ripping up his birthday offering like used scrap paper, insisting he dig deeper to find a meaningful gift. Even his high school graduation gift, a Mercury Comet, came to a crashing end when I slammed it into the back of a turning car one drunken night.

Now it was time to come to some resolution in order to work with my father, and quite frankly, I did not have the proper tools. I had already sold out for his approval and his money. My joy fled within the hour after I took Dad to the South Side to see my home.

This was his first visit to Syracuse since I had moved there ten years earlier. Even though he had freehandedly given me the \$1,300 to buy the pigeon-infested, city-owned nightmare of a “house,” Dad could not see beyond the neighborhood or my next-door neighbor’s Afro to appreciate my renovation. He spent even less time at this property than at the proposed restaurant site.

I had become accustomed to his prejudices, but still, I would squirm in my skin during his outbursts, hoping no one I loved got hit in the crossfire. His bigotry was the microscope he used to view the world. He could not see how many times he crushed my spirit.

A few drinks later, tensions eased and resentments were replaced by laughter as he shared his escapades with my bar friends. They perched on the edge of their stools, listening to Dad’s vinegary tales whose main characters were named Shifty, Speedy, and Bumpy.

For a week, I had bragged to my cronies that he might come to town; now he exceeded expectations as he bought another round. I escorted him to all my drinking haunts, showing him off like a Beefsteak tomato at the fair.

The crocuses and tulips were singing for me that day. Finally, after twenty-nine years, my Dad was there for me. He arrived on time – for the first time in my life ever – and completed my first real initiation as an adult, co-signing the loan at the bank to get my business started.

Our fun came to an abrupt end when our celebratory spree made us late for his afternoon departure. He complained for days afterward about the black security guard who made him remove all his gold jewelry, causing him to miss his plane. He even threatened to drive back to shoot “that nigger” with his gun.



If there was a higher power in my life, She arrived disguised as a jazz singer made up like Fanny Brice. From where I sat that afternoon, on the barstool drinking a shot with a beer chaser, everything about Lena Lenora Lenci was larger than life.

It was June of 1979. I had just received my college diploma in the mail. Refusing to give my parents any satisfaction, including allowing them to celebrate the family's first college graduation, I did not return to University of Southern Maine for my ceremony.

So there I was, far from home and alone in a bar, dressed like a construction worker (my normal attire back then), when destiny found me as she stopped by on her way to a dress rehearsal for *Funny Girl*. For me, this was good karma and for Lena, a debt that would change her life drastically – forever.

Fourteen years my senior, Lena became my coach, mentor and lover, propping me up like a wooden stick in a candied apple. She was big boned, bold, brassy, and determined. I would sit and wait for hours outside the theater hall, pretending to have just arrived when her practice ended.

Soon afterwards, I moved into her basement. I had gotten evicted from my place for conducting business – an all-night after-hours club – in my living room. (Like my father, I always had another scheme.) Each week I would sell non-refundable tickets at the local bar and at closing time move the party to my studio apartment. After several weekends with no sleep, the neighbors had the disco ball and me removed.

Lena helped me secure a job editing top-secret documents for GE. Not only did I hate the job, I was unequipped to succeed, possessing limited language skills and blind to typographical errors. They kept me around to run errands because I was quick and made people laugh.

Lena loved to eat and drink, and after months of meeting her for two hour-lunches at lavish restaurants, I ran short on excuses. GE saw fit to relieve me of my security clearance. After I “quit,” they instituted a written test for editors.

Lena worked as a Rehabilitation Counselor for disabled adults. Her schedule was a lot more flexible, but she was ready for a change, too. Soon afterwards, she left her state job behind in pursuit of her dream, a Jazz Club.

Once I was settled in her basement apartment, I hosted a dinner party in a makeshift kitchen next to her washer and dryer. After Lena tasted my cooking she was hooked like a trout. Within weeks, I insinuated myself into the rest of her life and moved upstairs. A short time later, Lena delivered life-changing news; she had decided to try it “one more time” with her ex, but remained devoted to me. For the next seven years she directed both of our careers according to her own script.

After this emotional complication, Lena found that she could not deal with having me as her moody roommate. She soon devised a plan that would move me from her home while starting me on my path as an entrepreneur.

The next step began with buying an abandoned ghetto house at a city auction. Lena and I scoured the slums to determine the better locations, and decided to bid on three properties that had potential to increase in value. I “won” the last of these and became the proud owner of a decrepit, boarded-up turquoise Victorian house, at the ripe young age of twenty-two.

My neighbors were working class black families who had bought into the American dream of owning their own home. What they hadn’t planned on was the prejudice that would drive their new neighbors to the suburbs. The only white family left on the block was a retired couple who remained to defend their fort. Since most of the homes predated automobiles, they did not have a driveway and I rented them mine.

I traded daiquiris for collard greens and my black neighbors taught me how to cook soul food. After smoking a joint, we would put a pair of chickens on my grill at the same time, theirs on the outer edge to slow roast over grey coals, mine searing in the red-hot center but always moist with perfect crisscrossed grill lines. I would be finished eating before their chicken was off the grill, and we laughed a lot at our different cooking styles.

Even though the front porch had no railing and the house was ripped apart down to the studs, I started hosting dinner parties soon after I moved in. Friends took plates of food and sat on the leaning front porch adjacent to the busy city street. They always came back for another meal, in spite of the shabby surroundings.

I lived with the dust of sheet rock for two years, navigating piles of oak molding being stripped of white paint, sharing my space with pigeons that repeatedly broke in through the boarded attic windows, trying to reclaim their former dwelling. I carved out a few clean rooms to inhabit, although for the first year I had only storm windows protecting me from the weather and the thugs.

One of my favorite pictures is of me huddled in one of the rooms, fully dressed for the harsh winter and looking like the Michelin Tire man. The wood-burning stove there was the only source of heat for months. Despite the chaos, I continued to cook and entertain, and many meals were cooked over the fire before the kitchen was built.

Lena came and went, juggling our relationship along with two others (by now she had reunited with another ex), but she continued to direct my life. She organized the contractor's budget and schedule and found ways to have the city pay her for labor and materials she put into the renovation. By the next summer she had devised yet another plan for me to earn money.

Another trait inherited from my father was the ability to sell anything I deemed worthy. (I had even been a used car salesperson for a short while). Lena's plan was that I capitalize on this talent, and I soon became the owner of an ice cream bicycle cart, which we painted red to match my short shorts and striped shirt. All business start-ups have their challenges. Not planning ahead for the twelve cases of ice cream that was dropped off curbside was one of the first I encountered. Lena came to the rescue once again and the ice cream was tucked away in a rented meat locker before it could melt.

Those were the good days, but the dark days were growing in equal number. The drinking was catching up with me, and when Lena was off leading her other lives, I became increasingly despondent. I spent many days sleeping on the mattress on the floor, hung over, drugged, and unwilling to get up and work on the house. My moods, grey and cloudy matching Syracuse's weather, determined my intermittent schedule and the dry ice dissolved in the ice cream cart parked in the hallway.

But deep inside there was a faint call to life. Slowly I came to, the drywall was positioned and painted, and the windows finally installed. Upon Lena's advice, I converted the space into two apartments, and for the next several years, I lived upstairs and rented out the lower unit. Despite successful efforts to convince friends to buy into the urban neighborhood and help with its gentrification, the city lost their federal funding. Lucky for me, I got out on time. Two years after opening the restaurant, I sold the place to an investor for a profit, which I used to keep my fledgling business alive.

Chapter Two – The Making of a Chef

Sometimes, we automatically know the right move, and sometimes we are frozen on one branch while the branch above our head feels like it is out of reach. Often we are so focused on the fruit just beyond our grasp that we fail to see the squirrel as it scurries along a solid branch that could take us one step closer to the limb we think is impossible to reach. In my lifetime, I have missed many opportunities due to my stubborn unwillingness to see a different route.

After one summer, the ice cream cart was retired. Between the rainy weather and my fluctuating moods, the business was doomed. It hardly seemed worth the effort to pedal the cart across town for a measly forty bucks; though I did earn over \$100 once by filling the cooler with beer, taking advantage of the crowd at an art show.

It was one of those muggy summer days that curled my wavy hair. Perhaps it was the suffocating heat or maybe the officer was enjoying my blatant scam. Anyway, he waited, watching from across the street until the line stopped before coming over to grab a Popsicle. That was the highlight of the whole job for me. I loved to break rules and get away with it.

As the harsh cold winds migrated across Lake Ontario towards Syracuse that fall, I landed my first job in a kitchen. While I possessed innate ability, I had no culinary jobs on my resume. Perseverance finally landed me a job in the shrimp department at Red Lobster. Every day, I faced a mountain of thawing shrimp. Each piece had to be hand-peeled and hand-breaded. Within a week I had mastered the task, finishing hours before the other prep cooks. But this only caused friction in the kitchen, alienating me from the other cooks.

Finally, after a month of shrimp, I secured the affections of a successful tavern owner and sweet-talked him into letting me cook dinners at his busy restaurant. The day chef would plan the menu, blend the sauces and prepare the mis en place. In addition to quickly developing my line skills, I was responsible for making several gallons of soup each shift. The soups were a hit with the after work crowd, and so my duties were expanded to Sundays. Each week, I pored through the cookbooks of Master Chefs – Escoffier, James Beard, Julia Child, Pierre Franey – whose recipes and stories inspired the menus which often surpassed my meager knife skills. Fortunately for me, the dishwashers all knew how to chop vegetables.

Even the owner, Peter O'Malley, would gladly help in the interest of polishing his newfound silver coin. He would read the recipes out loud as I struggled to create the dish. My relationship with him was a source of constant friction at home. I fancied Peter but also used his attentions to avenge my loneliness during Lena's absence.

He became my new mentor and she hated him. He bragged around town about his new protégé and restaurateurs thronged the bar waiting to taste my dinner specials. Local food critics spotlighted my cooking and chefs offered me better jobs. In order to nurture my culinary talent, I left O'Malley's, alienating Peter by selling him my ice cream cart right before giving him my two weeks notice.

In one job interview, a classically trained French chef asked me to explain how I made French Onion Soup. Full of gusto, I went through my entire recipe. He smiled and said, "While that sounds like good soup, it is not the way you make French Onion Soup," and he offered me \$4.25 an hour, a significant pay cut, to apprentice with him. Instead, I opted for a job with the Greek chef who taunted me by hoarding his knowledge.

That Chef sent me to the storeroom when he was seasoning a sauce and to the dish room when he was butchering meat. Whenever I asked Artemis to explain something, he would said, "If I teach you what I know, you will take my job for a hundred dollars week less." Later on, when Chef returned a few weeks after having hernia surgery to put on the greasy white coat that he had left guarding us in his absence, I quit. As I walked out the door, I thanked him for his confidence in my talent and assured him that the day I knew all he did, I would earn a hundred dollars a week more.

Perhaps here is where I started up the wrong branch of the tree. I had boldly sent my resume to the Escoffier Association. I was told by the chef in charge that my talent would be well served by going to Europe for an apprenticeship to put the points (his words) on my "i's" (translates to "dots"). Instead I took my "fine background" to work at a cooking school in New York City in exchange for classes. To this day, I regret not going to Europe.

When I fled to New York City, I carried along an extra bag of luggage containing all my personality flaws. Despite my talent, it was difficult for me to get along with others in the kitchen and I had a flagrant disrespect for chefs. Drinking had led to several incidents including accidents and near arrests.

The trail of wreckage included friends who had grown weary of my strife with Lena. It was time for Syracuse and me to take a break.



The moment I arrived in the city, I began a search for an affordable place to live. I ended up at the Jane West, a vagrant hotel whose glory had been lost to drunken merchant sailors long ago. The hallways reeked of stale smoke covered by cheap cleaning products. Years later, curiosity led me back up the steep steps to open the large wooden door of the hotel, and I was transported back to that time. The place had been upgraded and converted to a travelers' hotel, but the millions of dollars spent on renovations could not rid the place of the stench nor of the ghosts of sea captains that roamed the dark hallways.

My new room was two cots wide and dingy green. Spending my dwindling allowance, I painted it off-white and bought a rug so I had somewhere to put my feet. Every night there were fights in the hall and inevitably the toilet seats would all be broken. There was standing water in the showers and the cockroaches were as big as small dogs.

One night, Lena drove down from Syracuse to visit for Valentine's Day. We went to dinner at one of New York's premier Italian restaurants, where, although I didn't know it yet, I would soon be working, and then she stayed in my shoebox room, sneaking past the bulletproof glass reception area that stopped residents from having company. It was a prison, and to this day I have no idea what I was thinking of to endanger my life in those halls. Within the month, I found a room in the west village.

In the eighties, men were not readily relinquishing their cooking positions, knowledge, or changing rooms. Working the switchboard at the cooking school gave me the jump on job leads. I volunteered to assist one of New York's finest chef's, a master from Burgundy, at the French Institute. He liked my willingness to work and offered me an interview.

I would have been the first female ever to cook or even to work at La Reserve, a top-name mid town restaurant. I assured Chef Galliard that, even though I had changed in his office on the night I auditioned for him, I would change with the guys. However, fearless as I was, I felt uncomfortable in the male dominated kitchen, and he made the job decision easy for me when he said he would start me in the bakery. I protested that I didn't want to be a baker, and he exclaimed in his French accent, "But Renée, what will you do when the pastry chef is off?" Call it ego, or pride, or the need to make more than \$200 a week, I did not take the job.

Soon after, I had the opportunity to work for another French Chef at the Executive Dining Room at Chemical Bank, and this time I took it. I used roller skates to get to work, skating up Park Avenue at sunrise. My initiation by fire came the first day when the sous-chef asked me to remove a tray of muffin-filled cast iron pans from the top shelf of a double stack convection oven. I burnt my entire palm trying to balance the weight of the tray. Just as I regret passing on the Cordon Bleu, I rue being so determined to prove my worth that I could not let myself drop the muffins on the floor in spite of the pain. In any case, it was at this job that I finally learned to use the knife, cutting fresh chickens and perfect rectangular vegetable batonnet.

Meanwhile, I had taken another job at night, learning the art of Italian cooking. The style of cooking was the "white platter" that showcased simplicity and imagination using only a handful of fresh ingredients, and that was to become my trademark. This place had a woman chef who orchestrated the symphony and every dish was a masterpiece cooked to order while the clients talked with friends over a pricey bottle of wine. This was where I learned the true craft of cooking, but once again, I confused my creative energy with my sexual drive, and being unable to untangle my emotions for my teacher, I left the job.

The food I experienced during those nine months was my imagination's playground, and the city itself my source of amusement as I wandered aimlessly when I was not working or going to school. Even though I had rented out my truck and my two apartments back at home, money was scarce. I even rationed my subway tokens, saving them to be used when I was too high to roller skate or it was too far to walk home.

After nine months, the dirt and my loneliness overshadowed my desire to remain in New York. Towards the end of my declining stay, I shared a cab with a heroin user. Lucky for me, the other passenger did not want to share her stash and so I never started down that street.

My guardian angel must have had my back that day. Alcohol and marijuana were hardly numbing the pain and the cauldron of my anger was beginning to boil on the back burner.



When I left NYC, fueled by brazenness and having a few skills in my knife kit, I took a summer job running a large kitchen in the Thousand Islands, a beautiful place along the St. Lawrence Seaway. Lena assured me that to enjoy the islands, I would need a boat, so I found a twelve-foot rowboat that had been converted to a motor craft with a steering wheel. I bought it for two hundred dollars and, together with a fellow cook, I dragged it (and her) up from Syracuse.

My fondest memories of that summer are of visiting the islands in my “Great Red Mount.” Together, we navigated through ocean liners and freighters and waves reminiscent of those Moses created when he parted the Red Sea. I was fearless as I braved the waterways of the river, armed with only with vodka and childish dreams.

I was in deep over my unskilled head. I had designed a cooked-to-order menu beyond the capabilities of my short-order cooks. While they were able to teach me to cook an egg over-easy, I had neither the communication skills nor the time to teach them how to prepare hot pasta tossed with a cold tomato salad and served over arugula with shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano glistening on top, or veal boscaiola, or braised lamb loin with a raspberry beurre blanc.

This disaster ended one July night in a kitchen brawl with the drunken manager. I had two hundred hungry liquored-up diners in the front waiting to be fed, and despite my pleading, the manager continued to pour free wine and seat more people. We were all drowning in the kitchen, trying to cook the lavish dishes I had put on the menu. The order tickets were lined up three cooks deep, and the chefs were waiting for instructions from their captain. But I was unable to regain control and the next thing I knew, I was having a fist fight with the manager. Our screaming match ended as he went for my throat with his bare hands. Humiliated, I stormed from the kitchen, leaving my good friends behind to clean up the mess.

When I left New York, I told my Italian mentor that I was going to return to Syracuse, and she asked me who I thought I was going to cook for back there. I could not answer her then, but she was right.

Back in Syracuse, I was like the wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano I had left behind at the Thousand Island Club, undervalued and out of place.

I took a job cooking for a petite French woman in her fledgling bistro. Her first restaurant had been the hit of the town years earlier and had been influential in expanding my culinary palate. It was one of the places Lena and I frequented.



The French think everyone should learn how to bake and so once again I was banished to the bakery. This time there was no way out, but Nicole lovingly taught me everything she knew about baking. To this day, if I want it to look good, I get it from the bakery; but when it needs to taste great, I bake it myself. And so, choosing money over credentials, I did not go to Europe. Choosing comfort over the hard life in the city, I went back home. The pond kept growing smaller. It was time to open my own place.

Recipe for Nicole's Chocolate Mousse

INGREDIENTS

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| 1 1/2 Cup heavy cream (whipped until soft peaks) | 1/3 C Espresso (instant or strong coffee works great) |
| 1 # semi sweet chocolate (melted over a double boiler) | 4 egg whites (beaten until soft peaks) |
| 2 egg yolks | pinch of salt |
| 1/3 C Grand Mariner | |

Melt chocolate in a bowl over double boiler.

Blend melted chocolate with whipped egg yolks, grand mariner and espresso.

Fold in egg whites

Fold in whipped cream. Refrigerate.

The festivities of the Grand Opening had ended the day before – Sunday. Afternoon was fading, turning the enameled white kitchen walls a somber grey. A long stream of light reflecting off the tall city buildings cast a soft glow through the double-hung window above the cellar stairs. The restaurant was closed, but I was puttering around ordering food for the coming week, still nursing a hangover from the celebration. My nausea and angst were overshadowed by the joy of the attention I had received. Everyone had come to the opening, including my entire proud family, arriving from three different states.

I had completely forgotten that a week earlier a blackbird had broken into my home. Even though I did not understand the medicine path at that time, I knew that blackbirds were an omen of death and I should have paid attention.

In those days, phones were stationary and cell phones were the size of small car batteries, so when the phone rang in the quiet of the closed restaurant, I charged for the one on the wall next to my 10-burner stove. The coiled cord could reach everywhere in the cramped room. “Brown Baggers, how can I help you?”

The familiar voice of my mother instructed me to sit down. Her words were simple and clear. “Your father has had a massive stroke.” I slid down the wall to the floor.

And it is here that my healing journey begins. The man who was both my hero and my villain had been slain by his own sword.

Chapter Three ***Saturn Return***

Life! A complicated recipe to start with, it was not blending well for my family. The person I knew as Dad had died; someone new had stepped in to take his place occupying his spot a few more years.

Two weeks to the day after Dad's stroke, while I was again on the phone with my mother, her husband Fred dropped dead, coming up the stairs after jogging. Just two weeks before, he had unselfishly made the four-hour drive from Portland to Springfield, Massachusetts after a full day of work, so that my mother could be with my two sisters and me as we waited in the ICU for news of my Dad. Fred's death delivered another blow.

We gathered three times in one month, a freak occurrence in a family that rarely even got together for holidays. These two tragedies, followed within the year by the death of my maternal grandfather, ensured that my joyful Grand Opening was now forever connected to loss.

There is an astrological event called a Saturn Return that occurs in one's late twenties, as Saturn completes its cycle through your birth chart and returns to the spot it occupied when you were born. It marks the passing of youth and the start of maturity. It is foremost an initiation, a time for endings and beginnings.

For me, this transition came as a hard wake-up call, extremely difficult to face after spending my twenties in a fog. Saturn was insisting that I change, but I was not going willingly. Things were falling apart around me, everywhere I turned. My illusions about Lena were surfacing and dissolving. Even though she guarded Brown Baggers in my absence, I knew that our relationship was doomed, but I could not leave. My old self was being shoved out of the way for a new one that was not yet formed and I was not having fun.

My younger sister, Christine, and I found some comfort in picking out the right casket for Fred. There was a variety to choose from: one box had embroidered gold satin with a squirrel eating an acorn (we could not imagine anyone would send a loved one off in this model), and another was an overgrown glow stick that could light your way to the after life. The family settled on something modest that represented Fred, an environmental engineer and family man who loved my mother and sister.

Whether Ma was a wreck from losing her childhood sweetheart or from losing her beloved husband, we could not tell. She was stoic.

If Saturn was a wise man charting my best course, I would not have known it at the time. His initiations were harsh and they pushed me to the limits of my sanity. On top of running my new business and experiencing death for the first time, I was angry and hating everyone close to me: Lena for destroying my trust, Christine for being born and taking away my childhood, Cheryl for being weak, and Dad for leaving me to financially fend for myself. My mother took the heat for everything that went wrong in my life.

Walter, her father, was exempt. I pitied him; he was unable to escape the haranguing clutches of either his wife or his alcoholism. Although my maternal grandmother's house was so spotless you could eat off the rug, it was filled with a constant hum of bickering and fighting. My grandfather either hid out in the basement and drank, or worked in his garden, where well-manicured beds were filled with beautiful seasonal flowers that flowed in an orchestrated rhythm from early spring to late fall.

When we were approaching our teens and our family acquired our first home, my grandmother would stop by often on her way home from work. She would never stay to eat dinner. She was always "worried about Walter," even though he would be safely passed out in the living room chair by six every evening. He never contributed a dime to the family, and Grandmother Wilma, a bookkeeper, worked two jobs to support him until the day he died. She paid a high price for loving him. At first it was the emotional well being of her entire family that suffered because of his alcoholism, But after his death, it was her own sanity that slipped away.

For Cheryl and me, our maternal grandparents were never great on the emotional side of the equation, but they had loved us and cared for us many Saturday nights. When we were at their house, I would escape the chaos by running up the hill to a large field behind their property and scooting under the fence to get to a huge weeping willow. For years that spot was my safe haven away from the fighting.

Perhaps my mother was wounded from growing up with a father whose drinking binges led him astray for weeks, and a mother who was a co-dependent German who martyred herself for love. Whatever the reason, she and her mother accepted this state of affairs as normal, and they remained in close proximity throughout my grandmother's life.

After Ma divorced my father, her life consisted of us children and her work. For entertainment, she delighted in her garden, a trait she received from her father. She never talked about her own feelings, or applauded any of our achievements, but she always provided the necessities for us. We had a roof over our heads, shoes on our feet, and the refrigerator was always full.

It would have been appropriate, in this time of her grief, for me to shed my anger at her, but I could not bear to even share the same space. My restaurant provided the perfect excuse to avoid her and I did not even return home for my grandfather's funeral. This was the way I dealt with the pain – I kept moving.

My mother and Fred went to Las Vegas and got married on New Year's Eve my senior year of high school. The transition was awkward. I was accustomed to sitting home smoking pot while babysitting Christine, who was six at the time. The first night Fred came home, Mom was still at work, and he walked into a smoked-filled living room. I was incensed and I was belligerent; I told him he had no right to come there without my mother, and stormed out of the house.

As soon as I graduated, I left home for good, retreating to the safe harbor of East Otis to spend the summer as a camp counselor. In my mind, the converted porch with the knotty pine walls, the bedroom I shared with my older sister Cheryl, were no longer a livable option. As far as I was concerned, Fred had replaced me in our household and it was time to move on.

When camp ended, I returned to Springfield to collect the rest of my belongings. Orientation was to begin first thing Saturday morning and, not wanting to miss anything, I demanded to be delivered there on Friday. Mother refused, insisting that Fred could drive boxes, my possessions and me to school on Saturday when he was off from work. Rather than wait, I boarded a Greyhound Bus.

I fled two states away, as far as my limited funds and imagination would carry me. When I arrived in Portland after changing buses in Central Boston, a friend met me at the station. By nine o'clock we were shit-faced and I forgot about the bus trip until Ma arrived early the next day. The site of her enraged me and I used her unwillingness to get me to college on (my) time as fuel to feed my wrath. Sometimes my hurt turned to rage without warning.

Other times, I would minimize my feelings all together by making myself the hero of the story. In one case I bragged to my peers. "Hell, I was no stranger to bus travel; I ran ski junkets to Vermont in eighth grade with no adult supervision, selling seats in the Junior High School cafeteria with the principal's blessing." This venture

went well until the time someone broke his arm and we had no adult chaperone with us to authorize treatment.

It took me a month to get my sea legs in my new environment. One aspect of my personality thrived at college, loved the coursework, pledged a sorority, and entered a Beauty Pageant. The other Renee immediately went to work for a drug dealer selling pot, and drank until she passed out and puked in her bed. With the exception of English, school was easy. I was living in two worlds, which had become my norm in my adolescence.

Our first writing assignment in Freshman English was to describe a significant event in our lives. Taking the Bus to college was the topic I chose. My paper was returned to me with a D+ and a red note saying that the subject was NOT significant. The English Professor joined my mother on my resentment list.

That next summer Fred was transferred to Portland, and he, Mother, and Christine all moved to Maine. As far as I had run to escape the pain of my family, they had up and followed me. Despite my ugly mood, growing like the grandfather zucchini left in the garden bed a week too long, I decided to cook a family dinner. I had sublet a flat in a rundown part of town, and having spent most of my earnings on my recreational habits, the dinner party was a stretch for my near-empty wallet.

It was there in my poor kitchen with the double-hung, paint-chipped, grey windows open to catch the breeze off the ocean, that the sultry summer wind called me to be a chef. Scouring the pantry,

I found a can of oysters left behind by the previous occupants. Mind you, I had never tasted an oyster before, but these were not people I was trying to impress. (Or were they?) I had worked at a Portland saloon that served food and found myself cooking lunch when no other person arrived for the job. One of the things I learned was to make a cheese sauce and I concocted a menu based on those oysters and that sauce.

Both Fred and my mom were astonished to be served fish with oyster stuffing, topped with a Mornay sauce, rice pilaf, and ratatouille. It was several years later, after my attendance at cooking school in New York City, that Mother finally came to believe that I had actually cooked that meal

Something happened when I cooked. At the time, I did not know about alchemy, or that some people have innate talents and abilities, but, quite frankly, I had never even eaten a meal so grand.

When Ma had boasted about her finely prepared meals on her Monday nights at home, I would scoff, and opt for bologna and cheese or cheeseburgers. The rest of the family feasted on lobster, roasts, chicken, and vegetables. Perhaps I was resisting any attempt by Mom to care for me. My only way to lash back at her and to ridicule her was by rejecting her food.

Despite the fact that the women in my family were the sole supporters of the clan, my disrespect for them grew like slivers of nut grass in the garden – pull one weed and three more take its place. I blamed them for all of my unhappiness, condemning them for putting up with the shortcomings of the men they loved. For years, I shirked my responsibility as a member of the family.

A few years after Fred died, Mom was diagnosed with lung cancer and I left her care entirely to Christine. When I finally faced the trip home, it was months after her surgery. Depression had taken its hold on my life, and I stayed for only 24 hours. During that time, my mother, after having had a few drinks (this was the only time she would show her feelings, and that in itself would make me angry and agitated) told me that I was blaming her for something I needed to work out with my Dad. Looking back, if Saturn's return was a mid-term exam, I failed.

Book Description
(Revised August 2010)

In *The Shaman Chef: My Life and other Recipes*, Renee Baribeau tells how she overcame emotional neglect, abuse, addiction, and chronic depression by creating life-sustaining rituals based on her own intuition and teachings from various spiritual traditions.

As the child of a violently angry alcoholic father from a poverty-stricken background, and a repressed and co-dependent mother, Renee had to find her way in the world with little wisdom or guidance from her elders. Even though she earned a college scholarship, graduated with honors, became a property owner at the age of twenty-two and a business owner the following year, those successes were never enough to counteract the crippling depression that dogged her steps from a young age. It was only the discovery of her natural gift and affinity for cooking that saved her from an early death with drugs and alcohol. When that skill deserted her, she had to find a new menu for survival and she was successful in that search.

Today, Rene is free from the constraints of her lifelong mood disorders. She enjoys being awake and fully present in the Now moment of her life and is devoted to encouraging others to find their own rituals for healing and recipes for living.

This memoir, a bountiful mélange of memories sandwiched between mouthwatering recipes and uplifting rituals, offers a look at how you can play a significant role in bringing about your own emotional well-being.

Chapter Summary (Revised August 2010)

Introduction • Autumn Leaves: Meet Renee. Cooking became the crutch for her emotional survival, and spiritualism the cure. A recipe for Sweet Pumpkin with Spicy Meat Ragout accompanies this introduction.

Section One The Making of a Chef

My Father Was a Gangster: Renee's love/hate relationship with her father surfaces when she needs his help to realize her dream of opening a restaurant.

The Making of a Chef: Meet Lena, who orchestrates Renee's developing career despite the obstacles, including addiction, moral corruption, discrimination and her bigot father. Follow Renee to the male dominated kitchens of NYC back to a French woman who teaches her to bake. Enjoy a recipe for Chocolate Grand Mariner Mousse.

The Saturn Return: As Renee approaches thirty, her world is turned upside down. The day after the Grand Opening of her restaurant, her father has a massive stroke and two weeks later, her step-father dies of a heart attack. Get a glimpse of her strained relationship with her mother.

Opportunity Disguised as Loss: The initiation continues, her plot unravels, despite her half-hearted attempts to gain control. Saddled by a restaurant, she wakes up from her nightmare, living Lena's dream. Renee's father's favorite recipe was her Blackened Steak with Basil Aioli.

Section Two Muddy Waters Clear Themselves

Leaving Alcohol Behind: After hitting an emotional bottom, Renee quits drinking. Her inconsistencies continue as she learns to live without alcohol.

Lending a Deaf Ear to the Call of Spirit: The road to recovery has potholes and detours. Renee addiction to relationships is compounded by her use of cocaine and marijuana. Meanwhile she leads a dual life, business as usual.

Muddy Waters Clear Themselves: As she confronts the reality of her father's life, Renee's own self-loathing drives her to check herself into a mental institution and confront the messy reality of her life.

The Soul Retrieval: Destiny begins singing a song that Renee can hear. Little does she know that a weekend workshop was going to help shape the next ten years.

Section Three The Making of a Shaman

The Indian Stood on the Mesa Blowing Smoke to the West: Renee's first vision leads her to close her restaurant and head to Taos, New Mexico, for a winter sabbatical. It would soon become clear that California was to be her ultimate destination. In homage to the famous San Francisco Tenderloin district, she offers us Seared Pork Tenderloin with Smoked Cherry Sauce.

Vision Quest: For years, as her work permitted, Renee attended the Inipi (Sweatlodge) ceremony led by a local medicine woman. The time inside the willowed cavern was timeless and for the first time in her life, Renee began to know how spacious a life without pain could be. Italian Potato Salad was one of her most popular contribution to the pot luck that followed the lodge.

Sounds of Passing Horses: Her precious cat died, she got fired from a job and completed a gut wrenching personal inventory. Most painful of all, she came to recognize that her beloved partner was not going to join her on the road to sobriety. In search of a support system that could make life worth living, she journeyed to Chile to meet with the Mapuchi Shaman who had, on her thirty-ninth birthday months earlier, knocked her down by waving a feather over her heart. It was there in the Andes that Renee began to reclaim her lost self. She offers Camp style Trout Meuniere as an edible souvenir of that time.

Finding God in Upstate New York: Renee's encounter with her own higher power is reinforced with through the receipt of a gift from the dead. Brown Baggers' Veal Boscaola recipe is provided in memory of Jim.

Section Four
The Shaman Chef

The Medicine Wheel: Renee's teacher taught her to walk the Medicine Wheel. And in return, Renee cooked Salmon with Smoked Grape Relish for her.

The Door Slammed Shut: Back in the states, Renee's spiritual community, the one that had gathered for the Inipi ceremonies, disintegrated with much anger and ill will. Renee fled to Colorado where she created Fudgy Trail Brownies.

Closing the Back Doors: Renee's final crash and burn came about because she ducked out when Spirit called. In homage of that time, she brings us a Spicy Duck and Noodle Salad.

Coming Home to Me: This chapter tells us how Renee learned to care for herself and find her center in what is now a spirit-led life. Celebrate her fiftieth birthday with her by cooking up some Chicken Bastilla.