



The author herself just says “no” to a bowl of chicken feet.

The No-Try List

Her friends were offered a taste of the world—but they weren’t biting

It bugs me when a friend declares certain foods off limits. I worry that anyone that ultra-choosy about food might be too narrow-minded to be my friend. Then again, maybe I’m the picky one—at least when it comes to finicky friends.

One such friend—I’ll call her “Alice”—told me she didn’t “do curry.” I didn’t want to know what else she

wasn’t into. So when we were invited to a mutual friend’s house for lunch, I chose to risk bringing a dish without first checking all of the ingredients with her.

At our friend “Lisa’s” new apartment, Alice and I perched on high bar stools on one side of the dining counter. I couldn’t wait to see what they thought of my Provençal olive fougasse. But when

Lisa unwrapped the bubbly flatbread studded with olives, Alice was silent as she surveyed my handiwork.

“I don’t do olives,” she finally said, wrinkling her nose. She looked at the bread with the kind of alarm most people reserve for a lunging rottweiler.

That’s when Lisa reached across the counter and ripped off a nubbin of bread. She pronounced it delicious, defusing some of the tension.

Still, it hurt me that Alice really didn’t dare try the bread. When I cook for friends, it’s a way of showing I care. If I like you, I want to share part of my world. But in recent years, I’ve been thwarted.

One friend liked the sorbet I made when she thought it was peach, but stopped eating it the second she learned it was grapefruit.

Another time, I set my mind to making chicken Provençal for a dinner, until a friend announced that she no longer ate chicken.

Yet another time, I was all ready to bake an appetizer of pear slices wrapped in prosciutto with a sage leaf tucked inside when I learned that my dinner guest wasn’t wild about pears. Fortunately, I usually learn this information over email or the phone, so the friend doesn’t have to see a shadow pass over my face.

Growing up in a Chinese family, you ate what was on your plate. Avoiding food wasn’t an option. And you weren’t allowed to make mean comments about whatever was being served.

Back in the ’70s, when my family went to loud, dimly lit Chinese restaurants in Washington, D.C., Bethesda or Wheaton, I often faced eight courses or more. In the middle of each table sat a large wooden lazy Susan laden with dishes. Every few minutes someone would give it a spin, and an adult within arm’s reach of me would pluck a big helping of whatever was on a nearby platter and transfer it to my plate. Saying, “No, I don’t eat that,” was never

an option. It would reflect poorly not only on me, but on my parents.

So I learned instead to say that I had no room in my stomach or that I needed to finish what was on my plate first. Even then, something new and possibly scary would sometimes land in front of me. That's when I learned the benefit of pretending that a sea slug was a vegetable. And it helped me to swallow white squid rings by imagining that they were rubber bands.

In a few instances, I even became a convert. At 12, I decided springy jellyfish strips spritzed with sesame oil had a great mouth feel—and I would reach to help myself to more.

But I have to confess that I wasn't above being picky myself. It was hard to say yes to pigs' feet. Or chicken feet, for that matter. There's nothing like a hoof or a claw on your plate to ruin your appetite.

Sometimes I hid the remains of whatever I wasn't wild about under a crab

shell or some other detritus that looked like it could give me cover. Another option was to stash whatever I couldn't totally chew into my napkin. As I slowly wiped my lips, I would slide whatever was in my mouth into its folds and carefully conceal its growing bulk.

Most of the time, though, it was just easier to eat the thing, whatever it was.

I realize now that I was lucky to be exposed to a wide range of foods and taught early to try new things. I wish I could teach my friends to take a similar approach and be slower to declare things off limits. Expanding one's food vocabulary, after all, is a way of experiencing more of the world.

Instead of pushing Alice to try my olive fougasse, though, I stayed silent. Ultimately the bread's curious perfume of lavender and lemon zest pulled her in. During a lull in the conversation, she reached over and broke off a tiny piece. She tasted it and seemed to mull it over

for a moment. Then she ripped off a larger piece. "It's *good*," she said.

I didn't say, "I told you so." Seeing my picky friend overcome her initial resistance was like reaching a summit where we both could enjoy the view.

Later, in an email, Alice confessed that she had learned an important lesson: not to be so quick to rule something out before trying it.

"In spite of my declaration that 'I don't eat mushrooms,' I found myself going back for more and more of the bread," she wrote. "It was indeed delicious."

I gently responded that the bread contained olives, not mushrooms.

It turned out she'd confused the two. Mushrooms were another food she didn't do. ■

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