

## The Egg Slicer

In the cupboard next to the refrigerator, on the second shelf from the bottom, slightly left of the middle, there is an egg slicer. Small and simple in structure, it works precisely and efficiently at the task for which it is designed. It wasn't always where it is now. I don't know when my mother moved it into the kitchen. When I was a child, she kept it on a shelf in the cabinet in the living room where she stored the “good” china plates, the elegant set for 12 that she took out when we had guests.

Whenever I stole a glimpse of the egg slicer, I felt that it longed to be used more often than just once or twice a year, when my mother prepared her version of aspic. Like a musical instrument, it wanted to be played, to express its potential. As a teenager, I would plead with my mother to let me operate the fascinating object and she usually acceded to my request. I cracked the shell of a hard-boiled egg by tapping it against the side of the kitchen sink, peeled away a fragment of shell, then gently tore the membrane under it. Once I got a grip of both the membrane and the shell, I slipped them away.

I lifted the hinged plate of wires making up the top of the egg slicer and deposited the egg on the cradling slotted dish that made up the bottom. The wired plate, pressed down to meet the slotted dish, left in its wake egg slices of regular thickness, poised in a balance soon to be upset. Once again, the egg slicer had performed its magic.

The outermost slices were all of egg white. The yolk appeared in the next slices, first tentatively — a golden dot in a sea of white — then taking up more space. The yolk-centric inner slices

were the most coveted ones in the aspic.

My job was done. My mother did not let me distribute the aspic ingredients on the serving plate, neither the eggs, nor the other two: *prosciutto cotto* (Italian cooked ham) and *carciofini sott'olio*, baby artichokes preserved in olive oil. And I was not trusted with spooning the prepared gelatin on the ingredients. I could, however, steal some images of my mother performing those tasks.

The next phase of my official relationship with the aspic came at dinner time. My mother took the plate out of the refrigerator ahead of time, so that when it was served, the aspic would be refreshing, but not cold. My brother loved it and I enjoyed it too, though a note of acidity in the gelatin made my palate wish it could be smoothed out. But it was a dinner different from the usual and as such quite welcome.

The day after my mother's funeral, I opened her kitchen's cupboards to take things out of them to prepare lunch. For the first time, the plans were my own. My mother's assertive presence would never leave the room. Objects and my father yielded to it. I respected it, but without giving up the independence of thought and movement I had claimed long ago.

My right hand went for the egg slicer. I lifted the hinged plate and let my right index finger run over the thin metal wires. Familiar metallic notes filled the space between me and the still fascinating object. I gently pushed the plate back down with the shy respect of old. Although I now had unfettered access to the object of my old desire, it was still my mother's egg slicer. A package of the cubes she used to make gelatin winked at me. All right: there would be aspic for dinner.

Lunch was eaten in a stunned silence centered around my mother's empty chair. Then, I was left alone in the kitchen with my plans to make aspic. Whenever possible, my mother obtained eggs from someone who had chickens, and if necessary, she asked my father to drive her to that person's house. During my mother's recent illness, my father had continued to visit regularly the latest of her egg providers to buy eggs for himself and my brother's family, so I found fresh eggs in the refrigerator.

An artichoke lover, my mother sought out the most flavorful and tenderest ones for the various ways in which she prepared them. One of the messages of condolences we received was from the farmer from whom she had been buying artichokes for years. She had turned the last purchase, a few months ago, into jars of *carciofini sott'olio* and foil pans of cooked artichokes. The jars were on the same shelf as the egg slicer, while the containers were in the freezer, labeled in my mother's handwriting "for pasta or risotto" or "for frittata" or "side dish."

Was she already feeling unwell when she worked on what would have been the last preservation effort of her life? When, the morning before Easter, a few days after the last of the artichoke trays had been sealed and labeled, she cried out to my father that she should be in the hospital, was it because she was feeling really sick for the first time in that instant, or because she surrendered to the realization that something long in the making was catching up with her?

I didn't have the last item in the ingredient list, *prosciutto cotto*, so I paid a quick visit to the grocery store across the street to buy some. Then, I dedicated myself to making the aspic. The images stolen long ago emerged from my memory to guide my hands. I hard-boiled two eggs

and let them cool until I could hold them in my hands. In the meantime, I prepared the gelatin according to the instructions on the package. I discovered that the acid note I had detected was the result of the instructions directing to add some vinegar or lemon juice. I assumed my mother had used vinegar; I went with the more rounded lemon juice.

I cracked the egg shell, found the membrane and peeled the eggs, then let the beloved egg slicer do its elegant act. I took down from the shelf the jar of *carciofini sott'olio* that was not full. With a spoon, I fished out of the oil several baby artichokes, pressing each against the side of the jar to drain most of the oil. I halved the smaller specimens and quartered a couple of larger ones.

From the stack of serving plates, I slid out the one my mother had used for the task at hand. Oval and slightly concave, it made an aspic about 1/2 inch thick, meant to be cut in place rather than inverted onto another plate.

I rolled the slices of *prosciutto cotto* and placed them on the serving plate to create the frame for the composition. Aspic invites the eyes to pay attention to the collocation of the various ingredients, which the gelatin will later fix into place. I distributed the egg slices and the artichoke pieces, and once satisfied with the look of the plate, I spooned half of the gelatin on it. After spending half an hour in the refrigerator, the plate received the other half of the gelatin, spoon after spoon, then went back in the cold until I took it out so that the aspic would be refreshing, not cold, when served.

Come dinner time, my husband was surprised by the novel dish. Was it a taste of jealousy that made my father mumble something about having given too much to my brother and sister-in-

law? I had brought them half of the aspic, knowing how much my brother liked it and how much he needed comfort. He was there when my mother let her last breath go. I was on an airplane, prevented from arriving in time by a maddening combination of flight mishaps. In time for what, exactly, I will never know. I let my father's mumbling lose itself in the tinkling of tableware at work.

Given a shelled hard-boiled egg and a firm hand, the egg slicer will always perform as expected. It will always be my mother's: I could no longer ask her if she would gift it to me and she could no longer tell me that I could have it — or that I could not. Without her explicit permission, I didn't feel comfortable removing it permanently from its designated place. I put it back in the cupboard next to the refrigerator, on the second shelf from the bottom, slightly left of the middle.