

## Amuse Bouche

### Pandemic Pantry in the Big Woods: A Quest for Certainty During COVID-19

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In April 2020, Google searches for ‘pantry’ surged as people around the world turned to the internet for advice on how to cope during COVID lockdowns and prepare for an uncertain future.<sup>1</sup> Like others who were fortunate to feel food-secure during the pandemic, I embraced the opportunity to work from home and to bake more bread. It was a privilege to isolate with my family in physical safety, but the psychological vulnerabilities of what Aisha S. Ahmad (2020) calls “sustained disaster conditions” wreaked havoc on my mental state. I am the sort of person who derives comfort not from a rustic loaf of *pane*, but from a *plan*. I like to cocoon myself in agendas, itineraries, spreadsheets, and lists. As global and local uncertainty swelled in the early pandemic, I derived comfort by drawing upon my knowledge of food and cooking to plan for contingencies—with mixed results.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, I had amused myself with thought experiments that imposed constraints on my cooking. What if I had to prepare meals using only the Instant Pot, or just the waffle iron? If I were limited to five kitchen tools, which five would I choose? Early in the lockdown, when we didn't know how supply chains would be affected, I created spreadsheets of all the meals that could be made with shelf-stable ingredients. I ran the gamut of what-if scenarios. If the power grid failed, we had a charcoal grill and a cracked, but repairable, DIY pizza oven constructed of wild clay dug from a nearby stream. Legume stews and rustic loaves baked in this clay oven could sustain us, but the learning curve would be steep. We had plenty of firewood stacked up; would our fireplace be called upon to roast more than the occasional marshmallow?

Contemplating these far-fetched scenarios conjured memories of my earliest exposure to self-sufficiency—Laura Ingalls Wilder’s account of living off the land in her autobiographical *Little House* series. A cultural touchstone replete with romantic (and problematic) images of American frontier life, the series depicted domestic provisioning in intricate detail. Julie Tharp and Jeff Kleiman (2000) argue that “the technical content” of the books—a description of her mother pressing curds into cheese hoops would be an example—“establishes an air of objectivity, bestowing an irrefutable truth to the experiences related” (57). Wilder’s memoirs normalized the frontier myth for millions of young readers. Her compelling blend of nostalgic domesticity and expansionist bias may be evident to me as an adult, but, as a child, all I saw was Garth Williams’ illustration of the attic in the *Little House in the Big Woods* where Laura and her sister Mary perched on smooth pumpkins, cradling their dolls beneath rafters hung with savory onion braids and smoked hams. Wilder’s books depicted the comforts of being cozy at home, isolated from the threats of an unpredictable outside world, sustained by a well-stocked pantry. How could one not fall back on these ideas during COVID lockdown?

Children tend to read favorite books over and over, and the content of those books becomes firmly entrenched and fondly remembered. Clare Schmidt (2022) partially attributes her own compulsion to preserve food in jars to the influence of “the classics of white, rural childhood” (102). Naming the *Little House* books, L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* and *Jane of Lantern Hill*, and others, she notes how these texts “extolled the virtues of physical, domestic labor” (102). I could indulge in imagining a winter’s worth of food in a snug attic, but couldn’t fathom the amount of time and work that produced it, which is why I count the *Little House* books as one of my earliest encounters with fantasy food media. Wilder condensed a full day’s work into a few sentences of summary—akin to a time-lapse TikTok recipe. For a 1980’s child-reader like me, with little practical knowledge of the processes she describes, self-sufficiency seemed a lot easier than it was.

Across the eight books of the series, the Ingalls family experienced dramatic swings between food abundance and food scarcity. The solid, snug cabin in Wisconsin bursting with buckets of maple syrup and barrels of salted fish stood in stark contrast to the drafty store building where the family sheltered during back-to-back blizzards in *The Long Winter*. In this, the darkest of Wilder’s memoirs, we see a failure of nineteenth-century technologies: trains, coal, and kerosene—and a return to ‘primitive, pre-industrial skills’ and ingenuity, exemplified by Ma Ingalls’ fashioning a ‘button candle’ fueled by axle grease (Romines 1990: 44). A person who can solar charge a smartphone during a brief power outage can barely imagine what that small spot of light meant to a family confined to darkness in a howling storm lasting for days, but COVID presented the possibility of twenty-first century systems failing, and these remembered scenes of coping and survival were what flashed through my mind as I planned my COVID lockdown provisions.

In the big woods of rural Pennsylvania, I designated a walk-in closet in a storage room as our overflow pantry. We already kept a supply of flours, grains, and pastas, and to these I added canned proteins (tuna, sardines, clams, shrimp), canned tomatoes, nut butters, and olive and coconut oils. Money earmarked for canceled summer travel was funneled into extra nuts, coconut milk, protein powder, and rolled oats. When I felt unsettled by the memory of the Ingalls children grinding seed wheat in a coffee mill to make coarse bread during *The Long Winter* (Wilder 1940: 194), I reminded myself that our COVID spring was nothing like the Dakota Territory’s severe winter of 1880–1881. With enough chia seeds, we could survive this.

The more recent past furnished strategies for stocking the pantry as well. I turned to the recipe box of my grandmother, a homemaker who raised five children in a postwar ranch house, and kept up with the latest in convenient packaged ingredients. Her Sunday dinner salmon cakes made with canned fish and bread crumbs were a ‘sure thing’ to add to my spreadsheet. At the start of lockdown, we were two months away from the next family birthday, and I took comfort knowing I had everything necessary to bake her chocolate “wacky cake,” a WWII-era dessert made with pantry staples in lieu of fresh butter, eggs, and milk. Making her recipes had always felt like a special tribute to her memory, but having a plan and ingredients in stock gave me comfort beyond what cake could offer—the comfort of certainty.



Figure 1: Marcella Muri Conrad's recipe box and handwritten recipe for 'Wacky Cake', 2022  
 Photo by the author

I had learned the satisfaction of canning seasonal produce from my grandmother and mother, and had honed my hot water bath canner skills while testing recipes for my book about damson plums a few years earlier. Inspired by memories of my grandmother's cellar canning cupboard—an old wardrobe stocked with jars of damson plum butter, peach halves in syrup, and pickles—I pulled the canner out of storage, ordered more jars, and reached for my trusty Ball Canning Complete Guide. My only outing beyond the grocery store that first pandemic summer was to Marker-Miller Orchards in Winchester, Virginia, to buy damsons. I made damson-rose conserve, damson jelly, and my grandmother's damson plum butter. I made luxurious low-pectin strawberry jam and vivid turmeric-tinted corn relish. By the end of summer, I had jars in every color of the rainbow.

Having been an enthusiastic food fermenter for a number of years, I went into a fermentation frenzy about a month into the pandemic, making kimchi, carrot ribbons with garlic cloves, and even a kvass<sup>3</sup> using foraged wintergreen and white pine. Between teaching Zoom classes and attending virtual happy hours, I put up huge jars of sauerkrauts flavored with jalapeño and garlic, red pepper and ginger, and the classic caraway seeds. Fermented vegetables supplemented the fresh produce we got at our grocery store every three weeks, and we enjoyed them in a number of novel ways; the pleasure of tangy fermented ginger cabbage on a taco is one I would not have discovered without the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, we continued trading our saved food scraps for eggs from my mother's chickens, but infrequent grocery trips made us more cautious about food waste. Before juicing oranges for a braise recipe, I grated the zest and spread it out to dry for future use in steel cut oats. I had dried citrus zest occasionally in the past; suddenly, I had

become vigilant about preserving every useful part of the orange. An end-of-season hot dog relish that utilized green tomatoes carried echoes of Ma Ingalls' green tomato pickle in *The Long Winter*. Ann Romines (1990) notes that, "Ma, usually conventionally modest, boasts uncharacteristically and triumphantly," as she anticipates the green tomato pickle enhancing baked beans in the coming winter (29-30). Reluctant to discard several sad, too-old-for-salad lettuce heads, I recalled reading that romaine could be roasted in the oven. I peeled off the outer leaves, split them, drizzled them with olive oil, seasoned them with salt and pepper, and roasted them. They sweetened up and made a surprisingly good side dish. My ingenuity and competence in the kitchen were a source of pride for me, as they were for Ma Ingalls. I reveled in my productivity as I hung garden herbs to dry, infused vinegars with tarragon, dill, and rosemary, and arranged rows of jam jars on shelves.

Lest this Instagram-ready account of homesteading veer too far into the realm of fantasy, I must confess that not everything I plunged into a hot water bath was a success. Several things I made in large batches were actually quite disappointing. The amaretto cherries, intended for winter old-fashioneds, came out mushy. The pesto variations failed bitterly (literally) because I harvested the basil too late. An homage to a mint jelly my mother and I made when I was a child came out tasting grassy, and the tiny drops of spring green food coloring meant to enhance its shimmer turned it a rather lurid teal. Wilder focuses on her mother's triumphs, but failures must have happened, too. As I fed my canning misadventures to my own mother's chickens, I reflected that the Ingalls family had to eat what they had.

When per-person limits on toilet paper and King Arthur flour at the supermarket fueled comparisons to wartime rationing across food media, I embraced the trending #victorygarden hashtag. I posted photos of the small plot where I optimistically imagined we could grow all the herbs and lettuces and tomatoes we might need. I conveniently forgot that nineteenth century farmers had tried and failed to cultivate crops in the nutrient-poor shallow, silty loam of the rocky forest where I now lived. Bagged soil amendments and an internet full of advice supported the garden in providing some zucchini, cherry tomatoes, berries, and beans. But it was completely unnecessary, since the farm market and the grocery store thirty minutes away continued selling summer produce, just as they always had. As powdery mildew, blight, and blossom-end rot plagued my less-than-victorious garden, it became abundantly clear that my family was being fed not by the land, but by the ease of mail-order dry goods and curbside pickup.

Gazing down at the hot sauce bottles and peanut butter jars I was scrubbing in a sudsy sink at 11:00 PM one night in April 2020, I felt keenly the strangeness of the moment in which I was living. Many of us sensed that this was a time we'd look back on—a time our grandchildren would ask us about. I remember once, I asked my grandmother about her experience on the 'home front' during WWII. Her response was brief: "we just lived our lives," she shrugged. In my quest to prepare for the worst, I made things harder than they had to be. I could have, in a sense, just lived my life. Supply chains that served our family never failed. We did not need Almanzo Wilder and Cap Garland to venture across a whited-out prairie to bring wheat, because we could order flour online from Target.



Figure 2: Washing groceries, April 2020  
Photo by the author

Those who could indulge in panic buying and hoarding to soothe their anxieties did so, and pre-pandemic disparities were amplified. The percent of U.S. households with children who were food insecure doubled in the first six months of the pandemic, disproportionately skewed toward children of color, many of whom had relied on in-person school for meals (Harvard n.d.). In the face of such data, it's hard to view cream cheese and champagne shortages as an existential threat. The grocery stores remained full of food for those who could afford to buy it, even if hand sanitizer and Clorox wipes ran short from time to time. Despite my romantic fantasies of self-sufficient triumph over adversity inspired by abundant pantries of yore, it would be a mistake to compare myself to victory gardeners, pioneer families, or anyone facing genuine hardship.

My amateur forays into homesteading were a comfort to me in uncertain times, but the safety net of socioeconomic privilege was always there to catch me if I fell. And yet, I can't dismiss my efforts as being entirely in vain. Planning, canning, and gardening *felt* proactive, even if some of my schemes were minimally productive. My nostalgic recollections of the *Little House* books furnished me with a script to follow 'in case of emergency,' an aesthetic of self-sufficiency to recreate. Ma Ingalls summoned feelings of security, warmth, and comfort within her family's domestic space as a defense against what was occurring without, demonstrating, in Romines' words, "the transformative power of housekeeping" (1990: 41). At a time when the unknowns of a fast-spreading global pandemic and the fear

of potential sickness, and even death, suffused our waking hours, food became an avenue for me to carve out a small niche of certainty, to regain feelings of control, and to derive comfort through remembered, reclaimed, and recalibrated food practices.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Pantry' searches had been rising gradually since search term tracking began in 2004, but spiked noticeably in April 2020 (data from Google Trends).

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Long (2022) traces the evolution of the term 'comfort food' from a mid-20th century justification for consuming 'unhealthy' or 'fattening' foods to its pandemic-era meaning: 'foods that comfort' (57). Long suggests that the term has expanded to recognize ways "comfort can be found in the range of activities around food, not only in the consumption of specific dishes or ingredients" (69). In my case, *planning* was the primary source of comfort, though, of course, I enjoyed eating the foods I made and the opportunities for commensality with my family that lockdown meals afforded. For more examples of food provisioning offering the comfort of control and competence during COVID, see Stokes and Atkins-Sayre (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Kvass is a nutritious fermented drink with a low alcohol content. To make kvass, a base of grain or stale bread is fermented and flavored with fruits, berries, and edible plants. Traditional to many countries of Northern and Central Europe, as well as some regions of China, kvass is cloudy, fizzy, and tangy. For more on kvass, see Katz (2004), page 120.

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