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Rachel Hatch

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Food is ...

For chef and cookbook author Robin Asbell '84, the food we eat vibrantly reflects who we are and what we aspire to be.

Story by **RACHEL HATCH**



Robin Asbell (above) was an art major at Illinois Wesleyan. “When you study art, you study the history, culture and anthropology of the people who created that art. It is the same with cooking,” she says. (Photo by John Noltner)

food and good health. “You could say it was like a calling to a religion, this need to spread healthy eating to everyone,” says the 1984 Illinois Wesleyan graduate.

Alchemists of ancient times searched for the perfect recipe to transform the mundane and base into the valuable and divine. These days, magicians of a different sort labor over a hot flame, in search of the perfect combination of spices and ingredients to unlock the flavors of food.

On a bright July morning, one such seeker strolls past a variety of international food-vendor booths at the Midtown Global Market in Minneapolis, then halts. A leafy, dark-green vegetable has caught her eye. Like the alchemists of old, she tilts her curly, red hair to the side, as if hoping the ruffled leaves will whisper their secrets. “We’ll be making a great African garbanzo, peanut and kale soup with this tonight,” Robin (Calhoun) Asbell says, explaining that the plant in her hands is kale, known for its lively, pungent flavor and health-promoting nutrients.

Smiling, she leans in, lowering her voice as if to convey a confidence. “You know all that good stuff you hear about spinach? Multiply that by a bunch, and you get kale.”

When it comes to food, Asbell possesses several shelves worth of knowledge about the “good stuff.” As a cookbook author, culinary instructor and private chef, she has spent the past 20 years exploring and promoting the intersection between great

Asbell pauses again to pick up a jar of honey produced on a farm outside Minneapolis. “So many people now are getting great locally grown food,” she says. “It isn’t just ‘foodies’ going to the farmer’s markets and getting local produce and free-range eggs.”

Though Asbell herself is a vegetarian, her focus is helping people find healthy recipes to fit their life choices, whatever they may be. “I’ve known people who are vegetarian, but cannot give up bacon,” she says. “I’m not sure what they would call themselves — vege-baconites?” she adds with a laugh. Whether giving a cooking demonstration at a suburban culinary shop, as she will tonight, or traveling around the world in search of new recipes and new ingredients, her goal remains the same. “I like to think of what I do and teach as ‘mindful’ cooking,” she says. “Most people eat without really knowing what they are eating. Or what the alternatives might be — foods that are delicious, healthy and easy to prepare. I see my role as to educate and inspire. And to learn.”

Food is history

Clearly in her element, Asbell zips around the butcher-block countertops, chopping veggies with a chef’s knife and spooning spices into small, porcelain bowls as she prepares for her upcoming demonstration at the Cooks of Crocus Hill. The shop, nestled in a charming Minneapolis suburb, includes a classroom where local chefs teach favorite recipes.

Asbell usually does one demonstration a week at various Twin Cities locations. Such appearances expand with the publication of her cookbooks: *The New Whole Grains Cookbook* came out in 2007, followed by *New Vegetarian*, printed last year.

Setting sunlight pours into the shop’s kitchen, which curls in a semicircle around a tiled pillar adorned with an armament of kitchen utensils. Tonight she will tackle six recipes, taking her students around the globe, vegan style. “When I look for recipes,” she says, “I look for different flavors from all over the world.”

Her third cookbook, to be released next year, will include 400 recipes. “The average cookbook usually includes 75 to 100 recipes, so this was a big effort,” she says. Titled *The Big Book of Vegan*, the volume’s topic is timed perfectly with the emerging popularity of veganism — a strictly plant-based diet.

Among the observers of tonight’s demo, few will be actual vegans, Asbell predicts. “More and more omnivores are looking for healthy, vegan recipes. And that’s a good thing, because it’s more about finding delicious food that is good for us,” she says, chopping the kale she purchased this morning.

Asbell smiles at the notion that veganism and vegetarianism have “suddenly” gained popularity. “A lot of what is popular now in the United States has been a staple around the world for centuries. It’s what I call ‘peasant food,’” she says, noting those who live off the Western luxury grid cannot afford meat and rely on diets of plants and grains. “Now that same food is getting attention at top American restaurants. People are lining up to eat peasant food.”

She and her husband, Stan, travel often and choose their destinations based on which style of cuisine Asbell wants to explore. During a recent trip, she went on a quest to find an authentic recipe for a dish she will make tonight: Jamaican Veggie Patties. “I kept asking around for someone to show me how it was made, but I kept being led to tourist food,” she says, using her term for recipes fused with ingredients that make them more palatable to non-natives. She finally convinced several natives to show her genuine Jamaican cuisine. They took her to the island’s countryside, where she stood amid herbs and plants growing wild. She says, “I could roll them in my hands, smell them and understand what was meant to go into the food, then we went and cooked them together.”

Asbell mentions the rediscovery in the 1980s of quinoa seeds. Once considered “the gold of the Incas” because of the stamina it gave to their warriors, the “pseudograin” (actually a leafy vegetable) was suppressed by the Spanish because of its use in religious ceremonies. Asbell’s blue eyes sparkle as she speaks of the discovery like a lost treasure.

“Food of that region and the flavors they create are part of the character of the people, the land,” she says. “A people’s food is their history expressed.”

Food is art

No matter the topic — cooking, teaching, writing — Asbell usually ends with the phrase, “I’d like to do more.” It’s a drive she credits to her upbringing. Her father, Larry Calhoun, chaired the art department at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Ill., before retiring to devote time to his painting. Her mother, Marilyn, took time off to raise three children before returning to her career as a preschool teacher. From the pair, Asbell gleaned an insatiable appetite for knowledge, especially regarding food.



Asbell travels the globe in search of healthy cuisine. In Negril, she was taught the recipe for authentic Jamaican Veggie Patties.

She recalls baking for her family and parents’ friends even as a young girl. “Of course, my parents’ friends were all your stereotypical hippies, so I’m sure that influenced what I cooked,” she says.

“When I was 9, I asked my mom why her hamburgers were nothing like McDonald’s hamburgers, so we had to compare them,” Asbell recalls. “We figured out that if we mashed the meat really thin and overcooked it, chopped the onions up really tiny, and left the bun out to sit on the counter for a bit so it was just a tad stale, then it was just like McDonald’s!” she says, laughing. “After that, whenever we had hamburgers, I would make mine that way.”

When she was 16, Asbell announced her intention to become a vegetarian. Her mother took the news calmly, and then instructed her to write a paper. “No one believed back then that a vegetarian could get enough protein. So I hit the library and wrote a paper on protein-combining. My mother relented.” She would later expand on the topic for her senior-year thesis in high school. “I wrote about my theory of treating depression through diet,” she says. “In 1980, that was pretty unheard of.”

While in high school, Asbell was also getting her first lessons in the business of food. “My mom’s friends loved the bread I made, so I would bake about six loaves a week and take them to the little health food store, and they would pay me for them.” A small smile curves around her mouth. “I’m sure that would be violating sanitation laws today.”

At Illinois Wesleyan, Asbell majored in art. But her culinary passions persisted and her Dodds Hall room became known for its nocturnal feasts. “I had the forbidden hot plate, and everyone came by for snacks after the parties,” she says, laughing as she recalls the giant salads she often pushed onto friends. “I was the girl sprinkling vegan toppings onto the lettuce. I was *that* girl.”

Those convictions led her to challenge the University’s food service. Disappointed with its lack of vegetarian choices, she successfully petitioned to opt out of campus dining. “They wanted me to write a paper ensuring them I would be getting enough nutrition — so I pulled out that old high school paper again and revised it,” she says. “I think I spent a decade or so explaining being a vegetarian, so it makes sense I would teach about it now.”

A year after graduating summa cum laude from IWU, Asbell found herself sitting in one of her favorite haunts, a vegetarian restaurant called Nature’s Table in Champaign, Ill. At the time, she was pursuing a master’s degree in sculpture at the University of Illinois, but had come to a realization. “I did not like it,” she says with a slight shrug. “I could see where my life was headed, and realized I did not want to go that path. I wanted to pursue healthy cooking.” In the restroom, she saw a flyer advertising for a full-time cook. “I found my calling in the bathroom,” she laughs. Asbell approached Nature’s Table owner and convinced him to hire her.

Asked whether her art studies influenced her culinary style, Asbell pauses before responding. “People think an art degree means I do great at garnishing a plate,” she says, waving her hand dismissively. “Art shapes the way you think. When you study art, you study the history, culture and anthropology of the people who created that art. It’s the same with cooking.

“I was attracted to both,” she says, “because both relate to a strong desire to create.”

Food is personal

While working at Nature’s Table, Asbell made another life change when she met her future husband. “I was doing remodeling of the restaurant and had lunch in there every day,” Stan recalls, shyly adding, “She’s pretty incredible.” A vegetarian himself since his teens, he quickly bonded with the redheaded cook. The two married in 1987.

That same year, the couple decided to move to Minneapolis. “I had lived in college towns my entire life, and I wanted to try something different,” Asbell says. In Minneapolis, she worked in a cooperative nicknamed by its employees “No Meat, No Bosses.” (“Perhaps we should have tagged ‘Complete Anarchy’ on to that as well,” she adds.)

Her first foray into management was at another co-op restaurant, where she enjoyed developing recipes but didn’t appreciate other aspects of the job. “There comes a time when you either move into management and away from food, or move on,” she says. “I began to think then about working for myself.”

Around the same time, several crack houses opened in their Minneapolis neighborhood and Asbell became “an anticrime activist by default,” she says. “It was a huge adventure, but a scary one as well.” She formed and led a block patrol — and found herself writing speeches for political rallies and articles for community newspapers. “I discovered speaking and writing skills I never knew I had,” she says, and soon branched out to doing a weekly wellness column.

Eventually, she and Stan moved to another neighborhood — not because of crime, but because Asbell decided to launch her own business and needed a home with a larger kitchen. “I wanted to keep writing about food, and I decided I could make it as a personal chef.” Along with cooking healthy meals for a local family, she also began to teach community-education cooking classes and performing demonstrations at area shops.

By the late 1990s, Asbell hungered for an even larger audience. Flipping through the pages of a major food magazine, she wondered how one entered the world of national food writing. The question took her to the Greenbrier Food Writers Symposium in West Virginia. “They taught me how to write a query for an article, how to put together a proposal for a book. I met agents and publishers. That’s when my career in food really took off,” she says.

She is now the author of more than 60 articles, several which have been published in magazines such as *Vegetarian Times*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Today’s Health and Wellness* and *Weight Watchers*. A sample of article titles: “Mushroom Guide, A Fungus Among Us,” “Fast Whole Grain Meals,” “Keen on Quinoa” and “Fresh Herbs Make the Dish.” She’s been interviewed in *O, the Oprah Magazine* and often appears on Twin Cities newscasts, demonstrating her recipes and talking about healthy food options. She also maintains a podcast and Internet blog at her website, robinasbell.com.

Her writing success prompted Asbell to put together a proposal that would become her first book, *The New Whole Grains Cookbook: Terrific Recipes Using Farro, Quinoa, Brown Rice, Barley and Many Other Delicious and Nutritious Grains*. After three years of trying to pitch different book ideas, she finally met with the CEO of Chronicle Books while attending another Greenbrier conference in 2007.



Asbell has written three cookbooks, including *New Vegetarian* (above), and more than 60 articles in national and regional magazines. She also maintains a website and Internet blog.

“I spoke to him several times over a three-day period, and on that last day he said to me, ‘I think we should do a book.’ He said it so casually, I just nodded.” In a happy coincidence, her proposed topic was on the cusp of new U.S. Department of Agriculture recommendations that people increase their consumption of whole grains from one to three servings daily.

“I’ve been touting the benefits of whole grains since high school,” Asbell says, “but suddenly, I was in the right place at the right time for people to listen to that message.”

In contrast to refined grains, whole grains use all three parts of grain, including the fiber-rich outer layer and the nutrient-packed germ. Eating whole grains has been associated with reduced risk of heart disease, cancer and type II diabetes, according to the Harvard School of Public Health.

Cynthia Harriman, director of food and nutrition strategies for the nonprofit Whole Grains Council, credits Asbell for helping shake whole grains’ all-health-and-no-fun image. “Today more and more people realize [whole grains] offer delectable, delicious full-flavored tastes,” says Harriman. “Robin is one of the key players who made this happen, through her books and magazine articles. I defy anyone to taste some of Robin’s whole grain recipes without saying, ‘Whole grains, where have you been all my life?’”

Through her years as a chef and a cook, Asbell says she has learned, more than anything, that “food shapes who we are. I’ve had people burst into tears when they eat a gluten-free cake, telling me, ‘I haven’t had a birthday cake in five years because I found out I was allergic to gluten. I’ve missed it so much.’ We connect food with memories and emotions, and it is difficult if those foods are taken away.” Asbell has also worked with cancer patients and diabetics who request special diets.

“Cooking for people,” she says, “can be a very personal experience.”

Food is delicious

As participants file in and take their seats around the kitchen counter, Asbell wraps up preparations for tonight’s demonstration. Assistants provided by Cooks at Crocus Hill for the event help by grabbing assorted pans and lining up blenders and food processors. “These ladies save me,” Asbell whispers. “They take care of the details so I can teach.”

“Welcome to a night of healthy cooking,” Asbell tells the audience of women and men who crane their necks to take in the trays of ingredients that will soon become a global feast. “Of

course, we never say we are cooking healthy, do we? I'm telling you right now, I want you to lie to your family. If they ask you if this is healthy, you say, 'Nooooooo. It's not healthy, it's delicious.' I mean, what would you rather say to your kids, 'Here's a healthy cake.' or 'Here's a delicious cake.' — guess which one they are going to choose?"

At the mention of cake, Asbell begins to pour melted vegan chocolate and silken tofu into a processor to construct her Chocolate Kahlua Cake with Mocha Filling and Ganache. "Life is short, make dessert first," she quips.

Soon the kitchen classroom is filled with the aroma of spices and sizzling vegetables. As she moves from dish to dish, Asbell takes questions on topics ranging from light coconut milk to whether a vegan diet contains enough protein or healthy fats (the short version of her answer is yes, as long as you choose the right kind of foods).

It's Asbell's turn to ask a question: how many in the audience tonight are vegetarian or vegan? Not one hand goes up. Though she raises an auburn eyebrow, her smile is knowing. "That's great. I would like to see everyone enjoy healthy food because it tastes good, not because they feel they have to eat it," she says, lifting a cake of tofu that will become part of the Hazelnut Meatballs and Sauce on Top of Spaghetti. Sensing her audience may need more help choosing tofu, she advises, "Make sure you get the firm tofu. The silken tofu used for the mocha filling of the cake is too wet for this recipe." Several participants furiously scribble notes.

As she forms the shapes of pastries for her Jamaican Veggie Patties, Asbell offers a word of warning. "Don't be a junk vegan or vegetarian. You can't eat just vegan cookies. You are eating vegan, sure, but all you are eating is *cookies*."

Whirling from one side of the curved kitchen to the other, Asbell extols more advice. "You'll find that plants are very simple food, so a lot is done to add complexity, from the spices to the texture." She explains the Japanese concept of *umami*, or the sensation the brain detects when it eats either meat or certain chemicals that trigger the same taste sensors. "When I am creating vegan food, I use chemistry to create this *umami*," she says, noting that everything from certain types of teas to mushrooms can produce the effect.

Samples are served to each of participants, whose eyes widen with surprise and pleasure at the variety of tastes — from the eye-opening broth of Indonesian Hot and Sour Soup with Edamame, to the smooth-as-silk chocolate cake. "Is it good?" Asbell asks after each one, and nods her head at the enthusiastic responses before moving on to the next recipe.

When she is done, the assistants scurry to clean up the plates, pots and pans and audience members line up to have Asbell sign copies of her cookbooks. “Remember to eat real food!” she writes in the front of one book. Looking up, she adds with a wink, “as long as it tastes good.”



Asbell (above) gives a demonstration on vegan cooking. “I would like to see everyone enjoy healthy food,” she says, “because it tastes good, not because they feel they have to eat it.” (Photo by John Noltner)