

Mass Poetry interviews Stephen Massimilla

STEPHEN MASSIMILLA AND HIS NEW BOOK *COOKING WITH THE MUSE*

Available now from Tupelo Press

www.cookingwiththemuse.com

www.stephenmassimilla.com

How did you first encounter poetry? How did you discover that you wanted to write poems?

Before I could even speak coherently, I was making up my own peculiar language. I loved the way certain terms, such as “soup spoon” and “sewing machine” (which I called “maswing chine”) sounded. I thought the word “hippopotamus” was hilarious, and I used to say it over and over. In grade school, I wrote eyewitness accounts of electric eels that whipped and whirled through the air, concluding these pieces with protestations that nobody believed me. But when I found my great aunt Gertrude’s volumes of the 1880 edition of the collected works of Shelley, sounds and images came together in syntactically intricate ways, and I was hooked. In high school, Mrs. Hart introduced me to T.S. Eliot, whose poems I found compellingly sonorous and strange.

That said, I don’t think I became committed to this art until I went to Williams College in western Mass, where I took a poetry appreciation course with Larry Raab followed by a poetry writing workshop with Louise Gluck. Louise was such a smart reader and so authoritative and fiercely encouraging there was no turning back after that.

The inspiration for the culinary poetry in *Cooking with the Muse* owes a lot to the chef and cooking/nutrition instructor Myra Kornfeld, whom my poetry mentor Lucie Brock-Broido has referred to as a “culinary magician.” Through our

collaboration, among other things, you could say that Myra and I have become each other's muse.

Do you have a writing routine? A favorite time or place to write?

I write new poems, for the most part, only when compelled to—when the Muse is upon me. That happens often enough; but I need to surrender to her influence and accept her offerings without trying to digest too much too quickly. These days, just finding reflective moments in which to record what I want to say can be the challenge. I also revise and edit pieces whenever I can, often with the help of Sally Dawidoff and other friends in The Urban Range poets' collective. I can be guilty of too much ranging, of almost willful inconsistency, like an exuberant rider who likes his horse both covered with sweat and shying. I need help reigning *myself* in.

I prefer to write at night, when the traffic has died down and nobody is calling or texting. I don't want anyone even *thinking* in my vicinity. At these times, I'm also like a nocturnal lemur responding to electric charges in the atmosphere. Myra, on the other hand, prefers to write during the early morning, when the world is enveloped in a different kind of quiet.

That said, while Myra and I were working on *Cooking with the Muse*, I sometimes composed a poem by the stove while she was developing a dish. That happened with "Seared Tuna with Purple Potatoes and Cherry Tomato Sauce." Writing poems involved riffing on and helping to reinvent recipes. Though it began with a lot of intuitive hunting and gathering and freewheeling improvisation, the book also contains a great many of our poetic prose introductions, recipe preambles, creative and scholarly essays, close readings of

poems, and carefully researched historical and literary notes, all of which had to be planned, composed and revised in a more systematic way.

Where do your poems most often come from—an image, a sound, a phrase, an idea?

I always carry a little black notebook full of notes and sketches (I'm also a drawer and painter) about what the Muse happens to be saying—which could take any of the forms you just mentioned. My favorite pieces often emerge from more than one source of inspiration, including the time of year as it reveals itself in the thawing fishpond of live opinions, or in the rattling leaves, or the vanishing sky; or from a luminescent mood; a word or phrase; an overwhelming question; or even another work of art—a Bach cantata, an oil painting, a sad sepia photo, a documentary film, a novel. And dreams are inspired and inspirational, since in effect we have none unless they are memorable—a model for approaching our waking existence.

The green market (a living celebration of the seasons and the lush creations born of human collaborations with nature) was a major source of inspiration for *Cooking with the Muse*. Not only most of the poems and recipes, but also the poetic-prose essays introducing each chapter could be said to be odes to the farmers' market.

Which writers (living or dead) do you feel have influenced you the most?

My life journey has included deep engagements with and underworld offerings (I wanted to say blood sacrifices) to Plato, Dante, Emerson, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Joyce, and the Vedas and the Buddha, to name a few shades who seem eternally

alive, souls I can speak back to more frankly and critically than I can to the living. With regard to my work, lyric poets from the British Modernists (Hopkins, Yeats, *et al*) to American Modernists and Postmodernists (from Williams and Stevens to Grace Paley *et al*) to writers working a bit outside the Anglo-American paradigm (from Lorca to Montale to Walcott to Nazim Hikmet) have all been major influences.

Walcott was my mentor in the Graduate Writing Program at Boston University, and his emphasis on concrete, almost sculptural imagery and sonics had an impact—though his lovely work reminds me of a tropical jungle, with all the leaves and fruit hanging very low to the ground. Lucie Brock-Broido, whom I studied with in the Columbia MFA program, is a mystic who embraces the electricity of intuitive leaps. She had a big influence on my last book, *The Plague Doctor in His Hull-Shaped Hat*. Franz Wright helped inspire a central sequence in a manuscript I'm working on now called *Frank Dark*.

In the case of *Cooking with the Muse*, the inspirational roles of Rumi, Basho, Keats, Dickinson, Frost, McKay, Neruda, Kinnell, Heaney, Berry, Hirshfield, and a great many others cannot be overestimated.

And these poets all have an affinity for the culinary! Even the classical figures we learn about in school, including the Cyclops Polyphemus from *The Odyssey*, the Scythians from Herodotus, Socrates, Aristotle, Dante, Hamlet, and Milton's Eve are all major figures in the culinary world. Myra and I make this point throughout *Cooking with the Muse*.

Tell us a bit more about the new collection: what's the significance of the title? Are there overarching themes? What was the process of assembling the book?

Well, as the title indicates, this book is all about “the Muse.” Inspiration is the force within and behind cooks and writers, food and words, recipes and poems. And all of these are inseparable from the outer seasons and inner spirits that inspire us. Inspiration also dictated the process by which *Cooking with the Muse* came into being. Sometimes poems inspired recipes; sometimes recipes inspired poems; and oftentimes the juxtaposition of poems and recipes inspired other musings. (In addition to a wide-ranging anthology, the volume includes the equivalent of a complete book of my own poems and a book of my essays, as well as 150 original recipes.)

The subtitle, the part about “*Seasonal Recipes, Culinary Poetry, and Literary Fare*,” also communicates something important. Myra and I believe that many people are experiencing extreme hunger for in-season, high-*prana* food and quality literary fare. The word “Seasonal” highlights this central theme: Ingredients in the farmers’ market are celebrated in their natural sequence, just they come into their own, the time when the poets tend to be most in love with them. At the end of the Summer chapter, for instance, Herrick and Campion sing about the Eros of the “Cherry-Ripe” moment; and in “Blackberry Eating” at the start of the Autumn chapter, Galway Kinnell compares “black blackberries” at the peak of their ripeness to inspired words that fall “almost unbidden to [the poet’s] tongue.” Essays and notes help make the poetry accessible to all readers.

Each seasonal chapter is organized around a pageant of seasonal ingredients, and also by a progression from starters to main courses to desserts and drinks.

In all, the book celebrates the marriage of food and poetry, of cooking and writing. This pairing happens to come out of a long and venerable tradition, one that is now undergoing a modern renaissance.

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