

Dr. Karpman, chef, culinary critic, author and world traveler offers us a feast. His recipe includes love, humor, tenderness, curiosity, cultural sensitivity, exhaustive research, and a pinch of medical knowledge - all simmered in sauces of flowing descriptions and vivid details

Noni, Baloney, Puddin' & Pie

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NONI BALONEY, PUDDIN' & PIE

From Costa Rican Kitchen to the Corners of the World

By Lenny Karpman MD

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Chapter 8

FISH MARKET TOKYO

Jet lag had sent me to bed early. I awakened at 3:30 AM, about the time my tour companions staggered in from the bar. As they fell into bed, I tiptoed out, heading into the night with Tsukiji Market written in Japanese on the backside of a card and the name and address of the hotel on the front. Confident that the little Japanese I had learned would carry me through, I greeted the cabby with a polite honorific salutation and he grunted and rasped a totally unintelligible guttural response. I asked where we were, and he grunted "*Niu Otani Hoteru*"—the name of the hotel. I asked the direction we were heading, and he grunted "*Tsukiji Sakana-ya*," the name of the fish market – no more conversation – no more information.

There was little traffic on the black streets of Tokyo at four AM until the taxi neared the Tsukiji Fish Market, the world's largest, selling five million pounds of seafood a day. As we neared the market, we passed battalions of small trucks and divisions of motorized carts. He grunted one last time and deposited me in front of a maze of buildings that looked like airport hangers. There were fires in metal trashcans marking the route and warming hands. I

joined the processional and marched in. I was out of uniform without pant legs tucked into knee high rubber boots and with a camera hung from the neck of my bright pumpkin-colored flannel shirt.

The gray shadowy figures became illuminated as they entered the vast halls, but the colors of the fishmonger army hardly changed in the soft light. They wore only shades of gray, dark blue or black jackets, pants, sweatshirts or sweaters. They sloshed in boots that were all black. It was colder inside than out from tons of block ice. Narrow wet aisles separated small stalls, each selling one or two items. Wooden boxes and stainless steel trays full of glistening, slippery harvest from the sea sat edge-to-edge on tables illuminated by fluorescent ceiling fixtures. The blue-white glow made it all even more surreal. Some of the fish were smaller than a thumbnail, some had razor-sharp predator's teeth and some wore faces befitting a "Star Wars" bar scene. There were at least three different kinds of eel, all squirming in glistening tangles and more colors and sizes of shrimp than I had ever imagined. There were sea cucumbers, cockles, jellyfish, yellow and green groupers, red snappers, yellowtail and barracuda, small squid and huge squid, flanked by cuttlefish and octopus, raw and cooked. Those that were cooked were white-fleshed inside, dark red outside if they had been pickled or golden if they had been cooked in soy. The variety of fish roe, too, was incredible; silver gray, pale yellow, iridescent orange, golden and crimson. These delicacies were displayed mounded unadorned, clinging like barnacles to strips of seaweed or encased like sausages

in semi-transparent tubes. Seaweed came in all shades of green, from lime to dark forest, and in black, brown and dark purple. The clams, oysters, scallops and crabs went from teaspoon-tiny to platter-large. There were miniature periwinkles and giant conch.

The vendors were friendly and much more communicative than the cabby had been. They seemed amused by my exuberance and curiosity and answered my questions as slowly and as simply as they would if they were responding to an inquisitive toddler. Closer to dockside I saw dozens of large tables with electric band saws; workers in surgical gloves and rubber aprons operated on 200-pound headless and tailless frozen tuna bodies. They would cut the tuna lengthwise along their backbones, then load them onto carts for delivery to the buyers' mini-trucks waiting outside. The place sounded like a sawmill.

One vendor, who had been patient with me and had struggled to welcome me in English two hours before, smiled at me and bowed slightly as I tried to find my way out. He had exhausted his English with his greeting, but was adept at charades. I returned his smile and his bow, carefully bending my head a little more than he had, as a sign of respect. "*Sumimasen*"—excuse me—"New Otani Hotel, *doko desu ka*" - where is it? "*Yukuri, kudasai*"—Slowly, please. I handed him the card with the hotel's name, and we both tried our best. The hotel was not nearby, however. He tried to draw me a little map but seemed unwilling to give it to me because it was rough and not to

scale. He was a stern self-critic and kept apologizing. He frowned and tucked his chin under the neck of his black windbreaker.

I apologized for disturbing him and thanked him as profusely as my limited language skills allowed. I was going to take my leave when we both said, "*Gomen nasai*" - I am sorry - in unison, as if we had been rehearsing.

Both of our faces erupted into ear-to-ear smiles. I wanted to hug him, but settled for extending my hand. He took it in his and accepted the bond of a handshake. He became resolute. He raised his chin high, puffed out his chest and chuckled deep in his throat. He obviously had hatched a plan. He asked me if I knew Japanese numbers. I nodded yes. He asked me to count and I counted to twenty, then by tens to 100. He smiled and bowed slightly. He then opened his cash box, gave me a large bill and directed me to change places with him. He pointed to the golden, soy-cooked octopus pieces in the metal tray, and slowly articulated an order: "*Tako, ichi kiro han, kudasai.*" I got the message. I lifted a plastic bag onto the scale, pretended to fill it and pressed my index finger down to move the needle on the dial to 1.5 kilograms. I calculated the cost, took the bill, gave him change and presented him the empty bag with a bow and a thank you very much.

Pleased, Mr. Yamamoto then introduced himself and so did I, repeating each other's names aloud and exchanging salutations. He then rather abruptly hurried away and left me behind the counter to

tend his money and tentacled wares. I surmised that he had gone off to find an English speaker to give me directions.

A small gray-haired woman in a long dark raincoat walked by three times. The first time she stole a glance out of the corner of her eye as she stepped by in her plastic rain shoes. The second time, she paused ever so slightly, then quickened her pace and turned away after a closer look. Finally, she stopped and whispered in a high falsetto that she wanted half a kilo of the octopus. Her eyes darted back and forth from the octopus to her purse to the scale, but she avoided my eyes. She extracted exact change and handed it to me from the greatest distance possible. She watched the scale as I put successive pieces into the plastic bag with metal pincers. When I reached the half-kilo mark, she inhaled barely audibly, and bowed her head almost imperceptibly. I handed her the package with a bow, a thank you and a smile. Her eyes were trapped and she smiled back. She placed her package into a crocheted shopping bag. She seemed very pleased with herself for her courageous purchase from the bearded *gaijin* in the loud shirt. Me too! I noted the sale on a small pad next to the plastic bags. I would have affixed a gold star had there been one.

Mr. Yamamoto returned with a little boy who was barely visible in a down jacket and a knitted ski cap and gloves. The boy could have been six or seven. He hopped up on the wooden stool and took my place. Before I could figure out how to brag about my sale without destroying my veneer of humility, Yamamoto-san was steering me

down the aisle. We walked briskly through two cavernous buildings and out a door into an alley. We negotiated the maze to and over the bridge and onto a commercial street with open-fronted shops selling shaved bonito flakes, sushi, noodles, pottery and kitchen utensils.

He walked quickly and silently. I had to press to keep abreast. At each turn he smiled at me and angled his head a few degrees in our new direction. We descended into the subway. He bought two tickets from a vending machine and we were off. He seemed less willing to play charades with me in this public place than he had in the partial privacy of his fish-stand. He used hand signals to beckon me in and out of the spanking clean subway cars. With his hand opened, palm facing downward, he flexed his four fingers toward his palm two or three times rapidly, signaling me to follow. I tracked very closely behind him and marveled at his agile figure, walking rapidly but never touching another human, even with the brush of a sleeve or elbow. We exited onto a busy street in an upscale neighborhood. I resumed my position at his side, a quarter of a pace behind, like an obedient dog who had been instructed to heel. A boy on a bicycle, with a 4-foot-tall bundle of magazines on the back, beat us through the crosswalk. A few blocks later, we arrived at the door of the hotel.

He refused payment for even the subway tickets. I offered him a drink inside but he politely declined. We repeated our bows and handshakes. He gave me his business card, which I could not read, and I gave him my business card, which he could not read.

"*Sayonara, dewa mata*" - goodbye, until next time, he said. Then he hurried away down the drive toward the street without a backward glance. Inside the lobby, the clock read 10:45. My tour mates were heading into a breakfast buffet.

"Where did you go?"

"To the fish market."

"Why would anyone want to go to a fish market? Didn't it stink?"

I donned the requisite smile and nodded my head, not to affirm, but to leave them, politely. "*Sayonara*," I said softly, but from a deeper, raspier part of my throat. That is how we, the working-men of Tokyo, speak.

TENDER BITS

When our son, Matt Karpman, was a teenager in California, he asked that I show him how to make sushi. We began with standard sushi rice; sheets of dried seaweed, *nori*; *wasabi*, green Japanese horseradish; fresh local salmon fillets; dried black mushrooms, *shitakis*; dried gourd strips, *kanpyo*; blanched watercress; strips of sweetened omelet, *tamago yaki* and a sweet pink powder made from shrimp flakes called *oboro*. We soaked the dry ingredients and painstakingly cut everything into long narrow strips except the *wasabi*, fish and pink powder. On a mat, we laid out the *nori* with the

shiny side down, layered on the sweetened vinegar flavored glutinous rice, sprinkled on the pink powder, layered the cut vegetables, spread a thin layer of *wasabi* on the strips of fish (three times the thickness of the veggies), rolled the mat and pressed it lightly and removed it.

What we had was a log that we cut on a diagonal into inch and a half pieces. From the outside in, the layers were dark green seaweed, white rice, pink powder, multicolored veggies, yellow omelet, green watercress and pink salmon. We mixed a little *wasabi* into soy sauce for a dip and decorated the plate with some more of the watercress and a teaspoon of pickled pink ginger from a jar.

In subsequent years, Matt became a superb chef and a sushi maker with skills that eclipsed even my imagination. For our wedding anniversary, he makes us platters of world-class sushi, when we are together.

At home in Costa Rica, I make a very simple sushi of fresh marlin, mahi mahi or yellow tail tuna, strips of green mango or avocado, cilantro and *wasabi* wrapped in sushi rice. The obvious lesson is that local comestibles usually work to replace fancy imports and simple is often superior to complex.

CHAPTER 17

AMRITA'S TREES

Two hundred and sixty years ago, in Khejarli, a small town in Northwest India, Amrita stepped out of her ceremonial bath, donned her vivid red sari, covered her arms with bracelets and demanded that her family behead her. They did.

Despite this extraordinary protest to save the holy *khejri* tree, the woodcutters of Maharaja Ajit Singh cut it down. As the woodcutters cut, her daughters prepared themselves to follow Amrita's example, to die for their trees.

The Maharaja wanted to repair Mehrangarh Fort built in 1459 atop a 400-foot palisade in Jodhpur. Tree trunks were fuel for his ovens to change limestone into quick-lime cement powder. Thus, he sent woodcutters to the Bisnoi town of Khejarli for its magnificent *khejri* trees. As they cut the second tree, Amrita's oldest daughter asked to be and was beheaded. The carnage did not stop until night fell. After Amrita's family, entire villages of Bisnoi died, one life for each of 363 trees. When Ajit Singh heard of the mass martyrdom, he called his woodcutters back permanently.

The Thar Desert's Bisnois would die willingly to save trees, animals, birds and even snakes, wolves and jackals. They are well-

educated, sophisticated farmers and business people, successful and nothing if not steadfast in their beliefs.

We were part of an Elderhostel group on a cultural tour of Rajasthan. For the sake of my marital bliss, I feel obligated to mention that Noni is many years younger than the required age for Elderhostel, but was welcomed because of the age of her spouse.

In Jodhpur, we stayed at the heritage hotel, Ahjit Bhawan, which offered half-day jeep safaris to nearby Bisnoi farms. We hoped we would meet an incarnation of Amrita. I imagined that she would be handsome, serene and resolute. Noni hoped she would be wearing traditional Bisnoi red sari and jewelry.

Bis is Hindi for 20. *Noi* means 9. The Bisnoi are a people, caste and religion, sprung from Hindu roots 500 years ago. Their name stems from the 29 religious tenets to which they continue to adhere.

During an extended period of foreign invasions, internal corruption, looting, rape and murder in what later became Rajasthan, a devotee of the Hindu God Shiva, named Jambho, meditated and prayed for a way to restore peace to the beleaguered and impoverished people of the Thar Desert. He deduced that the careless cutting of trees was depriving people of food, shelter, fuel and fodder, and that the killing of animals for sport and profit led to starvation and desecration of Hindu principle. He taught 29 tenets, beginning with prohibitions on cutting trees and killing animals. Believers were to dress in white turbans and *dhotis* for men, and bright red and black saris and large nose ornaments for women.

In a jeep, we departed the city Jodhpur out from under the shadow of Mehrangarh Fort, into the Thar Desert. The diesel-fume-

enshrouded congestion of urban roads fell behind us quickly. The landscape transformed into a facsimile of the drier parts of East Africa. Dust, sparse grasses, thorn trees, and flat vistas of sun-cracked earth spread out before us. The cobalt blue sky was empty except for occasional raptors and vultures that soared above us.

This could not be Amrita's legacy, I thought. Along dry riverbeds and gravel roads, acacia shrubs, indigenous to Australia, held the soil together. Government airplanes had dropped the acacia seeds

The Thar Desert covers more than a million square miles. It straddles the border with Pakistan, seven eighths on the Indian side. It is the eastern end of an unbroken band of great deserts which reach from the Atlantic shores across Saharan Africa, the Negev, and the Arabian Peninsula.

Gradually, bounded farmlands appeared, and with them, wildlife. Noni spotted a solitary four horned antelope, similar to our pronghorn. We noticed pheasant and quail in fields of barley, wheat and millet. Then came the trees; *khejri*, *neem*, *bhatkania*, *bhor* and others we couldn't identify. Wandering in the open spaces between them were herds of black buck, dark brown-backed and white-bellied, the size of fawns. The males carried long spiraled horns. Lolling in the shade under the trees were very large, thick-chested antelope, varying from blue-gray to slate. They were *nigali*, sacred blue bulls, and probably weighed more than a ton each. We stared motionless. They seemed impervious to our presence, secure that no harm could come to them on Bisnoi land. They wandered through crops, munching a path before them.

Our jeep exited the gravel road onto a dirt track towards a white stucco circular house with a pointed thatched roof, surrounded by a matching animal-proof wall, storage buildings and several large trees. A miniscule flash of crimson moved into view. It vanished behind the wall. We paused to admire a demoiselle crane, standing in a barley-patch. It had a white body and black chest, neck and head except for a white crescent behind its ruby-red eye. On we went to the buildings.

Waiting to greet us at the door was Sunita, stunning in a bright red sari imprinted with a paisley pattern of white flowers. She was the vision I had carried of Amrita and the flash of crimson we had seen from the road. Her blue and red bodice was scoop necked. A gold pendant hung from a garnet necklace over her café-au-lait breasts. She wore a gold headband. Suspended from it was a yellow bauble the size of a ping-pong ball. Her ebony hair was mostly covered along with her shoulders by a diaphanous scarf that matched her sari. Beside her were two teenage sons in shorts, tank tops and sandals. They were all smiles. Noni and Sunita examined each other's bracelets and petted each other's forearms in friendship.

She served us tea in glazed ceramic cups and small fruits the size of quail eggs, and spoke to us in dulcet tones through our bilingual jeep driver.

"The fruit," she told us as she pointed, "fell from the thorny *bhor* tree in the yard."

Its leaves were silver dollar size and shape. The green skinned fruit tasted like sweet pear. Half the fruit was inedible pit. She stroked a piece of fruit as if it were a kitten. She presumed

accurately that I liked the taste, and slid three more into my hand. We nodded approval to each other.

“When I boil the fruit with lemon juice and *timur* (Sichuan pepper), it makes a very good tart chutney.”

Beyond the *bhor* tree was a field of large bushes called *kher*, with green berries and no leaves. The berries are cooked and eaten as vegetables or as pickle, as are tender roots. Later in the year, the berries become red, sweet and edible raw. When the bush dies, the broom-handle-like trunk and trifurcated roots are shaved into pitchforks. She pointed to one in the fodder pile under a roof.

She introduced us, as if to a family member, to the *neem* tree next to the house. Her family uses twigs to brush their teeth, bark to spread on their stores of grain and on their crops in the field as an insect repellent, boiled leaves in which to bathe and treat skin disease, dried leaves as seasoning in curry and fruit to eat during monsoon season to lessen the likelihood of bacterial infections. *Neem* twigs are used to sprinkle holy water from the Ganges over the bodies of the dead before burial. All other Hindus cremate their dead. The Bisnoi bury them. They return the bodies to mother earth. They prevent trees from being cut for cremation fuel. Dung is dried and burned for cooking.

The *khejri* trees were scattered across the backfields. They have roots that go down about ten stories, assuring a fulltime water source, and contain nitrogen- fixing nodules that restore the soil.

We visited in winter. The trees had been pruned back to their trunks. The leaves became fodder and the stripped branches building

material. The seed pods are boiled, sun dried, mixed with spices and fried. The dish is called *sangri*.

Bhatkania trees produce seedpods that are boiled, spiced, and eaten. Dead branches from thorn acacias are used for corrals. Even the weed, *dhamasa*, is used to tan hides from animals that died naturally.

Sunita had decorated the light walls of her home and storage buildings with red patterns of flowers and *neem* leaves. While we sipped our fragrant tea, two tractors pulling carts drove by. There must have been a dozen people of all ages on each. Returning home from a Bisnoi wedding, the women all wore red along with secondary colors. Many wore decorative necklaces that were virtually breastplates and their arms were covered with bracelets all the way from wrist to sari. The men were dressed in white and sat tall under their turbans. They smiled generously and waved with gusto as they rode past.

Sunita had charmed us with her poise and serenity. She embodied her beliefs. She sought out Noni and hugged her goodbye. We boarded our jeeps and trundled away towards Jodhpur, our waves were more melancholy than those of the wedding party. Like the desert, we had been transformed.

An eighty-year-old woman sitting next to me in the jeep, waved gently at a *neem* tree and blew a surreptitious kiss to a *nagali* standing in its shade. She spotted my glance. Our smiles met and she whispered to me, "Those animals, they're holy you know."

TENDER BITS

Bengali cooks use *neem* leaves for their bitter flavor. They often add a few crumpled dry leaves to oil or clarified butter along with chili flakes, mustard seeds or a five-spice seed mixture called *panch phoran*. The most common dishes that include *neem* are eggplant curry, lentil soup and potato fritters. To my palate, these dishes are better without *neem*. Fresh *neem* leaves are deep-fried and offered as a snack. My advice to you is to **refuse** as politely as you can. There is no more bitter substance that I have ever tasted and the taste persists with tenacity.

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