

Exploring the World through Food

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Author Naomi Duguid has been travelling on and off for most of her adult life, bringing back beautiful images and mouthwatering insights into the cooking and culture of the people she met along the way. Writing at first with her ex, Jeffrey Alford, she's published a series of books that wowed the critics and, more importantly, persuaded readers that they could attempt those exciting dishes in their own kitchens.

That's probably because she has a very practical approach to the recipes she presents. Back in her home kitchen, in Toronto in Canada, she sets about recreating the food she experienced on her travels until it matches her memories. But it all starts with endless curiosity and great respect for the women she's learning from.

Naomi Duguid: The categorization of things as being, I don't know, sophisticated, or better, or primitive, or basic, I've always, of course, rejected because to me, actually, the basic things are the interesting ones because those are the ones that require enormous creativity and attentiveness to get right. If you've got lots of choices of ingredients, you can always make a meal. But if you've only got three things to work with, how do you feed your family? Isn't that interesting, no? And isn't it lucky to be able to learn about that from people who know.

Jeremy: Your books are so beautiful that I wouldn't dream of taking them into the kitchen.

Naomi Duguid: Oh, they're made to be used. That's very nice of you. What I love is if – in former times and hopefully, future times – being out on, say, a book tour or just somewhere, and meeting someone saying, "Oh, I hope you don't mind. My book is so dirty and stained." And I say, "Yay," that's great.

Not that anybody has to cook out of them, but it's a lovely thing to think that people are prepared to, I would say, take the risk of embarking, for example, into a food culture they're not familiar with

because that's, of course, what I want people to do. Not necessarily cook, but to connect imaginatively with people from other places far away that might have felt scary or unfamiliar in various ways, and to have a fellow feeling, to feel you're in the kitchen with someone. Anyway. You can do that. If you're cooking somebody else's food, you suddenly can put yourself in their place.

Jeremy: This is the thing; you are in their place. You go there, you spend a lot of time there. How do you do it? I've read that you don't take many notes, for example, but you then come back to your home in Toronto and try and recreate the dishes. How do you do it? How do you get into people's kitchens? Let's start with that.

Naomi Duguid: I guess the thing is that I don't start out thinking that I need to. In other words, not being needy is the first thing, and having enough time. I don't go with an agenda. I go with trying to make myself available, which means hanging around and noticing and trying to appreciate. And also trying to notice the things that feel, what can I say, uncomfortable to me, and then to interrogate myself because they're clearly not uncomfortable to people there. What's wrong with me? What am I not understanding, that I'm uncomfortable with that thing?

I think that goes for tastes. It goes for all kinds of things. What is it about there, that means that people are attached to this particular smelly thing or whatever it is? In other words, it's not about what I think is great. It's not about my judgment and it's not about the plan I make ahead of time. I'm an ignorant person. I need to go and be a beginner and say, "What's going on here for people here?" That's the thing.

In terms of the note-taking, for example, if you're beginner then you're finding your way into things, and that's a way of learning. That is learning from the beginning as opposed to saying, "Oh, I get that and that," but not understanding. I can't explain, but you're building from the ground up, if you come in with an ignorant frame of mind, if I can call it that, an empty mind.

Jeremy: It seems to me, it's almost like you make yourself a child learning from their parents.

Naomi Duguid: Exactly. If you think about traditional ways of learning ... For example, long ago, I learned Tai Chi and did it for quite

a while in my 20s. I learned from a much older woman who was from China and who was in Toronto and didn't have much English. She didn't talk. Every once in a while, she'd come and maybe move my hand. We were doing it in a group. It was just about just letting go of any preconceptions and just trying to be present in that thing that was going on.

I think if I'm coming into ... I don't know, this is before working on food consciously, but say I'm walking in Nepal and I'm in my 20s and I'm tired at the end of the day and come to a village and somebody directs me to the house that has a space for somebody to sleep. This is before things got super organized in Nepal, so in the '70s.

What's happening? Night is falling. The woman of the house has lit a fire and she's starting to cook and I'm going to squat down on my hunkers and watch, because that's what's going on. I realized in effect, I've been trying to understand things through food for longer than I've been working in food. I can put it that way. I think a friend of mine says, "Oh, it's something about you, you have maybe a Scottish brain." I have a Scottish grandfather. "You're such a concrete thinker." I think it's that I want to understand. I'm interested in conceptual thinking too, but the fine grainedness of what actually is going on.

Where does the water come from? What's the climate that she's ... Gosh, I wonder why she doesn't have this, she only has that. Oh, I guess it's because on this side of the valley it's colder, but on the other side of the valley – because I've walked down to the bottom of the valley and then back up the other slope – the other side of the valley the food is different. What would that be about? Maybe it's culture. Gosh, I don't know. It's just always trying to understand at that immediate level, and then often that leads to all kinds of other larger questions, of course.

Jeremy: You said you were interested in food before you were interested in food. I wonder ... You also clearly have been traveling since forever. Is the traveling seeking out food, or is the food telling you where to go next? Or are the two unrelated?

Naomi Duguid: At the beginning, the travel was for travel, because I was curious about the world and was able, for various reasons, to travel then, fitting it in between study, or work, or whatever. But in retrospect, it was always when I was somewhere, certainly food and ... My undergraduate degree is in geography and perhaps it's that.

Understanding a place through what the climate is, what grows there, people's houses, architecture. The interesting landscape to me is the human landscape. What have people done here? What can I see? I'm not interested in the mountain on its own. That's nice, but the thing that's fascinating to me is how have humans worked here and shaped this and what made sense to them historically, and what makes sense to them now. I guess explanation is the thing. Curiosity and explanation are the two things that drive me.

Jeremy: They're focused on food in as much as, although your books are part photographic record, and part history, and part anthropology almost. You come back-

Naomi Duguid: To the food.

Jeremy: -and you write recipes that enable people in Toronto, in Rome, in London, wherever-

Naomi Duguid: To participate. At least to try.

To travel in their kitchens, is my language. I sometimes say "happy travels in the kitchen and out" to people if I'm signing a book and have time to do that. There, it's interesting. I use the camera as a note-taker. Now it's easier with digital, but even with slides, I would blow slides on ... I take shots. Not good ones. Not for beautiful, but literally, because it was the easiest way to take a note. There's something, especially in a place where the tax collector or the oppressive government is, er, oppressive, that means that when you take out pencil and paper, when you're in company with someone else and make notes about what they're doing, it's intimidating or off-putting and it closes them down. That's something I learned fairly early I guess in China in 1980. You just know this is not the thing to do.

Of course, back in the dorm or whatever, little notes about the day and stuff. I'll remember the look of whatever. But it's actually the camera, because it wasn't viewed in the same way, it was a safer way to take notes. Also, touch. If I was in somebody's kitchen actually and someone was showing me ... I remember doing this in various places, there's a handful of something. In Senegal, I remember, I stayed with a woman named Sarta. Holding her hand and then transferring the peppercorns to my hand to feel because that helped anchor me I guess. Again, the physical, the concrete is always the place.

If you're trying hard to get that right and to anchor in that, then hopefully, is what I think, it kept me from fantasizing or mythologizing or kept my feet on the home-cooking, honest, daily life ground and not in some, I don't know, dreams of castles in Spain or palazzos.

Jeremy: It's interesting too that if you went into even one of your neighbours, there isn't a recipe. For most of the things people cook every day, whatever their culture, there is no written recipe.

Naomi Duguid: Well, no, but there are instructions. There's a mother-in-law who will beat you up if you do it wrong in many places. There's somebody sitting on your shoulder saying, "Tsk, tsk, tsk." when your roti isn't perfectly round. There is a way of doing things. That's why, again, it's not about a telling, it's about a seeing. It's about participating.

Jeremy: I guess modern phones are really useful to you.

Naomi Duguid: Fabulously useful. Really extraordinary. Just to counter that, coming back from a trip in the old days of slides, I'd be carrying my film with me. First unexposed film and then, gosh, exposed film, that's the precious one. You have something to lose then. I'd carry it with me until I got home to have it processed, or until I got, say, to Bangkok was a place I used to sometimes get film processed.

So then the question is ... The slides, I'm looking forward to seeing the slides. Yes and kind of no. I've learned to actually not look at them after a trip for maybe two or three weeks because the image, as you know, is so powerful, it preempts the mind's eye. It preempts our intuitive, maybe, other sensory memories. It always seemed important to me to get back and start playing with maybe some ingredients or looking at my notes and so on before actually ... Does that make sense to you?

Jeremy: Absolutely. You talked about the mind's eye, is there an equivalent to the taste of something, when you come back?

Naomi Duguid: Yes. That's a good question. What I find the best way to remember things or what's in my mouth and what I'm tasting is contextually. In other words, the best example of this actually was ... I was in Portugal in a village. It's the highest village in Portugal, it's called Sabugueiro, in 2000. I was, luckily, in the house of a woman

named Margarita, all happenstantial. She was making bread that night as it turned out. The next day, they fired up the wood oven in this house that was the village oven. Anyway, that evening, I had supper with her and there was a honey and there was a cheese. I brought some of that honey back to Toronto and I brought some of the cheese. Snuck some cheese in.

When I tried the recipe ... It's a mixed rye-wheat bread. I had not known there was rye bread in Portugal. It's all a huge education. ... I was lucky with that recipe test because the first time around, I got really close. How did I know I was close? I had the honey and I could taste how it tasted with the honey. I could taste how it tasted with the cheese. You see what I mean? It's not a comparative tasting, but in that sense, it's a contextual tasting. That's one of the things.

Jeremy: Bread, wheat, rye, honey, cheese, I get that. But when you're floating down the Mekong or whatever and trying to recover that back in Toronto ... I know you can get absolutely anything you want in Toronto, but how do you do that?

Naomi Duguid: I console myself ... [chuckles] ... perhaps wrongly. I console myself with the idea that if someone from Laos or Northern Thailand, or whatever, finds themselves in Toronto, they have to make do with what's here and they're going to work to get as close as they can to the taste of home, working with what they have here. The tomatoes aren't going to be right, they're going to be whatever. It's going to be from here, grown here. It's like Ethiopians working with teff flour grown in Idaho instead of teff from Ethiopia. It tastes quite different, they said to me, but still it's teff. How exciting.

I think that's all I can try and do, is think about the effect in the mouth. I don't even think of the word taste. It's the combined sense of how it is. To try and do it without distraction. I think that's the other thing. It is almost closing your eyes and saying, "Am I there? No, I'm not there. This is too whatever. No, I'm not there." [laughs] It's edible, it's perfectly fine, but I'm not there.

Often, these dishes, you're also working in increments. You can taste it partway through and re-steer it, or think, "Okay, this is where I went wrong." That's where baking is more tricky, because it's a black box thing. Literally, often. Flatbreads, not so much. But even with flatbreads, once you've made the dough, you're launched. If you need to tweak it, you have to start again.

Jeremy: Bread's my thing and I fully relate to that. The flatbreads, again, it's an interesting departure because we "Europeans", we don't do flatbread, we do loaves. What was it about flatbreads that really intrigued you? Was that an excuse to travel?

Naomi Duguid: No. It's interesting. It started because I was with my ex, with Jeffrey Alford. We were in China traveling, in Xinjiang, where the Uighurs are now being crucified and genocided, to use it as that form. We had set out shortly after we'd met to bicycle from Kashgar in Western Xianjiang through the Karakoram into Hunza. That border had just opened to ... Built is a bit of a strong word. It was a dirt road, but it was there more or less and we could pass through if we had a visa and we've got a visa.

In that country, in all of that country ... And you think about flatbreads, they're really breads of people who don't have access to a fixed hearth. Because if you're making a loaf, you need to have continuous reliable heat. That means you need to have a structure that holds it in and that means you need to be in a place where that structure can exist and not be in danger. That means settledness. Whereas flatbreads, you can make them of course as settled people, but you can make them on a surface anywhere over a fire.

What was interesting out in Xinjiang generally is people were eating a lot of bread, especially in the small villages. We stopped in one place and we were invited in because it wasn't common to see people ... There was nobody on a bicycle except us. We asked in this Tajik village actually, "How much bread do you eat a day?" in my bad pigeon Mandarin, because there's always one man at least who would speak Mandarin in the villages. They said one person, one day, one kilo. That's of course the Roman soldiers' ration. That's 80% of their calories from bread.

You think, "Well, that's really important." We were eating flatbreads a lot. My ex, Jeffrey, had been fascinated with flatbreads before. I'd come from a bread-making household, not flatbreads. My mother made all our bread when I was growing up. She'd say, "Oh, I've left the loaves. Put them in the oven," or whatever, so bread was very much part of my growing up too. Anyway, it seemed like an important thing.

Of course, there are flatbreads in Europe. There's the flatbread that you use to test the oven in a village. Whether it's a rye flatbread in Poland. I was told this by a Polish grandmother or somebody's Polish

grandmother, or by an Italian friend. Yes, of course my friend Luigi Orgera who was from Gaeta said – his family were bakers for generations – said, "Of course you make a flat piece like a pitta and put it in to see if the oven was to temperature." Then, of course, all of the extraordinary flatbreads in India, so it was like, "Oh, gosh," when we wanted to do the book. It was how ... This is just a taste. I think there's 45 or something, 50 maybe breads in the book and then foods to go with them but there are so many more. There are so many more flatbreads.

I think that's where you start to say, "Ah, loaf breads are really just an extension of flatbreads instead of flatbreads being an offshoot. It's the other way round." Because if you should go to the Bedouin they're working with barley originally not with wheat.

If my goal is to get people to embark, then I want to try ... I'm already asking them to try things that are really foreign to them. I want to smooth away things that are going to intimidate as much as I can. I think it's up to anybody to play. You want to give them something that's going to intrigue them enough that they'll play with it and engage with it. It's not about perfection.

Jeremy: Nor is it about authenticity. That awful, awful thing that's claiming everybody.

Naomi Duguid: It stops people. Yes, I think that whatever you're making in your kitchen is yours to try. I think it's important always to acknowledge the roots of things. But the Lao refugee who comes here and is making her food here, that's not inauthentic. That's how her food transposes to here with her aesthetic and her culture and her reflexes. But not working over an open fire, no longer with her stone mortar because she hasn't got one yet. All of that.

I think we need to have respect and we need to give credit always to the mothers and grandmothers – I'm going to phrase it that way because it's really where it seems to lie mostly – who found their way with new ingredients as they came along and still keeping old traditions. Then, after that, I think we're just humans trying to work respectfully with food. That's really I think the only thing that's necessary.

Jeremy: Then how about the suburban Canadian family making Lao food? In what sense is that authentic? Or does it not matter at all?

Naomi Duguid: They're just making food in their kitchen and they're engaging with maybe an idea of Laos and thinking, "Oh, where's that on the map?" Maybe some kid says that, or it becomes a favorite of theirs and they think ... There's a cross-connection. That thin little thread of cross-connection that might be an emotional appreciation. Might be a political appreciation, I hope. Because of course, foundationally for me it's all political.

At the base, it's all about politics in the sense of having respect and understanding of people, not yourself, and wanting to use this little tool, this massive tool of food as the way of building that in other people. I just want this to filter into people's awareness.

Jeremy: How do you feel then when formerly closed off, maybe authoritarian, cultures open up and the first thing that happens is that globalized foods or imitations of globalized foods take over in many respects from their cultures? I don't know if you've been back to Burma recently or back to Western China to see what's happened to the food cultures there.

Naomi Duguid: I think it's really interesting. There's a lot of layers of that. When the first McDonald's opened in Hong Kong a gazillion years ago, 25 years ago I think, 30 years ago, it was a ... And in Bangkok too ... It was thrilling for people to be able to go there, an air-conditioned space. There weren't as many air-conditioned spaces in Bangkok then and it was very sleek and modern. Thais checked it out. They thought it was really fun. It didn't mean they didn't know about their other stuff. It was just another thing they were prepared to add to their enormously cosmopolitan set of food options. If you think about the targeting ...

Or, for example, when I was first in Vietnam, it was early, end of January 1990, and Coca Cola had just arrived. There were still sanctions, Americans still had sanctions, but Coca Cola had figured out how to get itself in there without being sanctioned by the US government. A can of Coca Cola, it was so exotic looking in Vietnam because everything else was worn and war-worn and tired and these sleek red and white cans. They cost something like 4,000 dong which at the time was \$1, for which you could feed a family of five or six out in the market. You could buy prepared food and sit and eat it out in a market stall for that. I haven't been to Vietnam for a while, I guess

probably 8 years. Sure, there's modern things but it's a robust culture. There's home cooking.

And so the idea that we should put walls up to wall off and say, "You, new person, your food culture is so great. You shouldn't have access to make the mistake of eating fast food." No. We need to just say, "Let's give everybody the respect they deserve." Really, in the end, the place that that junk food happens to destroy people is when it becomes cheaper than real food, and that is when in fact there's something wrong with the food supply. In other words, there's something wrong with income distribution. There's something wrong with the fact that farmers aren't being paid. It's all part of a larger picture. No, I think I just have to let life play itself out, I would say.

Jeremy: I see what you mean about politics being a part of it all.

[laughter]

Naomi Duguid: Yes, sorry. It does go to politics. Food is so essential, how can it not?

Jeremy: A final question, how have you been coping with not being able to travel? Presumably, you haven't been anywhere much in the last year or so.

Naomi Duguid: I have been doing, every year, a cultural immersion through food session with a small group in Thailand, in Chiang Mai, at the end of January. I did that and then flew back through the UK for a meeting of the Oxford Symposium Trustees. Flew back to Toronto in early March and have been here ever since.

I'm working on a book right now and I had a little more travel to do for it. It's about salt. Since my gleaning for the book also involves travels – of course in space but also in time – the fact that there's places I can't get to now is just an equivalent of not being able to go back to a salt place in an earlier time. It's really up to me to figure it out. I'm lucky enough to not have young children that I'm worrying about so I have no excuse for not just getting on with it.

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