



bountiful

recipes inspired by our garden

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AUTHORS OF THE WHITE ON RICE COUPLE BLOG

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RECIPES INSPIRED BY OUR GARDEN

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*To our grandmothers, and all who inspire us to love, cook, and bring together friends and family for
raucous good times.*

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Acknowledgments



***“If you really want to make a friend, go to someone’s house ... the people who give you their food
give you their heart.”***

—Cesar Chavez



white on rice couple: our story

A GIRL FROM VIETNAM

With my first bite into an American cheeseburger, I was smitten. Though I was only about four years old, this food moment is still vivid for me. The taste of that thin, floppy burger was so different from my regular regimen of rice and noodles. And the pickle—oh, that soggy, briny thing was just wonderful; I had always had an addiction to anything sour, so that pickle laced with tart mustard and sweet ketchup was like candy. Then there was the cheese: That melted-yellow creaminess on top of the meat was super-decadent and satisfying. My cheeks swelled with delight and my belly was instantly in love.

Beyond just the burger, that meal ignited an awareness of the world of food beyond my mother's everyday kitchen fare of white rice, fresh vegetables, fish, pho noodles, and more fish.

Vietnamese food was what I was born into. The pulse and heartbeat of what resonates in my soul and fills my pantry are the flavors defined by growing up Vietnamese: spicy, salty, sour, sweet, and savory—with plenty of liquid-gold fish sauce.

I was born in Da-Nang in 1972, and my childhood world was consumed by stories of the Vietnamese war: of conflict, of suffering, of loss, and of how little food there was to eat. I was taught to eat everything off my plate, because every grain of white rice was made out of love and sacrifice.

Again and again, every conversation and bit of wisdom ended up with a lesson in food. Whether it was a reminder that people are starving in the world or a pointer on how I could have pounded the lemongrass finer, I was schooled through food.

I'm grateful for those reminders now, as an adult. Ask me how grateful I was back then, as a third grader, and I'd probably tell you that all I wanted for dinner was a pepperoni pizza. ("Oh, why not Rice *again*?") But now I'm so grateful for everything my parents have given me that it almost hurts.

In 1975, when I was two-and-a-half years old and Mom was three months pregnant with my brother, we fled Da-Nang along with my uncle and paternal grandmother. Like so many other Vietnamese families during that treacherous time, we fled, ran for our lives, hid, then made it onto a boat: a very big boat packed tight with frightened people. We floated on the open ocean, without fresh water and with scarcely any food; babies screamed, adults cried, and lives were lost. We eventually ended up in a refugee camp in Guam. My father was in the South Vietnamese navy and fought alongside the American forces. He was separated from us during our escape, but thankfully we were all reunited at that refugee camp.

That's how I remember describing the experience to my schoolteachers in third grade. My English vocabulary was very limited back then, but that's pretty much how I shared the story. I often like to draw back on my third-grade jabber because, quite frankly, it's less graphic and painful than what really went on. The rawer, more truthful memories I inherited from Mom are only for times when I have a bottle of bourbon by my side.

After a few months in the refugee camp, we came to America and went to live with my aunt, who was married to an American soldier and already living in the States. Since 1975, my parents have relieved me of my only-child status by adding five more siblings to my big-sister résumé. Growing up in a family of six kids meant having to share, explore, study, sleep, drink, and sometimes even show up as a group. But most important of all, it meant cooking and eating together.

Mom and Dad were infatuated with food, and they now had six kids in their arsenal of free labor for growing, cooking, and executing their crazy food parties. We were always asked to participate in

household cooking chores (or, in our eyes, torture-pain-suffering), and no video games were permitted until we were finished. As a fourth-grader, I was not happy.

Actually, my parents were more than infatuated; they were possessed. They tore up the backyard patch of green grass to grow a mini vegetable farm. With the help of six kids, they were able to grow and harvest fresh vegetables, lush Asian greens, and loads of fresh herbs. Each child was born into the role of a line-cook. I helmed lemongrass pounding at the mortar and pestle and manned the shrimp peeling station. My younger siblings fulfilled their respective roles as garlic masher, shallot peeler, herb washer, eggplant picker, and lime squeezer with civic duty.

I had a love-hate relationship with food when I was growing up because preparing it was always complicated and time consuming. Food had to be fresh, because that's the only way my parents knew how to feed us. If we were hungry, we had to grow the food, pick it, wash it, then cook it. It was beyond my understanding that some of my American friends had it as easy as buying dinner at a fast-food restaurant or cooking a ready-made boxed meal. I was seething with jealousy every time I had to prep for my parents' fried-fish dinners.

My love of heavy cheese dishes, fried chicken, burgers, pizza, Twinkies, and other junk food drove me to distraction when I had to eat rice, noodles, and fresh herbs and greens, again and again. I just wanted to have a soft, chewy chocolate chip cookie! My hunger was certainly satisfied by Vietnamese food and I was fulfilled with a bowl of noodles, but eating a burger or pizza meant that I was more American.

It wasn't until I moved away from home to the small town of Port Angeles, Washington, at the age of twenty-two and as a vegetarian, that I learned the value of the cooking I had been raised on. Living far away from my parents' kitchen meant that I was able to eat all the cheese pizza and potato chips I wanted. At first, it was a blessing not to have to peel and devein shrimp and be free from the throng of the home kitchen.

It wasn't until I began breaking down both physically and spiritually that I realized I was yearning for a home-cooked meal. I needed Vietnamese food and I needed it fast and plentiful. (I found myself craving the flavor of fresh mint—what a crazy thought that was back then, to actually wish I had a herb to gnaw on!) I was malnourished and puffed out from eating bags of bagels and cream cheese. I had to learn how to cook for and feed myself the best way that I knew how.

All of a sudden, I was searching for ways to prepare vegetables even remotely close to how Mom would have done or to make the soup that Dad would simmer for hours. Drawing back on every one recipe Mom had taught me, on every kitchen technique Dad had drilled into my head, and on every memory of what had stocked their kitchen, I taught myself how to cook fresh food.

I traveled for hours sourcing ingredients that were not readily available to me in the small town where I lived. I relished farmer's markets because the vegetables there looked like what came out of my parents' garden. I liberated myself from the mounds of junk food and was now swimming in fresh greens, garlic, shallots, and vegetables again. I even owned my own knife, stockpot, cast-iron pan, and mortar and pestle, all tools that are bound to my heart and will go with me to my grave.

Home cooking was emerging from my tiny kitchen far away from home. I was humbled beyond measure—and grateful for every single cooking lesson, verbal recipe, grain of rice, and pearl of food wisdom that ever crossed my plate and my path.

And as for that cliché that we eventually become our parents? In my case, it's completely true. Look at my backyard today and I'm living proof of life's ironies, contradictions, and homecomings. My journey with food becomes more challenging and more exciting every day. I'm so grateful to everyone who nursed me through this delicious life that it hurts—but in a beautiful way.

A BOY FROM A CATTLE RANCH IN OREGON

It's hard to say when my love of food began. It feels as if there was no beginning, as if it was always there.

I grew up on a cattle ranch in northeastern Oregon, a land of valleys nestled into the mountains dotted with small towns centered around farming and logging. In the summer you can climb the foothills and look out across the patchwork quilt of crops filling the valleys, with a lazy river meandering through and breaking up the perfect squares of farmland.

From the time I was knee-high, my memories were filled with the scents of hay and horses, the feel of newborn calves sucking on fingers with their rough tongues and budding teeth. Even today, more than thirty years later, I can vividly recall the sights and sounds of feeding milk formula to orphaned calves we'd pasture next to the house, their cold, wet noses poking through the fences as they stretched to reach the bottles they would then fiercely suck on.

My youth was filled with adventures of tramping through waist-high pastures, grasshoppers scattering with every stride; of fishing for trout and searching for crawdads in the creek that wound through our property and lent its name to our ranch.

The Indian Creek Ranch. A small ranch focused on raising Hereford cattle, and now a place that no longer exists as I knew it, lost to the changing of industries and lives. It is, however, a place that shall forever be ingrained in my heart. It was life on that ranch, combined with the ever-present love and encouragement of my parents, that laid the foundation for the person I am today.

You see, life on a ranch can be quite isolated and quiet. Our nearest neighbor was about half a mile away, and to get to the nearest family with kids our age we'd have to tack on another couple of miles. Days were punctuated with chores and responsibilities, with the long gaps in between filled with exploration and imagination.

When confronted with a problem, or boredom, there was no one outside yourself to help alleviate it. If the pipes froze over in the horses' water trough, as a young kid you'd just figure out how to thaw the pipes and fix the problem. When the cattle or horses broke out, whoever was home would round them up, find the downed fence, and repair it. The thought of us being "just kids" never came into the equation. There were no limits to what we could do, except those we placed on ourselves.

There were so many things when I was growing up that seemed so commonplace at the time; only after much time and distance away from them did I realize how special they were. We grew up drinking the milk from a few milking cows we had pastured near the barn. The rich milk would be placed in the fridge, letting the cream rise to the top so it could be easily skimmed off. It took me forever to get used to the milk served in our elementary school. Those first experiences drinking milk from a carton made me think I was drinking milklike water.

There were some things that were special, even to us as kids. Homegrown raspberries had to be the greatest things ever. The horses thought so too, and we had to double up the fence just to keep them from stretching their mouths across and devouring every berry within reach. But we would make it up to them by bringing armfuls of apples from the front-yard trees. Oh that sweet aroma under those trees! Just the thought takes me back, and to the remembrance of dodging the bees attracted to the same beautiful scents.

Although no one else in the house was obsessed with cooking, there was one grandma in particular who etched into me her love for it. Even though we only saw her a handful of times as we were growing up, each of those visits left me with lasting food memories. It was she who left me with my first memory of cooking, and of trying octopus, and of learning as a five-year-old that I actually liked cooked carrots. Just like many kids I thought I hated them, until she affectionately but unwaveringly insisted I try them. "You don't have to eat them all, just try them."

As I grew older, I found myself drawn more and more into the kitchen. We all had varying schedules, and there was always a freezer full of meat, so in my early teens I started cooking for myself. Cookbooks and magazines were my guides as I experimented and learned. I was also lucky enough to have parents who supported nearly everything my sister and I did. (I once filled the house with the fumes of a particularly vinegary orange sauce, and there was no word of complaint or protest.)

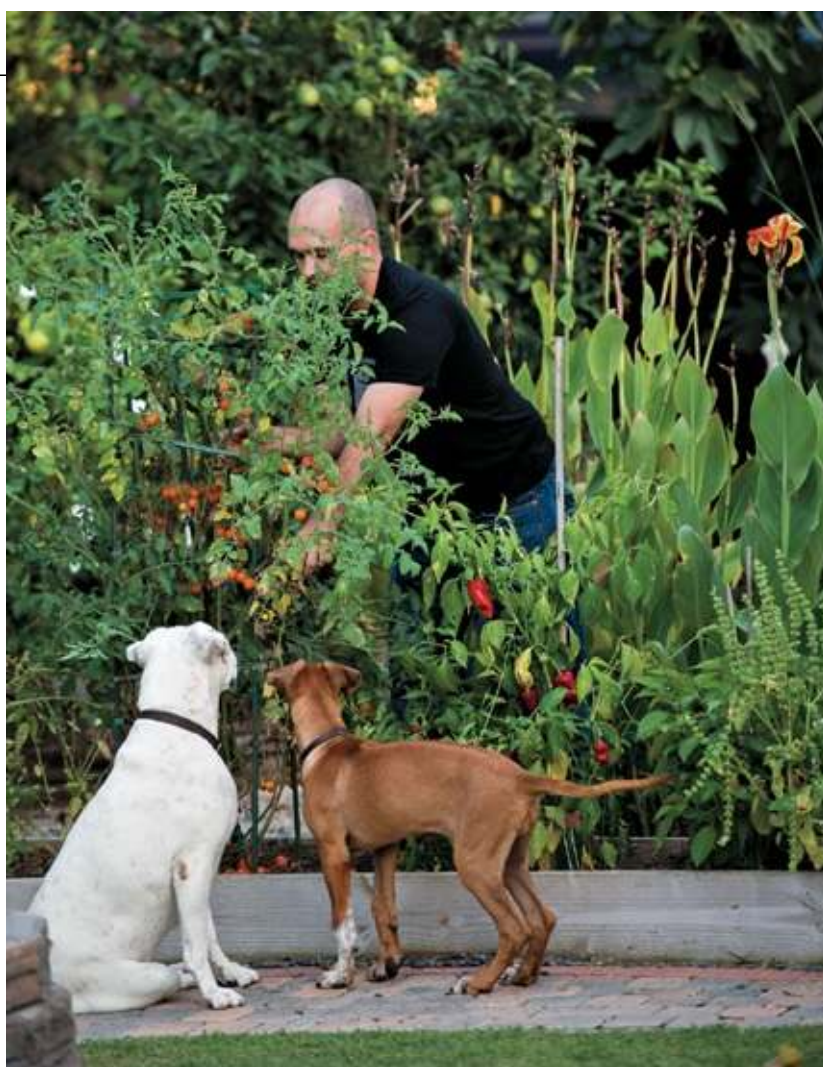
In my later teens, I discovered cooking a meal for a girl was a great way to get a date, especially in a sleepy little town where there was not much else to do. And after that there was no looking back. I studied Italian cooking, Asian cuisine, sauces, pastries, breads—anything I could find a cookbook about or a magazine to inspire me with. In the kitchen, time disappeared, and the world of food became a beautiful beacon leading me forward.

Throughout my life those etchings from the ranch have guided me. In the isolation of ranch life, I had learned to listen to my instincts. I became self-sufficient, often self-taught, and always open to exploration and discovery.

After high school it was time for a change. I left behind the mountains, valleys, streams, and horses for a vastly different life. I loaded all I could onto my motorcycle and rode over a thousand miles south to attend college in Southern California. Several years into college, after spending a couple of years working part time in coffeehouses and restaurants, I decided my major was far less interesting than the culture of food. *That* was where my heart was.

It wasn't long before I met the love of my life, and things have never been the same since. She was a veg-head from the rice paddies of Vietnam and I was a boy from a cattle ranch in the foothills of Oregon, but bound by our love of food, exploration, and each other, we were a perfect match.

Today, even though I'm far removed from the life of the cattle ranch and the quiet of the countryside, the spirit of the boy who jumped from rock to rock to cross a creek, spent afternoons chasing herds of deer on horseback, and found ways to lug bales of hay heavier than himself still resides within me. There is a part of me who is still a boy cooking for his girl, receiving untold joy from seeing her face light up after she's enjoyed something I've made. After all, how can a girl resist a boy who bakes?



TOGETHER AS WHITE ON RICE COUPLE

The initial seeds were planted in 1996, when we had our first conversations about food together. Over warm mochas in a coffeehouse, we bonded over subjects like art, theatre, love of the great outdoors, gardening, and, of course, food.

Back then, while the rest of our peers were hitting the nightclubs, we were at home watering our herb pots and learning how to make puff pastry. We're a little embarrassed to admit that at the time we were full-fledged food nerds, with a little garden geek thrown in. Yes, we were the homebodies who would rather stay home on a Saturday night and bake bread while the rest of our friends did what most young people did—which was *not* to stay at home and hover over the stove.

Even in our first two years in a small second-story apartment, we managed to start our first garden with potted vegetable plants packed onto a tiny balcony. Although it was limiting, we were determined to begin growing herbs and small fruit trees. From this special gathering place, growing, feeding, sharing, and cooking inspiration flowed.

Over the next decade we continued to build our food life in our small kitchens. We both worked long hours at day jobs that rarely allowed us to see each other. Todd worked in restaurant management, and Diane photographed families in her portrait studio. We'd both work long days, then meet back up at home to cook together while discussing how we could develop a life of working together rather than apart.

After a few failed attempts to find a location where we could open a restaurant together, we realized this was an omen. Instead of pursuing the restaurant plan to satisfy our love of food and cooking, we took a different route through photography, but we still wanted to be connected to the food community in some way.

While browsing online one day, we came across websites on which people were sharing their experiences about food. These “food blogs” were full of personal recipes, photographs, food stories, restaurant reviews, and everything that had to do with food. Reading these blogs inspired us to join this incredibly connected community of food people. We knew we wanted to be a part of it, even if just to share our garden stories and recipes.

From there, we whimsically came up with the name “White On Rice Couple.” Why this name? Because we wanted to poke fun at our ourselves and our cultural differences. Also, this name was available for only ten dollars a year, which seemed like a minimal investment for a personal hobby.

Thus, in 2008, WhiteOnRiceCouple.com was born. It has since evolved into a life-changing experience that we never expected. Our stories and photographs about our personal recipes, our garden triumphs and failures, our families, our dogs, and pretty much everything we wanted to share about our lives poured into each post. If something died in the garden, we wrote about it. When we had a bumper crop of vegetables and made a fun soup from them, it was certain to make the Monday blog post.

Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that this silly-named blog would be interesting to people, let alone lead us to a creative new career in food photography, food styling, filmmaking, and recipe writing. Now our days are filled with styling, photographing, and producing visual multimedia video, films, and other content for national brands, publishers, magazines, and newspapers. Traveling the world to teach workshops, speak at conferences, and meet our food community face to face is what drives us to pursue this life of worldwide communication.

Thanks to the support, encouragement, comments, and friendship of everyone within the food blogging community, we have found the inspiration to continue sharing and doing what we love so much to do.



on sharing

Everything about growing and cooking food brings us comfort. To be able to make things with our own hands is satisfying, but to be able to share it with others is the ultimate joy and privilege. We're grateful to have others at our table alongside us, with whom to break bread, to tell stories, and to cultivate friendship through eating and sharing.

Food is powerful that way.

The food we make and eat is about community, nurturing, and letting others know that we care and that they are loved. In the very beginning of our life as a couple, we didn't have much in the way of money or material belongings. But what we always had was a meal, a platter of cookies, or a pie to share. And we always accepted the same with open arms when someone gave to us something they had made with their own hands.

Feeding one another is undeniably a loving way to connect.

We are often asked what makes our cooking different, what makes food such an integral part of our lives, and what makes our garden grow. For us, it's not about what food means to us or what gets us cooking, but rather *why* we cook. We cook because it nurtures us in more ways than we can even imagine. Without food and cooking, our souls would be empty and lifeless. This process—from growing and harvesting to cooking and feeding—fuels our love for one another and our appreciation for life on its simplest terms.

Gathering at the table is the culmination of everything we believe in. Our table will always be full with stories and friendship, even if what we eat is a mere loaf of bread. Our sincerest hope is that you take time to sit, eat, and share together. Life's most powerful moments happen at the table.

Food brings people together in magical ways.

on cooking & eating fresh produce

With the changing of the seasons, our little patio garden reminded us of what to anticipate for the next meal. Meals began to be focused around fresh produce. This was not optional; it was a necessity integral to our lifestyle. In fact, there was no way to avoid fresh fruits and vegetables in the way we lived and worked.

Being able to grow seasonal fruits and vegetables as part of our daily lives all year round reminds us to eat mindfully and healthfully. Because of this access to produce in our garden and amazing finds in local markets, our meals have always been focused around fresh fruit and vegetables. Although we do eat meat, our recipes often highlight produce as the hero of the dish.

Way back in 1996, when Diane was a vegetarian and Todd worked in a vegetarian restaurant, our daily meals included vegetables in every possible preparation. Entrees and appetizers always showcased fresh produce. Between our long Southern California growing seasons and the numerous local farmer's markets, we were never without a satisfying vegetable.

Our budget was tight too, as we had very little between us while we were working to build our life together. Expensive items like meats and cheese were a luxury. And the times when Todd would splurge a little to buy a nice cut of meat were few and far between. What we could always afford to grow or buy were fruits and vegetables. Anything that was green, leafy, or fruity we were able to make into a meal. Our obsession with produce grew with abandon; without it our cooking would feel strange and incomplete.

Over the years, we concentrated our creative energy on making fresh seasonal produce distinctive and gratifying as possible on the plate. If we had a squash, we'd experiment with different preparations—using spices, fresh herbs, and soy sauce—to make it into a tasty and substantial meal. There is never a dull moment with fruit and vegetables. In your cooking, consider how to make use of the extra vegetables in your refrigerator. Even forgotten greens hiding in the vegetable drawer can transform into something wonderful.

Although we now both eat meat regularly, we'll often prepare a dinner and realize that it's completely vegetarian. Produce has become such a star in our dishes that we rarely miss meat when there is none in a meal. If you have veggie-haters in your family, however, try introducing them to a vegetable or fruit in a way that they've never had before. Summer squash, for example, is versatile both as a salad and as a main dish on the barbecue. Grilled zucchini burgers topped with homemade fresh-tomato sauce will be a surprise hit at your next cookout—don't tell anyone that there's no meat in them because they probably won't even notice! Consider these recipes as a clever way to sneak in vegetables without picky eaters knowing it. You'll be feeding your family healthy food without forcing it, and you can naturally build up to making fresh foods the heroes of your meals.

We're hoping this book will provide you with many options for when your CSA box is brimming with exciting produce. When the stalls at your farmer's market are at their peak, or when your garden graces you with a handful of tomatoes, you'll find a recipe in this cookbook to make a complete seasonal meal. On the other hand, if you live in a region with a short growing season and limited farmer's markets, but have access to grocery stores with quality year-round produce, there are recipes here that feature even common vegetables such as celery, radishes, eggplant, and potatoes. We don't always have access to seasonal foods, and making use of easy-to-find but healthy options is important.

We've tried our best to make sure that no matter where you live, what your income status is, and what your eating habits are, there is a fruit or vegetable waiting for you to fall in love with in this cookbook.

Have fun, and enjoy nature's bounty.



on home-growing

Our kitchen is the heart of our home but the garden is its soul. The garden has not only nourished us; it has also given us wisdom, sanctuary, and inspiration. We've learned more through failures in gardening than from anything else we've put our hands to.

We started off as a couple of kids who wanted to grow stuff we liked to eat; our gardens haven't been built with the experience and knowledge of master gardeners. The couple with whom we shared our first apartment graciously let us take over its tiny patio, and it wasn't long before we had it overflowing with potted plants—overflowing, at least, when we weren't exercising our brown thumbs and letting sections of the plants dry up and die.

Through trial and error we slowly started finding our way. Ironically, the more plants we began to grow, the less effort it was. Fresh herbs were continually being used in the kitchen, and the more we cooked with them, the less we would forget about taking care of the plants on the patio. We became more consistent in watering and fertilizing them. The herbs would get regularly pinched back, fostering fresh new growth. It wasn't long before we were trying to grow dwarf citrus trees on the tiny patio. Our first tree is still growing, now in the ground in our current garden, nearly seventeen years later.

Not everyone has a backyard in which to grow fruits and vegetables. Don't feel as if you need a plot of land to garden. Remember, we started our garden on a tiny apartment balcony with pots, which sparked our love of growing.

Small potted herbs are a wonderful kickoff for first time gardeners like we were. For those of you who live in tiny apartments, with just a sunny windowsill, consider growing a few of your favorite herbs in pots. Being able to harvest sprigs of fresh basil or thyme from your windowsill garden is truly gratifying.

The joy of growing isn't about who has the biggest garden. For us, the love of growing lies in the quality of plants and how happy a small sprig of fresh mint can make us feel.

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