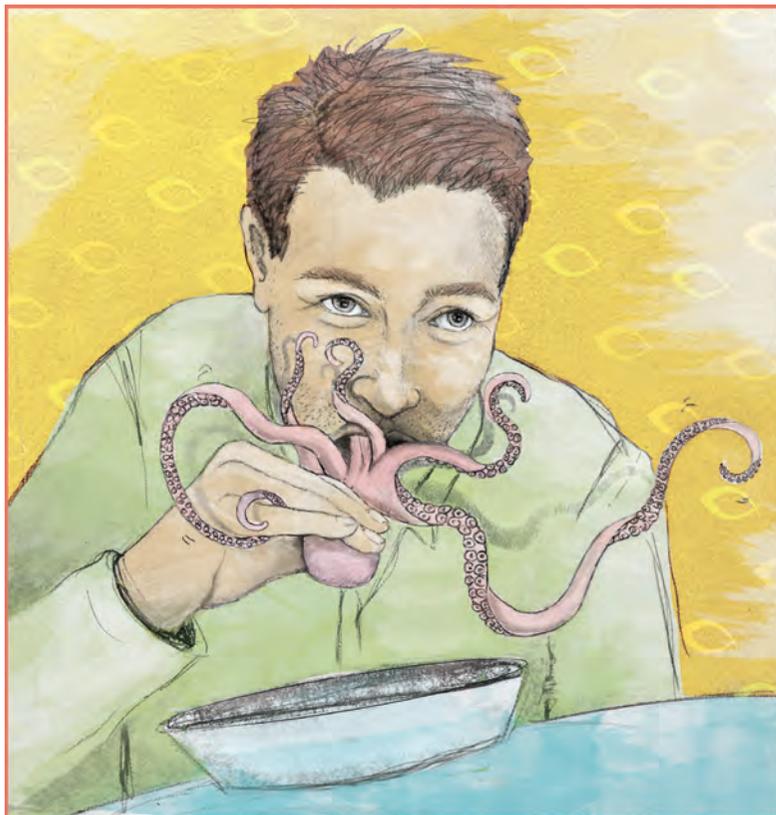


Dates & nuts

Hungry for love

Adventures in dining and dating

By Stacey Rowe



Anthony Bourdain once said that he believed good food and good eating is all about risk, and I'm inclined to believe the same concept applies to dating. Four snores and seven years ago, I was fresh off of a French Polynesian cruise and ready to take the plunge into the briny depths of the online dating world. With memories of *poisson cru* (Tahitian ceviche) on my mind, I penned a witty profile about my love of cooking, wine, and travel. I then accepted my first online date with a Fairport restaurant owner who shared a mutual love of food and drink.

Our agreement was that we would meet in the parking lot of a local bookstore, then drive two hours from Rochester to enjoy the "best lobster bisque ever" at a hidden Cazenovia gem, Seven Stone Steps. My friends thought I was nuts and that I would be found, julienned, in the trunk of his Subaru. I provided them with his name and that of his establishment in the event this brunette got brunosed. Since I'm still among the living, reflecting upon that date recently had

me wondering if other people would venture a distance with a total stranger for the sake of a good meal, or if they would be more likely to try something new to impress a potential love interest. My theory was somewhat accurate. While strict vegetarians, vegans, or those with food intolerances might not be swayed, I found a few folks who were willing to fess up.

Local stylist, blogger, and Monat market mentor Jennifer Sanzo recalls a dining experience at an upscale sushi restaurant in New York City. At nineteen, she was still living in New Jersey and had started dating someone several years her senior. New to sushi, she made a mental note of the bathroom location upon her arrival. Her suitor ordered a giant boat-shaped platter for the two of them. "It had all the raw things and the eggs of all the raw things," Sanzo says, laughing. "You know—I'm trying to look cool, but it's quite the sensory experience with stuff basically exploding in your mouth." Seated at the sushi bar, Sanzo's glance fell on a man eating live baby octopi. "He was wrapping the

tentacles around the chopsticks and swallowing them whole. And of course, the tentacles were popping out of his mouth!"

Sanzo admits she was nauseous over the sight. Feeling guilty about the expensive meal and knowing there was no way she could make it to the bathroom without walking by "Doctor Octopus," she continued to force feed herself and sip her cosmopolitan. "When you're young, you want to impress people and prove you're adventurous," she says.

However, when she met her now husband, Steve, the tables were turned. "We met at a wedding, and he said he had never tried an artichoke," she says, "so he took one of mine." Spitting out of artichoke into napkin followed. On another date with Sanzo, he tried mushrooms for the first time and actually got sick. While she has learned to love sushi, her husband still won't touch mushrooms. "He might have an allergy or an intolerance," she says, "so he won't be having them again anytime soon."

Mushrooms were also a hot topic on Jeff Bennett's* first date with his wife, Rachel. Now residing in Arizona, the former Rochester residents also enjoyed an Italian meal, where he revealed he had never sampled a mushroom. He has since grown to tolerate them and was devouring a mixed vegetable medley while we chatted over the phone, "I grew up in a single-parent, wasp-y household. We ate things like boiled hot dogs, bologna sandwiches, and Lipton noodles."

Luckily, Bennett was given another shot. One of their more daring feasts took place at an Indian buffet. Being new to Indian food, Bennett selected chicken tikka masala. While his future wife assured him it wasn't spicy, he quickly downed both his soda and water. "I think my nerves were starting to get to me because I was trying to impress her. But, I was chubbier at the time and started to sweat profusely," he says. Bennett explained that he needed air, stood outside in the frigid January breeze, and mopped his face with his napkin for ten minutes. Concerned he was having a heart attack, Rachel emerged from the restaurant to inquire what was happening. "I looked and felt like I ran a marathon," he laughs, "except all I did was eat some chicken!"

His courageous consumption paid off. The couple will be married ten years this October and now have a daughter. Bennett's palate has since evolved with his wife's encouragement, "I think anyone involved with another person adapts a bit for his or her partner." He then adds, "Well, except Rachel. She still refuses to try a delicious Wunderbar bologna sandwich on fresh Wonder Bread. Although, she'll eat a garbage plate when we head back to Rochester to visit. I wish you could see her right now. She's presently giving me a hand gesture that indicates I'm still number one!" (585)

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*Names have been changed