

CHAPTER 2

Cooking with Gia

TASTING THE SWEETNESS of Savasana, hearing that voice during the Forward Bend pose, and revisiting my childhood trauma were just the start of my holistic journey.

When I signed up for my first cooking class, I was simply doing something that I'd perceived would move me more into the middle class. I didn't realize that I would be challenged to bring together all my different flavors into a healthier and more self-caring version of myself.

I wanted to learn more about this holistic health lifestyle. Holistic Wellness regularly sent newsletters to my home. One day I received a personalized letter from Gia that seemed to speak directly to my need to rebuild my shaky foundation, and I immediately called her to schedule an in-home consultation. She came to my house in the way I imagined doctors made house calls in the 1950s. But she didn't look like a physician; she wore loose-fitting natural fabrics with a kind of comfortable, elegant, chic. She moved in her clothes as if in an easy flow with nature.

After our initial greetings, she examined my whole life and my surroundings. I had never received this kind of attention from anyone. She made me feel like everything in my life mattered, and that all the events in my life, good and bad, had contributed to who I was. I felt like I mattered. I must admit, it was a new feeling.

Gia pulled out her client notebook and glanced at the intake form. I fixed on her fingernails. They were short and manicured, but not polished. They were not like the nails I saw on the professional women in the corporate world, which were lengthened with gel, silk, or acrylic, and polished flawlessly. Gia's hands looked strong, natural, and yet beautiful. As she talked, I listened raptly.

"Saeeda, the basis of holistic health is to have our internal world be at peace with our external world." She went on to ask me about my sleep, my menstrual cycle, my significant other, family, and friends. Yes, Gia was like a doctor who made house calls. But she also went a little deeper, like a psychologist, a clergyman, and a friend. Nothing was off limits.

She explained that outside things affect how we express peace and harmony, or dis-ease and dis-harmony. Holistic health looks at the whole picture, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—not to mention financially. She talked about being at peace with it all.

After Gia took inventory regarding how I viewed my life, we visited my kitchen. Opening up the cupboard door revealed two boxes of Cracklin' Oat Bran and some tomato sauce (the other four boxes and extra jars of these items were in the freezer, since I stockpiled two-for-one coupons just like my mother.) I had bowtie pasta noodles, herbal teas, orange juice, milk, bread, ketchup, and very few fresh fruits and vegetables—one onion, several stalks of celery, a carrot, and a few apples. I also had the remains of my bulk cooking ingredients from the class—brown rice, lentils, steel cut oats, barley, and shiitake mushrooms.

I handed the Cracklin' Oat Bran box to Gia and she showed me how the cereal contained multiple forms of sugar products, all of them refined. We examined most of the food items in my cabinets, refrigerator, and freezer. I was amazed that so many items were loaded with sugar: my dry cereal, tomato sauce, ketchup, and even my bread. Not only did sugar appear in everything, it was listed under different aliases such as cane sugar, brown sugar, corn syrup, sucrose, maltodextrose, and high fructose corn syrup.

Gia departed, leaving me with lots of information and recipes to

make. I thought long and hard about what she had suggested. I could slowly phase out these old food items or give them all away and start fresh with better quality foods. She encouraged me to cook more and share meals with others. I was committed to following her instructions, even if I didn't like to cook that much. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was about to embark upon was a radical detox, long before the word was fashionable: no processed food, no sugar, and only whole-food meals.

I learned later that my regular consumption of refined sugar (both the known and unknown) affected my pancreas, my insulin levels, and my liver, which stored excess sugar as fat. Sugar made me feel tired and grumpy, especially during my premenstrual time. But mostly I felt spaced out and numb.

When I stopped consuming sugar, I experienced a chemical withdrawal similar to my Uncle Paul's heroin withdrawal. I became depressed, yet I was no longer fuzzy. I was less irritable and fatigued. I was in the process of sobering up. Even though it was challenging, I knew it was the right thing for my body and my mind.

The detox reminded me of the time when I went through the entire fourth grade without knowing something was wrong with my eyesight. By fifth grade, I'd had my eyes tested and, lo and behold, I needed glasses! With glasses, I could see much better. I didn't like everything I saw at school or in my neighborhood or at home, but at least everything was clearer. The three-day detox had a similar effect. I didn't like what I saw, but the picture was clear.

At Gia's advising, I made a broth called Sweet Veggie Drink. It nourishes the pancreas and helps eliminate processed sugar cravings. I wanted to add a kind of sweetness to my body, not in a quick or processed way, but rather in a way that lingered. This was how I was starting to feel about life. Since I was no longer numbed by the wrong kind of sweetness, I sensed that I wanted to taste a richer and fuller life. I didn't want instant gratification anymore. I wanted a delicious life, where my inside environment was at peace with my outside environment.

So I took inventory of my life, from what was in my cupboards to

what was in my heart, and I found flavors that were sour, pungent, and bitter.

I stood in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for the next day's soup while my dinner for the night was heating up.

Dinners at my house felt more elaborate than I had been used to. This was ironic since I didn't really like cooking that much, but I wanted the effects of good eating and couldn't get this quality in restaurants. During the week, I used at least fifteen different kinds of vegetables, three to four different kinds of whole grains, two to three different kinds of beans, fruits, and seeds. I am allergic to most nuts and fish; otherwise, I would have used them, too.

I often started dinner with a raw veggie salad, and then moved on to a soup. The main entrée was a combination of whole grains, beans, tofu or tempeh, and steamed greens like collards, kale, or chard. Desserts were wholesome too: gourmet baked apples, pear tart, or carob cake with a raspberry jam sauce.

Compared to what I used to eat, dinners were packed with lots of nutrients and lower in calories, even though I was eating more in terms of quantity and variety. After a meal, I often felt lighter, calmer, and clearer—like I was ready to take flight somewhere.

One day, months after my public bus meltdown, I was enjoying my dinner, reading my *Yoga Journal* magazine, and relaxing into the evening while a new soup was cooking. When the soup was done, I started to clean up the kitchen. Without warning, another memory surfaced.

I'm twelve and babysitting a neighborhood girl named Kelly. She is seven and sleeping over at my house. We are eating popcorn and watching TV movies. She and I lie across the living room sofa bed, laughing and joking around. I'm proud of myself, earning my own money and doing a good job at it. Money—one less thing I have to ask my parents for.

Kelly and I become sleepy and decide to go to bed. I tuck her in first and then I slip under the covers, too. We talk softly for a while and start to doze off. Suddenly, a thunderous rumble shakes the ceiling. My dad is beating my mom up, again. I feel Kelly wince, and I start to sweat, not knowing what damage would appear: broken lamps, dislodged furniture, or bruises and broken spirits.

Unable to do anything, my babysitting confidence crumbles. I think, “I’m the sitter. I’m supposed to protect her from danger. I studied for two summers to get my childcare certificates. I passed all the drills. I’ve proven that I’m responsible, and now, in my care, I expose her to violence.”

We lay there frozen and, just like a bad thunderstorm, the rumbling, screaming and crying magically stops. I feel insecure. I shake with anger. I’m furious at my parents, particularly my dad.

I’m embarrassed, ashamed, and tired, so tired. This happens all too often and I don’t understand why my parents fight. Why can’t they just grow up and act like adults?

I was totally blindsided by yet another memory resurfacing. I had tried so hard to move on. I believed my mom and mentors who said that once I had earned my college degree, got a “good” job, and started making more money, I would only go forward and never look back. I foolishly believed there was a pot of gold waiting for me at the end of the rainbow.

Instead, I found myself in the kitchen, feeling suppressed anger surfacing. It literally made my skin itch. I was itching to talk with my mom about my new insight into experiencing what she might have been feeling all these years and how she had seen her way through. I needed to call my mom and tell her what was happening to me. Surely *she* would understand, having been the victim. Besides, I wasn’t necessarily angry with her and I felt that having a frank conversation would bring us closer to each other. Perhaps we could become allies because now, as an adult, I understood so much better the brutality my mother lived through. And now I could help her see how the past was starting to affect me, too.

I didn’t know this at the time, but my flashbacks—being right back in a situation without warning all over again, feeling every sensation, hearing every sound, remembering every odor—were signs of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder.

I exhaled and dialed the number, thinking, “Whew, I don’t have to hold on to this anymore. I don’t have to keep these shameful secrets.” Surely my mom would guide me through it with her healing words of wisdom.

She picked up on the third ring.

“Ma, I called to talk to you about a few things going on with me. I started to remember some of the fights that happened in our family.”

“Why are you tryin’ to drive a wedge between us?” I looked at the phone, confused.

“Ma, I’m only bringing this up because I thought it would bring us closer together.”

“Why can’t we just continue with the way things are? Girl, leave well enough alone.”

“I can’t just continue.” I tell her. “I feel too much pain and anger. I want to heal from all the fighting.”

“Nothing is wrong with us. You’re the one that needs help.”

“Fine. Let’s go to therapy together.”

“I’m not goin’. *You* need the help.”

We exchanged a few closing remarks and then hung up. I looked at the phone with steely eyes and my heart hardened. I felt unseen, and then I felt an invisible protective shield go up around me, like Wonder Woman getting into her invisible jet. Like a powerless kid, I told myself, I need superpowers to protect myself from rejection and vulnerability.

The soup had cooled; now just slightly warm, it was ready to go into the fridge. I opened the refrigerator door, and the cool air refreshed me and the blink of the light snapped me back into my newer self. It was clear. I wasn’t going to pretend or hide from my past anymore. This new me didn’t want to numb myself again, just so I could pretend that my old life didn’t happen while trying to live in this new one.

Besides, I had been there all those years for my mother, playing the role of the one-dimensional “good” girl. I knew that if I continued to play this role for her I would be rejecting dimensions of myself. My new holistic health lifestyle demanded that I become more of who I really am: not just good, but *authentic*.

In my new way of being, I wanted my mom to acknowledge my newfound ways, ways that were putting me on the path to healing my past and creating my future wellness. As corny as it sounds, eating a

whole-foods, plant-based diet in a holistic health fashion made me feel more whole. It gave me fortitude to confront my past and the people in it. I didn't really know how or why it was working, but it was. So I set out to discover more, a life beyond just aspiring to be middle class. Instead, I looked toward a way of living that asked me to trust myself and to trust life.



There was only one place where I could fully trust life. It was in the last twenty minutes of a ninety-minute Hatha yoga class, when we practiced the relaxation pose lying on our backs. In Savasana, I didn't have to be anything to anyone. I just was.

At the same time, I was both everything and nothing at all. I expanded outside of myself while simultaneously disappearing altogether. I was free.

As I lay in Savasana each week, I felt like I was going through an intense purification process. My mind and body were the badly stained garments. Savasana was the pre-soak. My clean eating diet was a powerful eco-friendly detergent. My active Hatha yoga poses were a state-of-the-art washing machine. Each of these worked in partnership to lift the past, which had left long-lasting stains on my soul. The garments felt too valuable to throw away, yet too damaged to be worn in public. But perhaps with the right care and effort, these articles of clothing could be fully functional again. Eating wholesome foods during the week felt purifying to my internal organs. For instance, eating whole grains daily naturally cleansed my colon, as if the fibers were literally getting rid of old shit. Then on Sundays, yoga started the cycle again, lifting a few encrusted stains, physically and emotionally.

Within the first fifteen minutes, I always could feel the yoga class working. My clenched jaws would relax and my eyebrows would unfurrow. Savasana centered my mind. The single-leg raises lengthened my muscles and my perspective. The knee-to-chest poses and gentle spinal twists stretched my hamstrings and back, opened my

hips, and massaged my small and large intestines, stomach, pancreas, liver, and spleen.

I was being stretched, pulled, twisted, and compressed from the inside out. These movements were mining into crevices of my body-mind complex that were otherwise hard to reach. My daily troubles evaporated, and life's wrinkles straightened themselves out.

This happened every week. I entered class drenched from life, past and present. I left class feeling less stained, less damaged. Savasana was a space I could trust—a place where the truth of who I was could live without shame.

Soon I started to see the subtle ways that my new lifestyle affected each day. Having had such powerful experiences with whole-foods nutrition and Hatha yoga so far, I was hungry for more healing. So I signed up for more study. It was the fall of 1990. I had been practicing yoga for eight months and was soaking up the basic teachings of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and macrobiotic philosophy in Gia's eight-week-course "Creating Holistic Well-Being."

I felt the evening breeze as I walked from my house to the first class meeting along Squirrel Hill's tree-lined streets and gazed at the big houses. The sun was setting. The leaves were turning yellow, orange, rust, and brown. My gait lengthened with excitement; I was about to learn something new, something important. I felt like my life was just about to begin anew.

I got to class to find eight chairs set up in a semicircle with hand-outs on them. Sitting in this room, listening to the words of the instructor and chatting with my new classmates, all white and older than me, I began to learn things that confirmed that my life would be different from the lives of my friends and siblings. Gia would say, "Everything in the universe is a vibration," and I would lean in closer and think, *I have always believed that*. It felt thrilling to hear someone articulate and validate my intuition.

Everything in the universe is constantly changing. One of the main tenets of macrobiotics is that when you understand the changing conditions that govern our lives, you are in a better position to achieve harmony in your body and mind. These ideas seemed simple.

Don't go against nature. Eat in harmony with nature. Our body and environment always seek to be in balance. In my mind, I heard myself say, *Everything you eat has the potential to nourish every single cell in your body.* That whispered idea held power over me.

One of the most powerful concepts I learned in this course was that of yin and yang, the idea of expansive and contractive energies. Yin is considered to be expansive energy associated with woman, the moon, softness, and passivity; and yang is its opposite, a contractive energy associated with man, the sun, hardness, and activity. They are opposites, but they need each other to exist.

As Gia continued going through the course material, I began thinking about where yin and yang appeared in my family life. We kids—Rahima, Samir, myself, and Omar—grew up with one big, contractive yang headache. My parents' relationship made us all feel uptight, tense, and defensive. We cringed each time my dad walked through the door. We recoiled as their voices increased in volume. Over the years, I watched our parents' random acts of violence wind the four of us up so tight that we were always looking for release from the pain. Applying this yin/yang principle, I understood my family and myself better. (See my charts on page 252.)

We were all reacting to the yang environment we were immersed in. Right then, I knew that one way to get ourselves back to center was to find and nurture the yin element in our lives: everything that was deeply nourishing and sustaining. And food was a starting point.

The principles helped me put my past experiences into a digestible context. I could look at the events more objectively and without shame. I could see that my siblings and I were only reacting adaptively to our trauma. I learned that most drugs and alcohol are yin-based energy. Logically and energetically speaking, drugs and alcohol are understandable choices when you are scared or anxious or want to be pulled out of a tight situation. Drugs, alcohol, and sugar will help you feel centered for a little while, but then they pull you to the other side, where you feel spaced out, or even numb.

I, on the other hand, was learning to choose healthy foods that increased yin, instead of choosing drugs. Practicing yoga and eating

whole foods was boosting my much-needed yin energy. My new lifestyle was affecting me just like my siblings' drug and alcohol experience affected them, except my approach was healthier than smoking crack and drinking 40-ouncers. I started to see how changing my diet could also move me to a more harmonizing center, especially because I was not burying my past. Instead, I was integrating it. I was eating foods mostly made up from leafy greens, root vegetables, and whole grains, which balanced yin and yang energies in my body, pulling me away from my tight experiences, but not too far up or out.



About ten months into following this new lifestyle, I found myself mildly worried about not fitting in with my friends, who socialized in clubs and bars. We always had a good time when we went out. I still wanted to be part of that group, but I didn't want to drink. One day my friend Sage picked me up from my house to go to a local bar, Chiefs, a watering hole for recent college graduates and the neighborhood blue-collar workers. We parked the car, went inside, and found a couple of stools. I put money in the jukebox and played the Thompson Twins' "Into the Gap," Terence Trent D'Arby's "Sign Your Name," and Marvin Gaye's "I Want You." I was in a groove. For the next few hours, we laughed, joked, and debated with other customers. Later, Sage told me a friend of his had said, "Oh, my God, that girl you're with is so drunk. She can barely stay on the stool."

"Who? Her?" Sage pointed toward me.

"Yeah, she's tore up."

"Hmmm." Sage chuckled, "She doesn't drink. She's been having water and lemon all night."

It validated my intuition about myself that I could be more fun without alcohol. I could choose a healthy lifestyle and still be in bars, listen to good music, meet friends, and drink water with lemon served in a martini glass. This revelation was good news to me because I wanted to keep some of my old social ways of unwinding. I worked hard at my corporate job, which was another very yang

experience that I wanted to balance with a healthier yin. I didn't want to use drugs or alcohol, like some of my relatives.

By the end of my eight-week course, I had learned that holistic health encourages each person to work within her environment as best she can. I wanted this system to be easy, but it wasn't. It was simple to understand, but not easy to practice. I was living in a world where there was a pill for anything that ailed. I was in a middle-class community where self-help meant: "Just live this way and you will be rich." Taoism and the macrobiotic holistic health model said: "There is no right or wrong, just an opportunity for you to improve upon your current situation."



I started taking more and more classes at Holistic Wellness, getting Shiatsu massages regularly, and having private one-on-one sessions. I felt like Gia was taking me under her wing, especially when I assisted with other classes or helped out at events. I took advantage of this time to nourish my mind, body, and soul.

Gia introduced me to her macrobiotic and spiritual teachers and wide circle of friends. On Gia's recommendation, I reached out to another student of hers who was also just beginning her holistic health journey. Her name was Red. Gia emphasized that forming a community or having a friend during this lifestyle change can help an individual achieve his/her personal goals, and Gia thought that Red and I should cook and share meals with one another. So one evening, I invited both Red and a friend from college, Buddy, over for dinner.

I was nervous about including Buddy because when I first told him that I was cooking and eating macrobiotically, he said, "Urrrgghh.... Why are you eating this way? You'll never be able to go out to restaurants. You'll be in the kitchen all the time. Why go through all that? You can afford to eat out."

Buddy's comments meant a lot because he was my best friend.

I'd met Buddy in college at Temple University through a game

I made up. My dorm was on the way to the dining hall, so in the morning when random students would pass by my window, I would yell out from the second floor, “Hey! You!” Someone would inevitably look up, and I’d continue, “If you were on a game show and had to guess the correct temperature for \$10,000, how many degrees would you say it is right now?” I did this silly thing almost every day as a way to find out what kind of coat I should wear, if any at all. Buddy was one of those students who engaged me a few times. Then one day, I was in the dining hall eating with members of the men’s tennis team and rowing club when Buddy sat down next to me and said, “Hey, you’re the girl from the window asking about the weather.”

“Yep, that’s me.”

The college year passed along and Buddy and I found ourselves becoming friends, talking and exchanging ideas. Mostly, he really listened to me. He listened to me so much that I thought, *This guy is truly a friend, my best friend*. I don’t necessarily think that I was his best friend, but he was mine. So, his comments about my new eating habits confirmed a fear I had: this lifestyle would separate me from others. I wondered if someday I would need to make a choice.

The evening meal started with Mushroom Barley Soup. I watched carefully as their spoons reached their mouths. “Mmmm. Good.” Buddy said. And when they both raved about it, I felt perhaps this kind of cooking could actually appeal to my friends, instead of alienating them. Many other shared meals after that confirmed my suspicions that this kind of eating could be a way of connecting.

One such meal took place on a business trip when I sat down for lunch with a group of colleagues at the Philadelphia hotel where we were staying. The maître d’ showed us to our seats at a typical round banquet table with a plastic flower centerpiece and burgundy cloth napkins. Looking at the menu, I saw beef dishes, pork entrées, and an ocean of seafood plates. There weren’t any whole grain dishes, and very little in the way of vegetables, except salad made with iceberg lettuce, steamed broccoli, and a baked potato. I thoroughly scanned the menu and couldn’t find a suitable entrée.

I sat up straight in my blue corporate dress suit, teeth clenched,

tapping my French-manicured nails on the table. My mind was chanting, *What to eat? What to eat?*

Deciding what to eat should not be a big deal. But for me, at this time in my life, it was huge. The reason I was sitting at that table in the first place was because of an organization called INROADS. The organization's mission was to prepare talented college-bound "minority youth" for positions of leadership in corporate America and in the community. I had never belonged to an organization that was really invested in my worth and cared about my success. INROADS intern program had helped me get my job at the bank. It was important that I didn't embarrass them or myself.

My INROADS training had taught me ways to navigate a sticky work situation, but this one was a bit out of my element. How could I have predicted that I would one day be eating a whole-foods, plant-based diet, and that people might react strangely to it? What to do? I didn't want to seem weird or difficult. I had also learned to not make too many waves, especially on a business trip.

For young corporate youth of color, INROADS was like Motown. Motown taught its young black musicians and singers how to walk, talk, and sit properly in white America. INROADS did the same for youth of color in the business world. This organization taught us to blend in with corporate culture as much as possible, down to what fork to use when. I was taught to be a positive example, a productive, professional African American career woman. I was given insights on how to tiptoe my way up the corporate ladder without too much fanfare and unfavorable attention, so that upward mobility could happen for me and other talented minority youth.

INROADS put us through a rigorous training course covering all professional situations from how to run a corporate meeting to which eating utensil to use when dining out. INROADS wanted to make sure that the thirty students who had been selected from the 150 black students who had interviewed were prepared for this new corporate world. But it didn't cover how to make holistic lifestyle food choices when a menu had none.

My face began to feel hot, for fear that I might order the wrong way.

The waiter came to me, and I cleared my throat and scratched out the question, “Sir, I know this is not on the menu, but is it possible to order pasta with sautéed mixed vegetables in olive oil and crushed garlic, with a wedge of lemon on the side?”

He sighed. “Ummm, I’ll go ask the chef.” I was sure that I had annoyed him, but in a few minutes, he returned and said, “No problem.” He turned next to my colleague. “And you, ma’am?”

I heard a voice come from the other side of the table. “What she ordered sounds good.” My eyes widened. “I’ll have that, too.” The waiter wrote it down.

“Sir,” another one of my coworkers called out, “Can I change my order to that veggie pasta dish?”

“Me, too,” someone else said.

I was amazed at what had just happened. Five out of the six of us ordered the same customized, healthy dish. When the waiter brought out our covered dishes of bowtie pasta, we did not know what to expect. He lifted the silver cover and visible steam carried the pungent aroma of garlic. “Ooooh,” a few of us said. The sight of fresh julienne carrots, round yellow squash, and bright-green broccoli was a rainbow of color. Some sprinkled freshly grated Parmesan cheese on top or a squeeze of juice from the wedge of lemon. My mouth watered.

That day proved to me that a plant-based diet didn’t have to be strange in the corporate world. Not only that, but others had followed my lead. I was the minority, in more ways than one, on a business trip with all whites. But this time my being different did not isolate me. Instead, it gave everyone a new option to try.

However, I was soon to learn the hard way that this sign of acceptance would not prove to be the norm.