

MASHED AVOCADO ON A RICE CAKE (BASIC RECIPE WITH A VARIATION)

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This recipe requires but a trio of ingredients. But don't be deceived by that! The dish offers an abundance of weighty matters to chew on.

Ingredients:

1/4 cup ripe avocado, mashed
Salt to taste
1 rice cake
Serves 1

Preparation:

1. Select a ripe avocado.

Most people judge the ripeness of an avocado by the color of the skin (really, it's more of a leathery hide or shell), which isn't a reliable indicator of maturity, since softening can occur independent of a change in color. Even so, the rule of thumb is that if the hide is a bolder green than the avocado-colored kitchen appliances of the 1970s, the flesh will be hard, rather tasteless, and unspreadable. If the hide is black, it's slop inside. But if it's a dark green-purple, the flesh should be flavorful in that mild, avocado way and spreadable as butter: perfect.

A more reliable test for ripeness is to hold the avocado in your cupped palm like a blessing. Gently squeeze the fruit with your entire hand (if you press it with just your fingers, you might bruise it). If the avocado is immature, it will push back with the force of a defiant teenager. If it yields too easily, it's overripe, past its prime, a real pushover. But if you feel a pleasing balance in the avocado between acquiescence and resistance, it's perfectly ripe.

Another reliable test for ripeness is to flick the nub of a stem with your finger. If the stem holds firm, the fruit is immature. If

it comes out at the slightest provocation and you see brown in the opening, the fruit is overripe. But if the stem detaches with but a little coaxing and you see yellow-green in the wound, the fruit is consummate.

Some say that an overripe avocado rattles, since the pit has pulled away from the flesh. But no matter how many black, squishy avocados I've shaken at the grocery store, I've yet to hear one talk back to me.

2. Wash the avocado.

If you've wisely chosen an organic avocado, rinse it with cool water. But if you've chosen a cheaper, less healthful and environmentally sensitive nonorganic avocado, soak it in three-parts water and one-part vinegar for at least ten minutes. Rinse well.

Note: Always select the highest-quality ingredients for the recipes in this first of its kind cookbook for those who are visited by what Woody Allen calls "the bluebird of anxiety."

3. Halve the avocado.

Cut through the hide and flesh lengthwise. (Some call it the "flesh"; others, the "meat." Vegans and vegetarians should not be dissuaded from the avocado's many gifts by these objectionable terms.) Turn the two hemispheres in opposite directions until they separate. Since the pit is slimy and hard to grasp, loosen and remove it with a spoon. Discard the stone, and place the half of the fruit that you won't be using for this preparation of Mashed Avocado on a Rice Cake (MARC) face down on a saucer and refrigerate.

4. Scoop the flesh with a spoon into a bowl and mash it with a fork. Fill a one-fourth cup measure with the pulp and level it with a butter knife so that it contains precisely 5.25 grams of fat.

I long believed — and to some extent still do — that the fewer grams of fat, the fewer calories, the less flesh, the less me the better, so my diet contained almost no fat. However, the dietary thinking of the moment is that some fats are good for you and that carbohydrates are the real villains. Now, I take one serving of MARC per day, not as an hors d'oeuvres, snack, or meal but as a supplement and preventative medicine, along with my fish oil capsules (okay, I'm not a true vegetarian), a multiple vitamin, vitamin E, vitamin D, calcium, and when I'm feeling anemic, iron.

It was anxiety provoking to start eating fat after having believed for so long that it was a dietary and moral evil, something to abstain from even though food didn't taste as good without it. (For instance, the cakes I used to make with egg whites instead of whole eggs and applesauce instead of oil were too angelic, too celestial, too ethereal even for my palate.) While avocados do have a high fat content, two-thirds of that comes in the form of monounsaturated fat, specifically, oleic acid, which may lower bad LDL cholesterol and increase good HDL cholesterol. But I'm not as worried about my heart as my brain.

One of the few things that scares me more than gaining weight (though not as much as losing a loved one) is losing my mind. So, it was with consternation that I read the results of a study published in 2015 about the links between one's Body Mass Index (BMI) and dementia. Researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Oxon Epidemiology analyzed the medical records of 1,958,191 people living in Great Britain between the ages of 45 and 66, with a mean average age of 55 at the start of the study, and followed them for an average of nine years, though for some as long as 20. What the researchers' analysis of the data revealed was that people with a BMI of less than 20, were at a 34 percent greater risk for developing dementia as they aged than were those of normal weight, which the study authors defined as a BMI of 20 to 24.9. (The Center for Disease Control, however, considers a normal BMI to be 18.5 to 24.9. Mine ranges between 17.7 and 18.5; this morning, it was 18.3.) Those who were overweight (a BMI of 25 to 29.9) had an 18% reduction in their risk of developing dementia, while the severely obese (a BMI over 40) had a 29% reduction over those with a normal BMI. That's a mind-blowing difference in the rate of occurrence of dementia between those subjects who were underweight or on the low side of normal and the very obese. What the researchers don't yet know is if fat (dietary? bodily?) protects one from dementia or if another factor causes the higher rates of dementia among the underweight, like deficits of vitamins D and E. Nor does the study say which fats each BMI group was and wasn't eating, which makes its practical value almost nil or deleterious, even, given the negative effects of worry on one's health. However, in a study published in 2014, two Rush University researchers found support for their hypothesis that high saturated or trans fatty acids increase the risk of dementia while high polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fatty

acids decrease the risk.

I've noticed slippages and lacuna. Sometimes I can't recall the subject of a news segment that I've heard in the past several minutes (I admit that because I have NPR, BBC, and Pacifica Radio on a couple of hours a day while I'm working in the kitchen, often the news is more background noise than something I pay attention to), or I forget what someone told me just minutes earlier (because I have to keep track of all of those details about promoting my cookbook, my daughter's schedule, my son's schedule, my schedule, my students' needs, and my seemingly endless musings about what I wish that I'd done differently during my mother's brief and fatal illness, the contentious settling of her estate, and my dear friend's well-being, now that her metastasized cancer is no longer in remission, I probably didn't *listen* when the information was delivered). I make light of the situation. "You just told me that, didn't you?" I'll ask as I shake my head in kind of a goofy, dizzy manner. Then I remind the one to whom I'm speaking that I'm the stereotypical absentminded professor. Yet I don't miss appointments with my students. I don't lose my car or car keys. I don't forget any of the steps or explanations for this recipe for MARC or any of the others in my cookbook for those who are derailed by a knock on the door.

The misreadings have also become more frequent. Some are delightful — like reading the book title *Guide to Sight Singing* as *Guide to Night Singing*. But others are unsettling. Recently while waiting at a stoplight, I glanced at a billboard that I read as saying, "Take time to be dead today." I looked again. What it really said was, "Take time to be a dad today." But it was the first, the wrong reading that was so provocative. All the way home, I imagined myself dead. Surely my son and daughter would manage the liquidation and dispersal of my estate with more wisdom and civility than my siblings and I are displaying in the settling of our mother's estate. Surely I would regret not having been more cautious about my diet, my exposure to the sun, and my use of mood-altering substances when I was young. Perhaps, I would regret not pursuing experience with more gusto and abandon, even though that can look and feel a lot like recklessness.

As I pass over the threshold between wakefulness and sleep at the beginning of my brief, daily siesta, I'm enthralled and unsettled by the deluge of Salvador Dalian images. Because most are gone before I can grab them, squirting out of my hands like a slimy avocado

pit, I can't re-create the experience here, though recently, I've "seen" a trampoline embedded in a gorilla's hairy, gray palm; the bright green, foam keys of a manual typewriter; my mother's cookie jar wearing red pants while lying toppled over in the grass; sliced beets melting into yellow shutters. When I was younger and my connections were tauter, the passage between wakefulness and sleep was seamless: one moment awake, the next, asleep. I preferred that quick, smooth slide over the threshold to this slow swing through the trippier segments of Disney's *Fantasia*.

While working a crossword puzzle in the newspaper yesterday, I was stumped by a clue asking the name of a tycoon aviator. I'd filled enough squares that I could see that the first name was Howard and the last name started with an *H*. Howard Hunt . . . two empty squares remained. Howard Hunter. This name fit, but it didn't sound right. Later, it came to me — "Hughes. Howard Hughes." The mere mention of his name ushered in more details than I knew that I knew: moviemaker; dashing inamorato to Ava Gardner, Bette Davis, Rita Hayworth, Katharine Hepburn, and others in spite of his fear of women; a frightened eccentric or crazy man sitting naked in his dark screening room for months on end, watching movies, eating chicken and chocolate bars, drinking milk, and then peeing into the empty container; the author of a "procedures manual" that instructed his employees on how to open a can of peas or his medicine cabinet without contaminating them; the inventor of a rake-like utensil that he used to sort his peas by size.

Memory works sort of like the domino effect: you only have to flick the first tile in the series to start the tumbling, associative process of the entire set of bones. With age, however, I find it harder to locate the first tile in the series. But once I do, I'm rolling — enough so that sometimes, I feel like my pit has separated from my flesh, and I'm rattling on about what matters to no one but me.

But now I have the antidote for the faulty connections and the disruptions in my attention. No more Eggs Florentine or Dairy Queen Royal Oreo Blizzards or lasagna sloppy with three kinds of cheese or movie theater popcorn or pie crust made with Crisco or mounds of mashed potatoes rising above a pool of pan gravy! Now more omega-3 fatty acids! More antioxidants! More vitamin E! More polyunsaturated fats! More monounsaturated fats! But wait! For years, I didn't eat *any* of those fats — the bad or the good. In fact, it wasn't so long ago that I scraped the avocado off my salad at a

vegetarian, farm-to-table Mexican restaurant. “Too much fat,” I explained, as I slid the unctuous crescents onto the plate of my skeletal lunch companion who ate several avocados each day in her attempt to slow her weight loss from chemotherapy. In response to the studies about the links between fat and dementia and my awareness of my slippages and lacuna, I now take daily doses of fish oil, olive oil, vitamins D and E, almond and peanut butters, flax and chia seeds, and avocado. If you’re thinking of making such a change in your diet, be comforted by this: it’s easier to add something you don’t want than to let go of something you love.

5. Spread the mashed avocado on a rice cake. Salt to taste.

While any type or brand of fine-grained salt will suffice, the type or brand of rice cake you choose is more consequential, since a Quaker Oats, nonorganic rice cake contains 35 calories, while a Clearly Organic rice cake contains 40. I prefer the lower-calorie option because it has, well, fewer calories. But another advantage is that it has fewer and smaller craters and so, a more even and spreadable surface. Yet the bumpier more caloric organic cake lacks the arsenic, pesticides, and genetic engineering found in its nonorganic counterpart. One solution is to alternate between the lower-calorie cake one day and the cleaner cake the next. (If you’re prone to forgetting, note the brand of the day on your calendar.) But remember, the avocado is the star of this show, and the rice cake is but the delivery device for the polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids, vitamins B5, B6, C, E, and K, folate potassium, oleic acid, lutein, zeaxanthin, and glutathione contained in a single serving of MARC.

The type of thinking I exhibited in the preceding paragraph is an example of what Gyorgy Scrinis calls “nutritionism,” the dominant ideology or paradigm regarding food in this time and place. In *Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice*, Scrinis explains that this ideology incorporates a number of forms of reductionism, which I’ve boiled down to this: we analyze and evaluate the quality of foods and their relationship to bodily health primarily by focusing on the nutrient composition rather than experiencing food in terms of what Scrinis calls “its embedded sensual, cultural, or ecological qualities.” He finds this regrettable.

So, too, does Michael Pollan, the food writer who popularized Scrinis’s ideas. Pollan says that it was in the 1980s that food began

disappearing from our grocery store shelves to be “gradually replaced by ‘nutrients.’” Consequently, most Millennials and quite a few Gen-Xers may have never eaten food, and those of my generation, the Baby Boomers, have lived with nutritionism long enough that it’s hard (though not impossible) to remember when food was food. I’ve noted this shift in thinking in myself. Back in the ‘90s, I’d say to my children, “Eat your broccoli, it’s good for you.” But now, it would come more naturally to tell the grandchildren that I don’t yet have, “Load up on that broccoli, since the sulphoraphane in it stimulates natural detoxifying enzymes, which reduce your risk of breast, bladder, and prostate cancer, while lowering your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.”

I have to reach pretty far into the past to pull up a memory of a time in which I saw food not as chemical constituents with clear and measurable effects on my health, but through the broader context. Even so, I remember with clarity my mother’s cherry pie. As a child and young adult, it didn’t matter a whit to me that it was made with lots of white sugar. Then, I didn’t know the dangers lurking in Red 40, enriched, bleached wheat flour “improved” with potassium bromate, and Crisco, as the latter was made prior to 2007, the year when the J. M. Smucker Company replaced some of the trans fats in Crisco with the marginally healthier soybean oil, fully hydrogenated palm oil, palm oil, and mono- and diglycerides. I especially loved a piece of that pie for breakfast, when it was cold and firm from having been refrigerated overnight, such a different experience than the warm, runny, also delicious pie that Mom served for supper the day before. But whether warm or cold, I savored the sweet tartness, the bottom crust, more dense than flaky, the sugary lattice top, the fluting achieved by the press of my dear mother’s forefinger and thumb, the pleasure she took in making and feeding us pie. Oh, what I’d give now for a piece of that cold cherry pie! Other memories pour in: Dad’s “Joe’s Special,” eggs, milk, and crushed saltines fried in bacon grease and served between two pieces of industrial white bread, one spread with margarine (“o-lee,” we called it), the other with catsup, and eaten while we listened to Paul Harvey tell the “rest of the story”; Great-aunt Pertsie’s homemade mashed potatoes and butter made in the kitchen in the old farmhouse where she’d grown up near the Des Moines River (I was raised in town in an instant-potatoes-and-margarine home); greasy sausage take-out pizza eaten in a station wagon at the drive-in movie theater with my

parents and brothers; creamed chipped beef on biscuits and iced spice cake snarfed in the middle school cafeteria with my friends; the syrup-soaked chocolate-chip Bisquick pancakes that I made for my children when they were young; my former sister-in-law's hearty, peppery Guyanese cook-up rice and the fun our family had divvying up the coveted "bun-bun" — the burnt chunks on the bottom of the pot. How much easier it is to determine the milligrams of cholesterol in a food or its glycemic load or its contribution to billowy butts or the inflammation of one's internal organs than it is to measure the effect of a meal on one's sense of pleasure, security, identity, and belonging.

6. Contemplate what you're about to eat and why.

One-fourth of a cup of mashed avocado contains 92 calories. That means that one serving of MARC contains 127 or 132 calories, depending on which brand of rice cake you use. To add this to your once no-fat diet means that you have to eliminate something else if you want to break even and not gain weight or attract to your yard pretty, little bluebirds who fly headfirst into your windows with nerve-jangling, soul-sickening thumps. If you only eat one-half of your daily vegan protein and fiber bar (85 calories; 10 grams of protein; 9.5 grams of dietary fiber; no dairy, no lactose, no added sugars, no GMOs, no soy, no gluten, no guilt), you'll still have a 42-calorie surplus after eating a serving of mashed avocado on a Quaker Oats cake ($127 - 85 = 42$). If you eat the mashed avocado on a Clearly Organic rice cake and only one-third of your protein bar (since avocados and rice cakes provide little protein or fiber, this would put you at even greater deficit of both for the day than would eating half a bar), you'll be over your daily caloric total by 20 ($132 - 112 = 20$). If you eat one-third of the protein bar and choose the Quaker Oats non-organic rice cake, you'll still have to shave off 15 calories someplace else ($127 - 112 = 15$). Yet your diet is so "spartan," as a guy that you recently dated for almost a month observed, there's little for you to cut or trim. Perhaps you could omit part of the sweet potato (All of those B vitamins! All of those antioxidants!) you were going to add to the stir-fried vegetables you almost always have for lunch. Run these numbers again. If you don't, something could go seriously awry.

When I'm in a tailspin over calories, weight, and how quickly and easily those who I love can be taken from me, and want to

skip my daily serving of MARC, the only thing that can save me is perspective. I remember the skinny old woman I sat across from at the church potluck who told me the same story about her father three times before she and I decided not to join the dessert line. I remember when I worked in a nursing home kitchen during college, we periodically cleaned out the dresser drawers of a sweet, plump woman who hid food and dishes from her tray so she could feed the plastic doll she lovingly tended. I remember the woman who rolled up and down the hall in her wheelchair as she searched for the elevator (which didn't exist) that would carry her to the third floor (which didn't exist). I remember the woman who liked to sit in the dining room after dark because she could make out the lanterns her menfolk were carrying as they trekked back from the Mississippi River where they'd been working that day (what she was seeing were the lights of the ball diamond) and her delight at this sight. I remember visiting my grandfather when he lived at the nursing home long after I quit working there and being rattled by his question to me: "Who are you here to see?"

7. Eat! Depending on the experience you're seeking, follow the instructions in either Variation A or B.

Variation A

As you eat, reflect on the polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, vitamins B5, B6, C, E, and K, folate, potassium, oleic acid, lutein, zeaxanthin, and glutathione contained in a single serving of MARC. Be grateful that MARC is at once lowering your cholesterol, soaking up the free radicals that cause cells to age, and buffering your brain from harmful chemicals so that you don't repeat the same story about your mother's pie-making skills three times over dinner.

This type of thinking may be symptomatic of orthorexia nervosa, which is, according to Pollan, "an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating." While it isn't recognized as an official eating disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, it's widespread among the people I know. Rather than list the symptoms of the disorder offered by Stephen Bratman, the physician and former orthorexic who coined the term "orthorexia nervosa" in 1996, I'll list those that I've observed among my friends and acquaintances:

* An old grad-school buddy says she is finding relief from her

irritable bowel syndrome through the FODMAPs (fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides, and polyols) diet, which means that she avoids fructose, lactose, fructans (especially garlic and onion), galactans (legumes), and polyols (sweeteners and stone fruits, including that elixir of life, the avocado);

* A colleague, an unwavering adherent of the Paleo diet, believes that by guzzling coconut oil and feasting on grass-fed beefsteaks and by shunning legumes, grains, and tubers, he's lessening his likelihood of another "heart episode";

* A friend had hoped to keep her cancer from returning through the G-BOMBS (greens, beans, onions, mushrooms, berries, and seeds) cancer prevention diet. Now she has metastatic lesions on her spine, she eats organic liver and chicken, organic greens, berries, avocados, turmeric, and very limited amounts of amaranth and quinoa until she is beyond full, and washes down handfuls of non-FDA-approved supplements with khaki-green smoothies;

* A chum from high school only "eats" high-protein vegan smoothies, since the effort involved in digesting solid food and animal products creates vibrations that interfere with his spiritual practice and evolution;

* A former friend detoxifies from her organic vegan diet by fasting from all fluids and food one 24-hour period each week. She believes that you will inflame your internal organs by merely touching a potato chip with your finger. She also believes that all strife, from the friction between her and her adult children to the crises in Syria and Ukraine, are caused by the consumption of the flesh of once-living creatures, and that only vegetarianism has the power to end domestic and international strife;

* Several friends attempt to keep themselves safer and calmer by having so escalated their dietary restrictions that they've eliminated entire food groups (until a year ago, this group included me).

Because of their staunch compliance with their self-defined, self-imposed health regimens, my friends, former friends, and acquaintances are both flourishing and waning. Most have normal BMIs and more desirable cholesterol levels than the general public. All are comforted by their self-imposed restrictions. But some have low BMI's, increasing their risk of developing dementia. Some are so doctrinaire that their fidelity to their dietary philosophies trumps everything else — loved ones, career, social life. Some believe that because their self-image, self-worth, and peace of mind

are compromised by their indulgence in a meatball bubble biscuit at a coworker's going-away party, they will need many penitent days to atone for that fall from grace. I've been surprised to hear myself on more than one occasion nudge these friends toward moderation. "Take it from me," I say. "It's best not to become too rigid about anything."

While this hypervigilance could be a symptom of orthorexia nervosa, it could also be seen as evidence of my best efforts to keep myself safe in a world where so much is beyond one's control (the E. coli infection I contracted from a salad at a decent restaurant, all those texting drivers drifting into my lane on the interstate, the theft of my credit card number by a guy who bought thousands of dollars of merchandise with it at a Wal-Mart in North Carolina, the increasing number of blackouts due to our aging and unstable national electrical grid; all those police harassing or killing black people for driving with broken taillights [how I fear for my black daughter, my black ex-husband, my black students], the departures of all of those loved ones, which has left me so anxious and grief-stricken that it's a rare night in which I'm not awake at two or three o'clock, thinking about them, thinking about me without them, thinking about how with each passing year, I have less to lose, and wondering who is next). We are the gatekeepers. We have to be vigilant about what is trying to gain entrance and kill, steal, or destroy us and ours.

But, too, orthorexia nervosa might be yet another attempt, as with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), to medicalize or pathologize behavior on the outer edge of normal, and so it's a bunch of sodium nitrate-loaded bologna. Those who are scared to touch a potato chip with their finger for fear that it will inflame their internal organs or to consume an extra 15 calories per day really need to buck up, get over themselves, and find something worthwhile to pour their time and energy into.

And, too, orthorexia nervosa might be yet another development in the polarization, the bifurcation that is destroying 21st-century America — political conservatives versus political liberals; proponents of a social gospel versus evangelicals and fundamentalists; pure food devotees versus those who will eat anything but kale; "so-what's-your-point?" readers versus those who are willingly along for the ride in spite of the digressions or subterfuges or passages of potent, purple, or pointless prose. How and where do we find the

center of balance we crave?

I know people who eat with little or no compunction Tater Tot casseroles, mugs of canned soup with hidden MSG, cookies made with baking powder containing the neurotoxin aluminum, Jell-O, diet pop, farm-raised Atlantic salmon, and iceberg lettuce drenched in Miracle Whip and pesticides and sprinkled with bacon-flavored bits. When traveling, those in the “anything-but-kale” camp (that included me before all those bluebirds began nesting in my trees) stop and eat anywhere — convenience stores, strip mall cafés they know nothing about, and chain restaurants that advertise on television, while my nutritionist friends and I pack our lunches, hold out for some rare but promising find on the VegOut phone app, or snack on almonds and dried apricots until we’re back in our own kitchens. There’s more heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnea, obesity, and less willingness to take health precautions seriously among those in the anything-but kale camp (“Everything gives you cancer,” they’ll say with a shrug as they chomp into a plump ear of genetically modified corn slathered with butter and recombinant bovine growth hormone). Also, they’re more likely to look their age or older than are those in the nutritionist camp. It’s too soon to reach conclusions about the rate of occurrence of dementia or Alzheimer’s disease among those in either group.

Variation B

Try that other, pre-1980s way of experiencing food. Savor the mild, grassy-nutty flavor, the creamy, buttery texture, the oily slipperiness, the decadent richness and green-yellow lusciousness of the avocado. How glad you are that tomorrow is another MARC day! Be surprised when the desire arises within you for someone to share this meal with. (If that happens, double the recipe and dust off a chair at your dining room table.)

After you finish eating, sort through the newspapers in the recycling bin until you find that article in the “Lifestyle” section about creating an avocado bar. Imagine arranging on the counter separating your kitchen and dining room bowls and platters filled with slices of ripe avocado and various organic mix-ins — black beans, toasted coconut, artisan cheeses, edamame, pico de gallo, arugula, diced papaya, smoked, wild-caught Pacific salmon, sliced olives, hard-boiled eggs, capers, corn relish, salsa, and sour cream — on non-GMO corn or kale chips, gluten-free quinoa pita bread, almond

crackers, and two kinds of rice cakes. Eating with other people can be anxiety provoking, since by most standards, your food preferences and eating habits are weird. Yet with the avocado bar, your anxiety level might not be so acute or your quirkiness so conspicuous since you'd be eating what you normally do — MARC. To make your individual serving festive, you could add sliced olives, a scoop of pico de gallo, and a few feathers of arugula, the whole concoction only slightly more caloric than the plain version of MARC, and yes, you'll be using the lower-calorie rice cake. Imagine how you and your guests will jabber away about the soy controversy; that recent report on NPR (you vaguely remember this one) about restaurants that make bogus claims about their "farm-to-table" specials; the high antioxidants in and anti-inflammatory properties of aronia berries ("chokeberries" you used to call them); the debate over whether wild-caught Pacific salmon is safe now that five years have passed since the Fukushima nuclear disaster; Congress's anemic GMO-labeling bill (more loopholes than a crocheted rug); and the self-discovery and transformation possible through the Whole30 Program. What a filling and fulfilling experience this soiree will be!

Note

After you've eaten the last creamy, salty, crunchy, bite of MARC, weigh yourself and take a long, brisk walk. Muse on what you'll do when you return home. Weigh yourself again? Work a crossword puzzle? Draft the guest list for your avocado bar? Try to remember what an entire meal was like before you realized how much of life was beyond your control (the more frequent and violent storms where you live; all those mass shootings, at least one a week it seems; a presidential nominee and his followers who believe that they're making America great again by spewing the most unapologetically selfish, hateful, and violent utterances that you've ever heard voiced in public; the disheartening realization that for financial reasons, you have to work eight years longer than your father and ten years longer than your mother did; the executor of your mother's estate who resists your requests for transparency the way an unripe avocado pushes back against a gently inquiring touch; the dearth of available men your age who are both employed and able to scale a flight of stairs without becoming winded; the zesty, quirky friend you've lost because you refuse to condemn omnivorous humans as lower life forms on the same rung of the evolutionary ladder as the

hearty, adaptable, prolific though smelly and drooling opossum; the metastasized cancer that is killing your sweet, generous, loyal friend who you already miss; the wound created when your children left home several years ago that still oozes a bit; the aggressive, painful, unscreenable cancer that killed your mother seven months sooner than her oncologist predicted). Then you ate simply because you were hungry, the food tasted good, and there were people at the table who wanted your company and you theirs. What a ripe blessing that was. Then, consider whether or not you're remembering this as it actually was.

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