

# SIBLING REVELRY

ACCIDENTAL FOOD STYLIST  
EMILY MARSHALL  
EXPLAINS HER NEW CAREER  
TO HER BIG SISTER

by Alexandra Marshall  
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My sister Emily Marshall has worked in a lot of different fields in her 43 years. She was a girlswear designer in New York before there was an X-Girl or a Delia's, created tattoo t-shirts based on Sailor Jerry designs before Christian Audigier ruined the legacy of Ed Hardy, and went on to be a fashion and prop stylist in Los Angeles for magazines and movies. If you remember a picture of Pamela Anderson on roller skates in her prime postmodern pinup years, for *Stuff* magazine, that was Emily's bright idea. But then she's also done people's books to pay the rent and, not too many years ago, she was even the manager of the San Fernando Valley's sole attempt at artisanal hipster dining. I know what she's capable of, which is an awful lot. But it wasn't until I saw a series of unhinged casseroles and Jell-O molds on her Facebook and Instagram feeds early this year that I learned she had become a food stylist.

It made perfect sense to me. We grew up in a thinky, talky family that worshipped food—our dad was an early adopter of Los Angeles nouvelle cuisine in the 1980s and our mother, a sophisticated home cook who learned a lot of her tricks living in France before we were born. Emily has always taken after my mother, an interior designer, and has a more developed visual sense than most people.

Still, around February of this year, the time I first saw her food pictures—electric red, white, and blue molded Jell-O “salads;” shrimp trees; cheese ball porcupines with pretzel quills; and something called a crown roast of hot dogs—I thought they were culled from one of the many, many midcentury cookbooks she's collected and laughed at/with over the years. It wasn't until just before the summer lead-up to an ABC mini-series called *The Astronaut Wives Club* that I realized she had actually made these insane, Technicolor, will-never-appear-in-nature creations for the show. We are in pretty good contact for siblings who live halfway around the world from each other—I'm in Paris, she's in New Orleans—but I still didn't really have the story straight, even after the pictures started to go viral. I called Emily the other day to finally get all the details on how one becomes an overnight-sensation food stylist; when I did, she was in the middle of another challenging assignment.

**So wait, before I turned on the recorder, you told me that the first thing you did this morning was check on your nut cheeses. What is nut cheese and why are you checking on it?** I've been hired to make steak for a scene in an upcoming movie about L.B.J. starring Woody Harrelson, who is famously a raw, organic vegan. In the movie, he's going to carry a piece of steak to his mouth on a fork, and the only thing I could think of that could possibly be steak-colored and sit on a fork and be raw and organic and vegan was a nut cheese. But I've never made nut cheese.

**It sounds gross and like maybe it has to do with balls.**

If you expect it to be like real cheese, it'll be disappointing, but if you let it be its own thing it can be delicious. Usually you use cashews, almonds, or macadamia nuts and soak them to plump them up, then grind them in a Vitamix, and add nutritional yeast flakes to give a sort of cheesy flavor. Since everything had to stay raw, I chose to ferment the mixture to get past the granular texture and firm it up. To do that, people usually put in something called Rejuvelac, which is a sprouted grain fermentation starter. The problem is, I had an impossible time finding that here because New Orleans doesn't have the same breadth of crazy health resources as Los Angeles. So I used sauerkraut brine that I had from cultured vegetables I made.

**What about the meat look?**

Well, that's the hard thing, because what makes meat look like meat is that it's variegated. It's not a single color and I won't be able to do that. I'm satisfied if I can just find a color that approximates what meat could look like. If I could just use chemicals I would douse the thing in Kitchen Bouquet gravy browner, but in this case it has to be all the way natural.

**So let's back up to discuss how life led you to doing nut cheese experiments for Woody Harrelson.**

The briefest version I can give of this story is I have a close friend Jonathan Hodges, whom you know, and who is a feature film prop master of some renown. Many years ago I was his first assistant when he was doing commercials and videos. One of my first jobs with him was a McDonald's commercial called “Ronald Has a Bad Hair Day,” where Ronald McDonald was trying to fix his hair with a rolling pin and hair dryers and sledge hammers. Anyway, we worked together constantly for years, and eventually parted ways because he went back to feature films and due to my non-union status I couldn't follow him. Years went by and I got back in touch with Jonathan, who had moved to New Orleans full-time. The city had made it really advantageous, tax-wise, to film there, and a lot of the Hollywood carnival has followed—there's tons of production here. He told me to come out and kick up my heels for a minute, and as I was in the process of making plans to do so, he called me and said, “Oh, I booked a job, but maybe I can give you some work on it.” And that was *The Astronaut Wives Club*. If anyone reading this didn't see it, it's about the space race in the 1950s and '60s, shot from the perspective of astronauts' wives. So it's essentially a 10-episode series with a lot of ladies bringing snacks to each other's houses.

**So this insane, food-heavy show for a major network was your first job as a food stylist? How was Jonathan able to convince them to give you a break?**

Well, as a prop master, it's his job to bring in food stylists, so it was his call. But Jonathan is a very cautious person, so he



asked me to put together a presentation just in case. I did a Pinterest board that was 95 percent food ads from the period, because it was the easiest thing to find online. They didn't end up needing to see it to give me the job, but I wound up using it as a reference and a lot of those things made it into the show. It was one of those weird serendipitous moments where everything in your life leads you to a point where you're ready to succeed at something. I had started collecting vintage cookbooks from garage sales years ago because, hey, they only cost a quarter and were sort of cool.

**It helped that we came of age in the garage sale era, before vintage was such an expensive fetish. And when we were in our 20s, the shit that people were looking to sell for 10 cents came from the '60s and '70s.**

I only really became conscious of how much I held this particular interest when Mom bought me that Amy Sedaris book, *I Like You*, for Christmas one year. She redoes weird crafts and recipes from that era with strange Technicolor photos and it finally clicked for me that this also lived in my head. And then with our family history... all those divorced-Dad nights going to Wolfgang Puck restaurants in the '80s really taught me to know what food is, and to be able to talk about it, and think about it.

**It was when nouvelle cuisine had really settled in L.A., too, and the food was so revolutionary and stylized and different from the fancy home-cooked food we were used to. That kind of thing gives you distance. But I also feel like Grandma, who was such a brilliant home cook, is in the mix here too.** Oh yeah, and growing up Mormon. I mean even if our mom did not ever make Jell-O...

**Ever. Too chic for that.**

But being from a Mormon family meant going to extended family reunions and church potluck parties with Jell-O salads and sherbet punch and casseroles and fluffy yeast rolls. Grandma's cooking was so Americana, but she didn't do Jell-O either.

**No, being a woman of the Depression, there was not a lot of newfangled industrial food in her kitchen. But that's what's so interesting about midcentury food. It was the birth of patent- and corporation-driven cooking.**

Just after the show premiered, I started reading this book called *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, and it's really all about this, and how people started using dehydrated milk and Jell-O packets in their cooking. The author, Laura Shapiro, explains that, because of how food was made into rations in factories for the troops fighting the Second World War, there was a massive machine in place with an existing body of knowledge about how to industrialize food. So after the war, these big companies were trying to figure out how to sell this stuff to America at large. There were these relentless campaigns, with corporate-sponsored cookbooks, to tell women, "Hey, you need powdered milk and frozen orange juice concentrate in your life." Even today, every Vitamix blender comes with a massive cookbook.

**And now you're using one to make period nut cheese. Is the scene on set usually disgusting, with all the hot lights and prop food sitting out?**

Food doesn't do well in blazing ambient heat, especially when you can't cover it up with a lid or a towel because you have to be ready to film it at any moment. So you always have to

be there hours before they need you, with five times as much stuff. I make most of the basic building blocks at home and pull it out of the cooler on set only when I absolutely know I'm going to need it, and then try to garnish it. The stuff has to be like rock. God bless that 1960s industrial food because right or wrong, it holds up to the elements.

**But what about making modern food?**

The show I did right after *The Astronaut Wives Club* was for AMC and is called *Into The Badlands*. They don't track across the food and show it as much, but the creators are trying to build a world that doesn't exist, and they want food to help tell that story because food always does. The show takes place about 500 years into the future, after an apocalypse, and the world has rebuilt itself as a feudal empire. It's very loosely based on *Journey to the West*, which is an awesome Chinese movie that everyone should see, based on a classic Chinese novel. They wanted the food to both look very old fashioned, like it was grown in a natural environment—not modern apples that all look the same—and also to have an Asian influence because that's the look of the show. So it's mutton and mead meets showy Asian food elements. I did a rice bowl for them loosely based on Korean shaved ice, with sweet mung beans in syrup and chunks of red, syrupy Jell-O cubes, and a little bit of coconut milk for the oozy, sticky texture. The whole bowl is ringed in strawberries with pistachios sprinkled on top. Most of the food doesn't get eaten, but it might so you need to have at least a handful of things that you actually want to taste. We did a lot of cool things with bamboo shoots and century eggs and ginkgo nuts and Peking duck.

**With all this Jell-O, and the fact that you live in New Orleans and are probably living on fried oysters, perhaps it would surprise people to know that you are a cleanse freak.**

Cleanses have become a weird hobby of mine. About six years ago, the father of an ex-boyfriend taught me to culture vegetables and got me into the Body Ecology Diet, which is basically no carbs, no sugar, no caffeine. And then doing Kundalini yoga teacher training, which I've done, there are lots of cleanses associated with it, like 40 days of green foods.

**So what is this banana cleanse you were recently complaining about on Facebook? (Readers, don't try this at home.)**

Every detail is so airy fairy. You start on the new moon and then for two weeks you eat nothing but three bananas a meal, three times a day, plus fresh squeezed orange juice sweetened with honey. An hour after you have your morning juice, you chew and swallow cardamom seeds. It sounds like a lot of sugar, but I always felt full, had crazy awesome digestion, lost a ton of weight, and got my unbalanced hormones back on track.

I have weird food obsessions, clearly, but overall, living in New Orleans is not about denial. People love and are aware of food here more than any other place I've been outside of maybe Italy or France. You just walk up to the average person on the street and start talking about food and they'll stay in that conversation with you for an hour.

**POST-SCRIPT:** The day after our interview, Emily sent me a picture of something that looked like the sole of a beige shoe with drawn-on griddle marks. It was her nut cheese, and perhaps in memory of President Johnson and the great work he did for our country, the filmmakers decided to go with avocado and coconut butter "ice cream."



## MOM'S BBQ MEATLOAF

*This is the meatloaf I grew up eating. It's not a super finely textured meatloaf. It's not at all dry, because there's not a ton of breadcrumbs. It's beefy, it's chunky, and I kind of like it a little rare on the inside. It might fall apart when you slice it. Don't worry about getting the onions teeny, or the carrots (if using) thin as a hair. Just get it mixed up and bake it. It's delicious, it will make people happy, and it's amazing as a sandwich or just reheated again later.*

1 medium onion, chopped  
1 pound 20-percent fat, 80-percent lean ground beef  
(leaner is fine, but don't go fatter)  
2/3 cup plain breadcrumbs  
1/2 cup shredded carrot (optional)  
1 egg  
2/3 cup barbecue sauce (I used Sticky Fingers sauce)

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Cook the chopped onion over medium heat until translucent, but not browned, and set aside.

In this order, place ground beef, breadcrumbs, carrot (if using), and egg in a large bowl. Pour on the barbecue sauce. Thoroughly mix the ingredients by squeezing them together repeatedly with your hands until well incorporated.

Place the mixture in an ungreased 9-inch loaf pan. Bake for 45 minutes or until the juices run clear and the top is browned.

**HOT TIPS:**

Really get in there with the ingredients and push/pull/squeeze the mixture together. Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty, just get it all incorporated and wash your hands afterwards. This is not a time to be precious.

If you use a little more than a pound of beef, whatever. Just don't get too crazy or it won't stick together.

Which barbecue sauce you use is totally your choice. I've used a lot of different ones over the years. For this to taste like Mom's, a classic dark brown molasses-y sweet tangy sauce is best. You seriously can't go wrong here, but the more flavor there is in the sauce, the more flavor there will be in the final product.

The meatloaf may seem low in the loaf or casserole pan, but if it's too high, the fat will overflow.

Speaking of fat, there will be a lot of it. You're going to want to pour it off after the pan is no longer crazy hot. Don't get a grease burn. Really, don't.

The meatloaf will shrink inside the pan. That's okay. It means you're doing it right.