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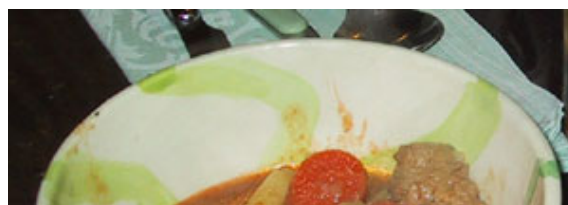
As American as Apple Pie

Sculptor Mary Carlson
simulates nature — and Dinty
Moore Beef Stew — with a deft
hand and lively imagination
by **Carol Kino**

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of Mary Carlson's work is her way of using the homespun to summon up the ineffable. For the last couple of years, she's employed ordinary materials, like clay, lightbulbs, and cloth, to simulate some of the wonders of nature, such as rocks, starry skies, and leaves. Her last show included a display of butterflies, pinned to the wall, that she'd fashioned from knitted wool and embroidered felt. At the back of the gallery stood a couple of supernatural-looking trees: one was



Photos by Carol Kino



made from compacted sawdust and the other from neatly dovetailed pieces of wood.

Of course, this work comes with a definite conceptual edge: in making each piece, Mary is returning some highly processed natural thing back to the earth that originally spawned it. Yet this conceptualism never comes off as didactic or ironic. Instead, it resonates as complex, thoughtful, wondering, funny, and sweet — very much like Mary herself.

Another thing Mary's artwork proves is that she's as comfortable with a needle and thread as she is with a radial saw. So it probably won't surprise anyone to hear that she's also a dab hand at cooking. I knew this for a fact because one Labor Day, I witnessed Mary and a friend, with minimal fuss, whip up a huge

dinner for twelve or so that turned out to be one of the best meals I've ever eaten. Because she's a vegetarian who often uses soy protein in place of meat, it seemed likely that her cooking would have a pretty strong conceptual edge itself



Mary Carlson's Fake Dinty Moore Beef Stew

A couple of summers ago, Mary and Jim sublet their loft to a bunch of college students. After the kids moved in, the mother of one furnished the loft with a summer's worth of provisions, procured from a warehouse store. When Jim and Mary took possession again, they inherited the remains: half a flat of Dinty Moore Beef Stew and a lot of garbage bags and rolls of toilet paper. At about the same time, they

discovered a vegetarian store in Chinatown that sold simulated meat made from soy protein. Mary started experimenting, while Jim did the taste-testing. (He also did the dishes.)

pretty strong conceptual edge itself.

— and as it turned out, I was right.

For this dinner, Mary proposed a meal based on Fake Dinty Moore Beef Stew — a mind-boggling invention of her own that uses soy protein to replicate chunks of beef and fresh-cooked ingredients to invoke canned food. To go with it, she suggested corn bread, baked in individual corncob-shaped loaves.

This would be followed by a streusel-topped apple pie, made from a recipe in the 1972 edition of the *Betty Crocker Cookbook*. Though the pie didn't seem too conceptual, it was appropriate for the date we settled on: Election Night.

Unfortunately, on November 7, Mary suddenly came down with a cold, so we were forced to reschedule. But when we reconvened after Thanksgiving, some *deus ex machina* had miraculously intervened: the election was still going on anyway. When I arrived at their North 9th Street loft, Mary and her husband, the portrait painter Jim Torok, were glued to the television screen,

and almost,

For the broth:

water	vegetable bouillon
onions	cubes
potatoes	thyme
carrots	oregano
celery	bay leaf
garlic	vegetable oil
	soy sauce

For the stew:

- vegetable broth
- faux meat cubes*
- carrots
- potatoes

Start by making vegetable broth. Mary's is adapted from a recipe in Martha Rose Shulman's *Vegetarian Feasts*.

First, she makes stock by adding the bouillon cubes to water. After that, "I boil a lot of vegetables — onions, potatoes, carrots, celery, a lot of garlic. Then I put in some thyme, oregano, bay leaf, and vegetable oil, and a little soy sauce, and I just cook the hell out of it. Cook it for hours,

gasping as reporters tried to codify the actions of the nefarious Katherine Harris, who had just cunningly certified the vote. But in the background, a pot of Mary's stew bubbled fragrantly and reassuringly on the stove. She sat me down at the kitchen table, handed me a glass of cranberry juice spiked with water, and set to work on the apple pie.

It turns out, Mary told me while measuring out butter and flour, that her parents live in Palm Beach County. In fact, her father, an industrial chemist who specializes in paper analysis, has some interesting theories about why those ballots were so difficult to punch. First, he says, the paper they were printed on was probably made of Southern pine, which is cheaper — and harder — than the Northern variety. And probably, the presidential section was printed near the edge of the roll, so that full penetration became even tougher. Yet though her father had volunteered his analytical services to the local election board,

and get rid of the vegetables at the end."

"After that just add a couple of packages of faux meat cubes, carrots, and potatoes. Add those in and cook the hell out of them too, on low heat, for I guess about half an hour or forty-five minutes. It's better if you eat it the next day, or even two days later — it tastes more like canned food."

Mary gets her soy meat cubes in Chinatown at a vegetarian

Chinese grocery store on the north side of Hester Street near Center. "They have a big freezer full of stuff and I look for the beef."

Mary Carlson's Everyday Salad

Chopped Italian parsley or regular parsley

"Macadamia nuts or any kind

Mary hadn't asked who had gotten his vote. "I'd rather not know in a way," was how she tactfully put it.

As a child, the Carlson family moved around a lot because of her father's job. "Back then," she explained, "to get a promotion, you had to move." Though this makes it sound as though her childhood transpired in the 19th century, it was stolidly 1950s. Family dinners usually consisted of meat, potatoes, and salad — "but back then, you know, it'd just be iceberg lettuce." One of her fondest food memories involves Jell-O mold. "When we'd visit our relatives in Wisconsin, each of them would have their own special salad." Each family member made her own unique addition to the jewel-like mold, "like marshmallows, coconut, ripe olives with mayonnaise — that was really good! But no pineapple," she admonished me, wagging her finger. "You know you can't put pineapple in Jell-O!"

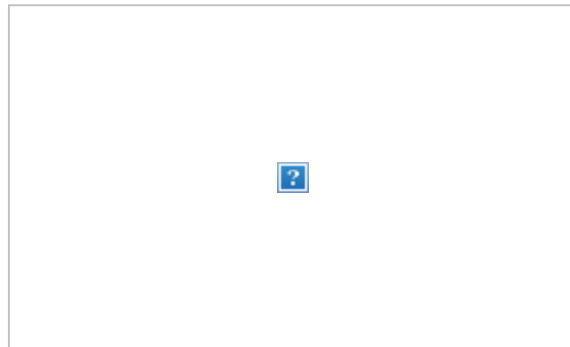
Curiously, Mary was making her pastry in a very old-fashioned way, too: rather than cutting the butter

of nuts are good — almonds,
sesame seeds, pumpkin seeds.
Coconut is good."

Oil and vinegar

Grated Romano cheese

Mix well.



into the flour with a utensil, such as a pastry cutter, two knives, or a fork, she was rubbing it in with her fingers. After adding water, she turned it out onto a board and began to knead enthusiastically. "You know why I think I like making pie dough?" she asked. It reminds me of clay!"

I have to admit, this worried me,

because I'd always been taught that pastry making requires a very light touch. But "I used to have a real prejudice against cooking," Mary went on blithely, kneading away regardless. "I thought it was woman's work, and I didn't want to get stuck in that role."



Her first brush with cooking proper came in a home economics class at Bishop Kenny High School, a Catholic girls' school in Jacksonville, Florida, where a lay teacher attempted to teach the rebellious eight grader to make biscuits. Though she'd always been a straight A student, in home ec she got a B. "I was really proud of that," she said, slicing apples into the pie. "I kind of wore it like a

badge." She sprinkled on the streusel, gave her creation a final pat and popped it into the oven.

Next up was the cornbread, made from a recipe in a very beaten-up edition of the *Jacksonville*

Sesquicentennial Cookbook, also from 1972. (Mary's mother gave it to her, along with the Betty Crocker book, when she first moved to New York. "I think she did hold out some hope that I would learn.") The recipe, which includes cornmeal, eggs, and sour cream, also calls for a cup of cream-style corn. But Mary had only been able to find plain at the grocery store, so she decided to improvise her own cream sauce. "It's just butter and flour and some milk."

Mary likes to say that she knew how to sheet rock and sweat a pipe before she could ever make a biscuit, and that's totally true. Some years after her mother gave her the cookbooks, she moved into a raw industrial Tribeca loft, where she put up walls and ran the interior plumbing lines herself. (She and Jim recently sold the space and moved

recently sold the space and moved to Williamsburg.)

In those days, she ate mostly

sandwiches. "I had this little grilled cheese sandwich maker. You'd add bread and cheese and plug it in." For five years, she waited tables at a seafood restaurant on the Upper East Side, where she usually ate dinner.

But by the time she reached her late twenties, her priorities suddenly changed. "I realized I like to eat and it became kind of a social thing — I'd get together with friends and cook." However, her first attempt at cooking was "Jelly Bean Bread," a made-up recipe that ended up a major disaster.

"When I teach art," she says now, "one of the most common problems with kids is they want to put everything into one piece — their mother and their father and their whole life. It reminds me of when I started to cook — I would put in every spice. It's better to be specific and focused."

Today, however, those awkward years are long behind her. Her cooking style is pleasantly efficient and workmanlike, and she seems completely relaxed in the kitchen. She likes to watch television cooking programs, she confesses, and she has a special fondness for Julia Child. "I just love that sort of demonstration. It gives you ideas on how to teach art — like how to demonstrate mixing cement."

Curiously enough, a similar progression, from shop to home ec, has been going on in Mary's artwork. In the mid-1980s, she was making big wall reliefs, which involved putting paper, plexiglas, or rocks over a heavy wood armature. "When I was first doing that stuff," she told me, "people would say, 'Oh, I thought a man did that,' and I would think of it as a compliment. I find it insulting now."

But as her cooking became more confident, sewing and knitting began to creep into her work. "It took me a long time to reconcile it. Men can

claim that stuff and it can seem radical, but it's more difficult if you're a woman." Recently, while Jim was at the doctor's office, Mary was crocheting in the waiting room, when a passing nurse asked what she was making. "An octopus!" she replied. (The buff-colored creature — life-size and anatomically correct — will appear in her forthcoming solo show at Bill Maynes Gallery this spring.)

Today, Mary's two sides have finally joined. "I love carpentry and making things and using a circular saw. I also love cooking and making the home kind of homey. It was just that thing of feeling that a woman couldn't do both, that you had to make a choice. And that's how I worked through it." Looking around Mary and Jim's loft, I suddenly realized that Mary had made just about everything in it: the storage shelves behind us, the gauzy curtains in the windows, the upholstered chairs we were sitting on, the dinner we were about to eat.

"Does anyone want sour cream in

"Does anyone want sour cream in their Dinty Moore? Shall we have a candle, too?" Jim tore himself away from the election and we tore into the stew, which was amazing: the soy's texture was remarkably beef-like and its taste was satisfyingly full-bodied and rich. And the buttery golden cornbread corncobs, which Mary had baked in an old cast-iron novelty pan, went perfectly with it.

Afterwards, we had a salad that involved finely chopped parsley, coarsely chopped macadamia nuts, oil and vinegar, and grated Romano cheese, mixed together until the texture was deliciously gloppy. But the true pièce de resistance was the apple pie, which Mary served with big glasses of milk, spiked with

carob-flavored soy. Despite all the enthusiastic kneading I'd worried about before, the crust was impressively flaky, and the filling was lusciously sweet and tart.

"It always comes out differently," Mary said in wonderment, as we ate.

"That's because you make it differently every time," Jim pointed

out. Though he does all the taste-testing — and the dishes — he doesn't cook much himself. ("He doesn't do carpentry either," she told me later. "I think he's rebelling against his father in not wanting to hold a hammer, just like I was rebelling against my mother.")

Mary has been a vegetarian for 15 years, since she and her sister made a beef stroganoff that made them "really, really sick." On the train ride home, she read Frances Moore Lappe's 1972 classic, *Diet for a Small Planet* which outlines soy's economic efficiency relative to meat and


explains how to create complete proteins by mixing grains and beans. "I don't have any problem with people eating meat. But vegetarianism did make sense as far as how efficient soybeans are. It wasn't so much animals for me as land usage."

Right now, her favorite cookbook is Martha Rose Shulman's *The Vegetarian Feast* (Ballantine Books, 1995). She also likes *The Joy of*

Cooking — "I use it to get a recipe for something, like how to cook baked beans" — and *Ten Talents*, a Seventh Day Adventist vegetarian manual by Dr. and Mrs. Frank J. Hurd, first published in 1968. Occasionally, she makes something from Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. "And once in a while, I'll save something from the *New York Times*, and try it out."

"I try not to make a big deal of the shopping," Mary says. "It has to be

easy, so it's not sophisticated or exotic in that way. What I really like about cooking is having people over and sitting around and talking."

And what I really like about Mary's cooking is that, in the manner of all great home chefs, she uses casual ingredients and humble methods to routinely achieve the divine. Best of all, in contrast to a lot of conceptual artists I could name, I doubt she'd ever try to pass it off as artwork. 

Carol Kino writes for *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Art in America*, *Art & Auction*, and many other magazines.

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