

2,000 Words

In this short memoir, Ana Ceron reflects back on a time in her life when turbulence drove her out of newspapers and into restaurant kitchens. She was looking for stability and guarantees, only to learn that there were no such things in either place. What she needed instead was to remember she already had what it takes to make it anywhere: herself.

## BITTERED SWEETS

By

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I saw the universe splayed out before me in a pastry kitchen. Then I heard my world crumble in another.

Let me tell you about the cosmos first.

I was in a classroom, a kitchen classroom, observing an instructor – a chef -- giving a demo. He was about to roll out some dough and to prevent the sticky mass from adhering to the counter, he cupped some flour in his hand and flecked the powder across the marble top. I was mesmerized.

The result was a Jackson Pollock splattering of white dust, a galaxy of stars and planets and mysteries scattered across the unknown.

This was New York City and I was looking for a sign. I had just started my thirties, I was paying off a mortgage, and the Internet was ravaging newspapers – not to mention the future prospects of my career as a reporter.

*Would I survive the next round of layoffs, or the one after? I wondered. Did I have what it takes to make it through?*

By this time I had been working as a reporter for about eight years. I started this track in university, where I was pursuing majors in both English and Anthropology. I eventually stumbled my way into the student newspaper and found I could combine two of my favorite subjects: words and people. When I graduated, it felt natural to continue with reporting.

For a long time, I loved this job. The daily papers where I worked had circulations wedged between South Florida and Central Florida. This was land east of Lake Okeechobee and west of the Atlantic. If I drove out long enough on Midway Road, I could either smell the orange juice from outside the Tropicana plant or the brine of ocean spray beyond the Hutchinson Island.

In newspapers, I fell in love with what I wrote, like zoning regulations. Locations of past crime scenes became personal landmarks. I could walk into a coffee shop or the courthouse and hear people discussing one of my stories. (This, mind you, was not always pleasant.)

Then the Internet really came into its own. Our readers were spending more of their time online, where they could access multiple papers all at once and all for free. That caused a big hit to advertising sales, which, back then at least, never did as well with digital promotions as with print. Things became bleak.

First came the offers of early retirement, then rounds of layoffs followed. As the newsroom thinned, beats and job descriptions increased in scope. Meanwhile, pay raises stalled.

I felt overworked and undervalued, sure. But what scared me the most was that I wasn't sure that I could last in this field. The way I saw it, I was competing with the other reporters in my newsroom for a job and I didn't know if I had what it took to make it in this new normal. I needed a guarantee and there was none.

What I did know, however, was that the time had come for drastic change, and whenever I paused to reflect about what it could look like, food would quickly come to mind.

That's probably because there have been many times when the only thing that made sense to me was food.

For instance, I was seven years old when my family moved to Broward County from South America. When we visited Disney World for the first time, I couldn't tell you what Minnie Mouse was saying, but I immediately understood what hamburgers and apple pie were all about.

Growing up, when I wanted to offer some sort of cultural exchange with my young gringo friends, I wasn't going to do so delving into Third World dictatorships or the history of Spanish colonialism. Instead, I'd offer the Chilean food traditions that my family and I enjoyed, like a steaming cup of tea in the afternoon, or baked beef empanadas.

Now that I was looking for something to ground me, food felt obvious. Besides, everyone eats food – there was no cyber substitute for this analog. The job security seemed infallible.

Off I went, then, to one of the most vibrant food scenes in the world. My itinerary was filled with visits to famous bakeries and tours of culinary schools. I was desperate to find a sign pointing to a way out newspapers.

All it took was a fistful of flour.

When I started pastry school, I wasn't sure what to expect out of my newly chosen profession. Though I had read Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential* and other memoirs from the culinary world, I still couldn't fathom my future. Would I establish my own empire of baked goods? Would I work on television, or smile from the cover of my very own cookbook?

Mind you, I did try answering these questions before ever heading out to New York. While still a reporter, I broached my pastry career idea with my newspaper's food editor. She encouraged my daring, and suggested that I help out at a local restaurant to

see if I liked the work. Good idea, I thought, and promptly called exactly two places.

Both declined my offers to work for free.

I now know that there are times when we search only for what we want to find. I pressed on.

I read the books. I visited the schools. Finally, I enrolled in a pastry program and drove to my paper's downtown office to announce my resignation.

Things looked promising. After all, I was a far better pastry school student than I was a university student. (This would be a good time to admit I never graduated with two majors.) I never missed a class, not even when a major snow storm kept a good portion of the students home. I used my favorite notebooks as a reporter to write down copious lesson notes, notes that I still hold on to with pride. Really, I worked hard.

Even so, like everyone else trying something new, I had my share of struggles. Take my very first exam. I bombed, barely finishing on time after my puff pastry didn't puff and my heavy cream overwhipped to practically butter. Several modules later, when it was time to bake, build, and decorate a tiered wedding cake of my own design, I realized too late that I had overestimated my piping skills during the planning stages. Two days' worth of work resulted in a sloppy, crooked concoction that a toddler may have executed better.

No matter. I graduated, I enjoyed my time in classes, and school offered me ways to learn even more through opportunities outside campus.

The program I chose was part time. I spent nine months going to classes four days a week so that I could pursue internships during my free time.

I did a stint at a candy shop specializing in marshmallow treats and life-sized high heels made entirely of chocolate. I also spent time at a wedding cake shop that a woman set up in her New Jersey garage, thanks to her contractor husband's help.

My longest internship, however, was at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Manhattan's Theater District.

In the bowels of a glass building neighboring Bryant Park, I got a good, close look at the pastry chef life. And more often than not it looks like this:

Stuffing your belongings in a too-small metal locker that may or may not have a functioning lock on it. Changing into your kitchen uniform – your chef's whites – out in the open, even if it is at a secluded corner of the kitchen. Cooking equipment and tools that are falling apart or taped together or barely functioning or the only one of its kind so every cook fights for it or hoards and hides it. Rat traps everywhere. And rationed kitchen towels, forcing you to quickly learn to keep at least one dry for handling hot items because there are no oven mitts.

The pastry chef at this restaurant was a petite woman who scared everyone to death. She was talented with her skills, but not especially gifted with patience. I recall one night in particular when her husband called her cell. She picked up the phone and demanded crossly, "What do you *want*?!"

My favorite thing about her, though, was her lung power. The pastry kitchen was located in the basement, a turn or two away from the wide stairs that connected to the wood-panelled dining room. Orders from upstairs arrived via a little printer stationed in the pastry kitchen. But once we were done plating all the desserts for a table, the only way to let the servers know was to, well, bellow.

“Piiiiick up!” she’d yell.

Thirty, forty seconds later: “Piiiiick UP!”

A server always arrived. This pastry chef was very good.

It was in her pastry kitchen, between roasting pineapples with butter and brown sugar, or frying mini squares of doughnuts, where I got my first sign that things could spoil.

Service had yet to start, and the kitchen was calm. A black-suited server approaches the chef to discuss a special request made by a diner. The chef listened and nodded.

“Of course,” she said. “We are here to serve.”

I couldn’t tell you what the request was because I either didn’t hear it or I’ve forgotten it. But I will always remember the cold chill that ran through my spine when I heard the chef speak.

I was baffled. *Are we here to serve?* I asked myself. Then it dawned on me that they call it the “hospitality” industry for a reason and my palms began to sweat.

Those in the restaurant industry say that they like nourishing people, and that’s why they went into the business. They believe in offering good, wholesome sustenance. Not me. I sought refuge in kitchens because I needed to nourish myself. I wanted food to sustain me, never mind anybody else.

The panic I felt then wasn’t about me being in the service industry, it was realizing that my expectations were as off the mark as those of my previous profession.

If I’m honest, this was the beginning of the end of my pastry career, and I was still an intern. The spell, as they say, had been broken.

Even so, I hung in there. I spent the next seven years working in professional kitchens. I suppose this was my way of convincing myself this was where I belonged. Well, the uniforms never fit and the porters always catcalled.

I’m not ignoring all the good stuff, though. I got to measure the years with produce: Meyer lemon season, black raspberry season, concord grape season, and so on.

I learned perfection *was* possible – your reflection on a chocolate glazed cake could attest to that. So could the infinite layers of a crispy croissant, or the sunny tartness of a creamy lemon curd.

Lastly, my favorite part, which was helping the new hires find their kitchen groove. At one bakery, that meant showing how to scoop 77 pounds of cookie dough in less than an hour. In a restaurant kitchen in the Flatiron District, it meant setting up the cake display in the dining room.

At one point or another, someone somewhere needed to know these things, wanted to eat these things.

I had found what I was missing in newspapers, and that was assured survival.

In fact, I fared pretty well. I'd get whopping whole dollar-an-hour raises. I won a competitive scholarship to take professional classes offered by a renowned chocolate manufacturer. I also got promoted to management and a salaried position.

Only survival wasn't enough anymore. I no longer looked for guarantees. I found my grit instead.

I could close a shift at the bad side of midnight and the following morning come back to work to start another shortly after sunrise. I could get yelled at and not walk out on my job in response. I could start a fire by accident and not panic. Too much. And I could stutter my way through a presentation before one of the most renowned chefs in America and not be too embarrassed about it. (Thank you, Chef Thomas Keller.)

Yes, I found my grit.

Know where it was? In a windowless kitchen steaming with boiling sauces and yelling chefs, hiding under the ill-fitting jacket of a tormented intern faceplanting back to Earth.