

Marion Kane:

I am at John Ota's house in downtown Toronto and he's making me lunch. I love my job.

John Ota:

It's fantastic to have you here! Oh, my goodness. I can't believe it. Marion Kane! Oh, my goodness. I'm so excited to be cooking for you!

Marion Kane:

As you've just heard, my guest today is a man who exudes enthusiasm. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth and welcome to Sittin' in the Kitchen. John Ota writes mostly about architecture, but his latest obsession is right up my alley. In his brilliant book simply called The Kitchen, John searches for the perfect kitchen, a journey that took him into the homes of Georgia O'Keeffe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Elvis Presley, and Louis Armstrong among others. He also visited a kitchen of his and my favorite foodie, Julia Child. We met at his home - in his kitchen, in fact - in downtown Toronto.

Marion Kane:

What are you making?

John Ota:

I'm making Japanese Canadian chow mein. You know, people make this their own way. Some people put mushrooms in, some people put a little bit of carrot in. I just like mine straight up with the bean sprouts and the noodles and the meat and the onions and the celery. That's great.

Marion Kane:

John has served us lunch in bento boxes. It looks beautiful. I loved eating with chopsticks. It slows me down.

John Ota:

We're sharing some mackerel and a piece of sea bass that have been marinated in mirin and in miso and I grilled underneath the broiler.

Marion Kane:

I repeat, I love my job.

John Ota:

I love having you here! Oh, my goodness.

Marion Kane:

Why did your mother teach you to cook?

John Ota:

Well, she taught us how to cook, gave us lessons on all kinds of things and then she used to wag her finger at me in my face and say, "I never want you guys to depend on your wives to cook." She was completely obsessed with that.

Marion Kane:

I second that emotion. This John Ota is a delicious lunch. I've had seconds of chow mein and salad.

John Ota:

This is just comfort food.

Marion Kane:

The kitchen is the subject of our podcast. We both love kitchens and my podcast is called Sittin' in the Kitchen. And your book is called The Kitchen. Coincidence? I think not!

John Ota:

I love the kitchen. The kitchen is my favorite room in the house. It's the center of everything that happens in the house and pulls everybody together.

Marion Kane:

Show me your kitchen. We're in the kitchen, it's modern. It's pretty basic.

John Ota:

Well, here we are in the kitchen and the situation is this: My wife Frances and I love to cook and entertain, but right now we're in a house where the kitchen just isn't working for us. It's a little cramped, awkward and things are not in the right place. In fact, you could say, I hate to say it, but Fran hates our kitchen. The kitchen is at the front of the house. We have a big window at the front along the side, along the East side of the kitchen is a whole row of cupboards and a built-in refrigerator and oven. And then to the right on the West wall is our stove. So, we have a limited amount of counter space here.

Marion Kane:

I think it's not enough.

John Ota:

It's not enough. Marion Kane, culinary royalty, yes, you're right. It's not enough. So, we need to expand and somehow find extra space. So that's what I need to do and that's why I went on this journey to find the perfect kitchen. I went to examples of excellent kitchen designs throughout history across North America to explore different ideas and bring those back so that we can use those when we renovate our kitchen. So I need to know everything about the kitchen. I tend to be obsessive, so I don't know if you noticed, but I need to know everything about the kitchen before I redesign. So I want to know about the origins of the kitchen, the architectural layout, the history of different kitchen appliances, the origins of different foods, drinks and cooking methods, and the invention of different appliances. So I want to find everything out before I start to redesign.

Marion Kane:

You have 13 famous kitchens in your book that you've visited. Most of them you have cooked in.

John Ota:

Yes. I started off with the Pilgrim kitchen.

Marion Kane:

Yes. Describe that kitchen and you cooked in it!

John Ota:

I cooked in that kitchen. It's down in Plymouth, Massachusetts, outside of Boston where the Pilgrims landed in 1620. And so, they built their houses like Medieval cottages. They built them out of wood and they're very sparse. There's really no decoration at all. It's a dirt floor. It's unpainted clapboard, and in the house it's just an open fire, an open fire, and an opening that lets some of the smoke out, but not a lot of the smoke out. So when I got there, I expected to have a nice experience because I like to cook. Oh my goodness. It was very difficult. It was very miserable. There was smoke in my eyes. It was hot. I was perspiring all the time. It was a lot of work to make this food, to develop these dishes. So, we pulled pumpkins right out of the ground. I had to wash them and then I had to chop them with a really dull knife. I never worked so hard prepping food before. There was so much smoke in my eyes. So much

smoke in my hair, I had to step outside all the time because I was coughing. Oh, the other thing about it was they brought spices on the Mayflower. They had cinnamon, they had salt, pepper, nutmeg, vanilla beans. They brought vanilla beans. So, it was very surprising that they had all these different spices. That day we put a duck in a pot and made a duck stew. We roasted quails over the open fire and bathed them in butter. And then we made fried pumpkin, fried in butter over the open fire and added cinnamon and nutmeg and salt and pepper. And you know, after these things were made after so much work, I was exhausted and I really, I actually really didn't care after a while cause I was so tired and sweaty and smoke and my eyes, my eyes were hurting. But then I tasted the food. It was fabulous. Fabulous. It was amazing. I couldn't believe it tasted so good. They have the same spices. They have the same butter, the same ingredients that we have today, except it was fresh. We took the pumpkin right out of the ground, the quail and the duck, they were fresh. So when we cook with all these different spices, it tasted so good. And it was a complete surprise to me that something like that could taste so good. Because what I found doing this book is that in historical periods people really want to taste. They wanted things to be spicy, they wanted things to be sweet, they really wanted the full experience of eating. I get the feeling that historical food has more taste than what we have today, so it was a big surprise to me that the food the pilgrims were eating in 1627 is as good if not better than what we eat today.

Marion Kane:

You list the kitchens in chronological order. More modern kitchens are the highlights. Georgia O'Keeffe's kitchen, Frank Lloyd Wright's kitchen and Louis Armstrong's kitchen and my two favorite ones. We'll get to one later. Elvis Presley's kitchen. What was that like?

John Ota:

It's complete a vintage '70s kitchen. It has Tiffany lamps that are decorated in bright fruits. He's got wall to wall carpet on the kitchen floor in multiple colors. The whole room is wrapped with dark wood paneled cupboards and it's so, it almost looks like a Ye Olde British pub. And the appliances are all in those '70s colors - a harvest gold refrigerator, harvest gold stove, avocado green sink, avocado green electric can opener. And there was a stool in the middle with an orange cushion where the person who was cooking would sit. So, it's very entertaining.

Marion Kane:

We'll move on to both of our favorite kitchens, Julia Child's. I have a picture of me in 1991 with Julia Child toasting with white wine and eating exotic snacks in my kitchen in Kensington Market.

John Ota:

Ha – aren't you lucky? You got to meet her! Oh, my goodness.

Marion Kane:

She cooked me breakfast in her kitchen in Cambridge, Mass.

John Ota:

Oh, my goodness. This is the most famous chef in American history.

Marion Kane:

She cooked me her famous scrambled eggs.

John Ota:

Oh, the scrambled eggs that she made on that Boston television program that launched her into a television.

Marion Kane:

Yes. Where did you visit Julia's kitchen?

John Ota:

So, Julia Child is my hero and Julia Child was the hero of my mother. We would sit around and watch her show all the time. And then at the end of the show, my whole family, including my father, we'd jump out of the living room, get into the car and go to the supermarket and get the groceries so that could make the Julia Child a recipe that we were just watching. So I'm doing this book on kitchens. I have to see Julia Child's kitchen. That would be the most famous kitchen in North America. Julia Child had donated her kitchen to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington so that everybody could enjoy her kitchen. And before I went, I really did not know what to expect. I expected a superstar like Julia Child to have a fabulous supersonic kitchen with all the latest gizmos because she's Julia Child. So, I get to the Smithsonian, I walk into the exhibit. Oh my God, my jaw just dropped.

Marion Kane:

She had pegboard all over her walls. Pots and pans were hanging on them.

John Ota:

Yes. And really, when I first saw it, I thought it was a mess. You know, everything's out on the counters - her olive oil, her vinegars are all on the counter. There's even a jar of Skippy peanut butter out on the counter. There are pots and pans hanging off the pegboard everywhere and there seems to be countless knives and spoons and different utensils all scattered all over the kitchen.

Marion Kane:

We ate in the kitchen, breakfast. Tell me about the plastic garbage bin.

John Ota:

Oh yeah. So, the plastic garbage bin. First of all, this kitchen reminded me so much of my mother's kitchen. I thought about my mother right away. I could not believe it. Hanging from the handle of the Julia Child's oven is the same red and white dish towel that my mother had hanging off her oven door handle. And in the middle of the kitchen is this plastic garbage bin with a swinging lid. I thought what an odd thing for Julia Child to have in the middle of her kitchen. But my mother had the exact same plastic garbage bin with a swinging lid in the middle of her kitchen.

Marion Kane:

Coincidence, I think not!

John Ota:

I could not believe it. And I used to say to my mother, "Would you please get that garbage can out of the middle of the kitchen? No one has a garbage can in the middle of the kitchen." And she said, "Just leave it John, it's fine there. It works for me." I was like, Oh my goodness. And now I go into Julia Child's kitchen. She's got the same plastic garbage can - the exact same one - in the middle of her kitchen floor. It was amazing.

Marion Kane:

There are recipes at the end of your book. I can't believe you chose Julia's cheese soufflé. I make it often. It's incredible. It works perfectly.

John Ota:

It's orgasmic. When you say it is just fabulous.

Marion Kane:

I made it the other night.

John Ota:

My goodness. It's so crunchy on the outside, it has that nice crust and in the inside it's so soft and pillowy and creamy and so you get this crunch and softness with the different cheeses all at the same time.

Marion Kane:

I have made two other recipes from your book including the matzo balls in chicken soup from the New York Tenement kitchen. They were good.

John Ota:

Oh, I'm so glad you enjoyed that. Thank you. So that's a, a recipe from the grandmother of my friend Annie Lewison. She lives right around the corner from the Tenement Museum. And so, we made this a matzo ball soup in her kitchen. And what was really lovely about making that soup was that she said that whenever she makes the soup she thinks about her grandmother and how lovely she was. And then she thinks about her parents, her mother and father. And then she thinks about her aunts and uncles and her cousins all sitting around the table while they're having the soup and the laughing and the joking and the different stories they would tell. So, there's a lot of love that goes into making that soup and a lot of love in consuming that soup. So, it's memories and texture and taste and that love that people have for each other in matzo ball soup.

Marion Kane:

I couldn't have said it better myself.

John Ota:

Well I thought I had that soup. I've never made a matzo ball soup. It was a wonderful making it with Annie and it just left me with such a nice warm, glowing feeling inside. And the taste is so surprisingly good. It's amazing that something so simple can taste so good.

Marion Kane

Some cultures think that to have food taste good you have to put love into the food.

John Ota:

This past week I made my first challah bread. Oh my goodness. To get the dough pounded down is a lot of work because you want to get that gluten. My instructor said, "John, keep putting love into that bread. Keep putting love into that bread" and what she's saying is keep pounding that bread. Keep rolling it. So I was getting tired, but then I thought about the people who are going to eat this bread tonight who was my wife and my friends and I forgot about all the hard work. We made the bread. It was stupendous. They ate it in about five minutes and it was really good. I think it was all that pounding, all that love that I put into making that bread.

Marion Kane:

Would you like to say a last thing?

John Ota:

What I learned when I was writing this book is that we take so much for granted today. People have beans, for instance, and it comes in a cellophane package and they're already cut and they're already cleaned and all you have to do is put it in the microwave for two minutes and you open up the cellophane bag and the beans come out perfectly. There's no love in making beans like that. There's no love in the cooking or you're thinking about the person you're going to be feeding or you're cooking for.

So, with this book, I would like to inspire an enthusiasm and a love for cooking again. Cooking is love. It's memories, it's culture, it's history and identity. And our lives are so go, go, go, we don't take the time to put that love back into cooking. So, I hope that when people read this book, it'll inspire them to put love back into cooking.

Marion Kane:

Well said, and thank you, John Ota.

John Ota:

Marion, thank you!

Marion Kane:

That was my conversation with John Ota. His new book, *The Kitchen: A Journey Through History in Search of the Perfect Design* is available now. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth. You can find more stories like this at marionkane.com and in Apple podcasts. Thank you for listening.