



A Homemade Home

by Mackenzie Krauter

The motor of Mom's coffee machine reverberated as fresh decaf espresso poured from the spout. A touch of heavy cream and a dash of cinnamon rounded out the roasted flavors of the coffee. At 6 pm on a wintry Montana evening, we hopped into her Toyota Rav4 and headed to the pottery studio. The crisp air filled my lungs as I clutched the white paper cup in both hands. We took the drive time to catch up on the latest happenings of our lives. It's not often that we have some time together, one-on-one. Usually, there are plenty of interjections of little ones chiming in to talk to Gigi (my mom's name for Grandma). Mom gifted me this beginner ceramics class so we could spend quality time together and enjoy learning something new.

When we arrived at the studio, a warehouse on the outskirts of Missoula, we didn't know what to expect. We sauntered in and opened the door. A calm little dog greeted us, white with some black and brown spots, one blue eye, one brown. There were eight potters wheels lined up in two rows so we found a seat on the stools next to them. Once the other classmates had arrived, the instructor introduced herself and gave us a tour of the studio. She was a ceramics artist and one of those people who are just effortlessly cool without trying to be. She guided us step by step through how to center the clay on the wheel and how to build a cylinder. The grey clay glided through her hands gracefully. We all stared in awe, mesmerized by the spinning wheel and the ease at which she had just made a vessel flawlessly and quickly out of a lump of clay.

When it came time for us to begin, we realized the craft was not as easy as our teacher made it look. After many attempts, I finally was able to build a piece that was worth keeping. This class was a series of four sessions: two for throwing clay on the wheel, one class for trimming, and one for glazing. Mom and I eventually were both able to create a few pieces that we were excited about.

I was enamored with the process, elbows deep in clay and mud, the wheel flinging bits of clay all over my clothes. It was a sensory experience, challenging yet relaxing. But what I was most looking forward to was enjoying the final product. A vessel that I could use in my kitchen. Daydreams of handmade diningware danced in my head. Would I be able to pull it off?

At the end of this beginner class, I was pleased to bring home three bowls. After a few more classes and more creations, I had a shelf in my cupboard dedicated to my handmade tableware. Each piece is individual and distinct, my own little functional art collection. When we purchased our home in Montana we had our work cut out for us. Over two years, with time and budget limitations, we have worked tirelessly to elevate our home and land to be a better fit for our family. Remodeling several bedrooms, flooring projects, loads of paint, fence builds, and a chicken coop construction project, we have had our hands full. These projects have set us up to have some new family habits. In the morning the girls grab our wire basket and walk down to the chicken coop together. They bring up the eggs that we then prepare for breakfast.

Several weekends after we moved in we started to see little orange signs popping up all over the main road down our valley. We discovered that there was an upcoming 50-mile yard sale, a whole weekend event! This is an annual occurrence. I heard that some people even travel long distances to spend the weekend exploring the sales. This appealed to the treasure-hunting nature that both Colten and I possess. We love a good vintage find or bargain. We spent the entire weekend with kids in tow, following neon arrows up bumpy country roads. We carefully tied mid-century furniture to the top of our Subaru Forester. As our home started coming together, we already had an eclectic mix of old and new, hand-me-down, and homemade. The oak grain of my grandmother's table and the floral upholstered chairs are the backdrops of our family meals. That table holds the memories of playing spades with my grandparents when Colten and I were in our dating days. The metal industrial bookshelf that my mother gifted us is where I store my extensive collection of colorful cookbooks, new and old. On our living room window sill sits a vase from our neighbor. Next to it is a collection of beautifully bound old books that a fellow bookworm shared with me at his garage sale.

Familiar items with a backstory ground my home in a sense of belonging. When I walk into a room of strangers, my eyes dart around the room. I'm not sure where I fit or where I belong. When I walk into a room, let's say at my grandma's house at Thanksgiving, I am greeted warmly. I have a relationship with each person. There is depth, understanding, and knowledge there that transcends the specific moment. The item comes alive. Like Mrs. Potts, Lumiere, or Cogsworth from *Beauty and the Beast*, these objects take on a sense of identity.

When I make a meal for someone I love, the food itself is a part of a story. The apple pie I serve to my husband is not just an apple pie. My daughters and I spend a Saturday in the autumn sun on the back porch. We core and slice local apples from a friend's orchard. Simmering them in a pot on the stove with spices, brown sugar, vanilla, and butter transforms them into a hearty pie filling. My oldest daughter watches a tutorial and notes a recipe for pie crust in her sweet handwriting. She cuts up butter and mixes it with the flour, salt, and sugar with her bare hands. The oven does what ovens do, heat and time transform our humble ingredients into a crispy, browned, delicacy. From beginning to end, the apple pie is more than food, it's a journey that we get to experience together.

This approach to handmade, thrifted, or passed-down household items seems so different from the modern consumer way of life we know today. If I lived 3000 years ago and broke a plate, I couldn't just order another one in the same brand, color, and style online. Nature provided the

means of getting food to mouth and survival was paramount. Leaves, wood, stone, and clay were the eating methods. As time progressed and civilizations thrived, new elements such as precious metals, or artisan-painted decorations emerged. The act of making dishes required skill and time. This resulted in expensive goods with limited supply. I imagine this would cause the average household to give special care to each item and value those pieces through generations. When plates are hard to come by, you cannot just go out and get another. The owner places a high value on those daily-use items. As technology advanced, many goods could be machine-made, each an identical version of the other. This reduced costs and advanced supply, and perhaps this changed some perceptions of our household items.

The rise of large corporations making a lot of our products is one of the reasons I can feel disconnected from the items in my home. When I had the privilege of quitting my job to be home full time with the family, that helped me to create enough space to approach our life with more intention. For me, the first shift was our diet. I wanted to support my family's health. But this quest has led me to care about so much more than just my family's experience. It's like pulling on a thread and realizing it's connected to an entire sweater. My family's health is connected to the success of small businesses and local farmers. Each purchase we make can take us closer or further from the quality food and the local economy that we want our family to support and enjoy.

When we moved to Montana my vision was to have a Montana-made pantry—that the majority of the staples that we eat would be from local farms and businesses. This year we were out of town for the 50-mile yard sale but I mentioned to a friend that I was on the hunt for a grain mill. She had a friend who showed up to her garage sale carrying a quality grain mill. I purchased the mill and promptly ordered wheat berries from *Living Sky Grains* in Three Forks, Montana. I cannot wait to use my new mill to incorporate local grains into my sourdough bakes.

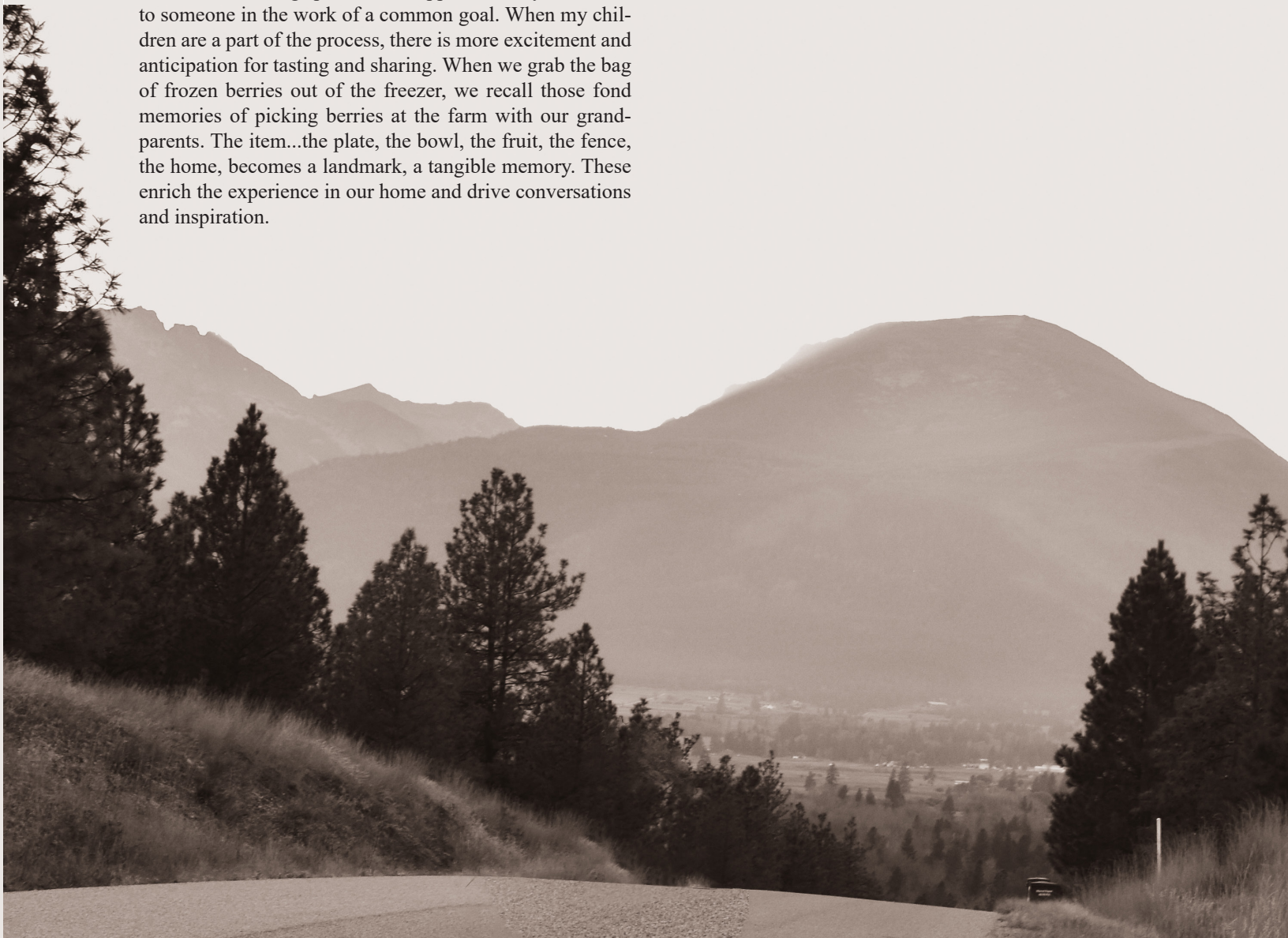
It is a part of our routine to order meat from *Living River Farms* in Stevensville, MT. The girls and I drive a few miles from our house and turn down a dirt road. We drive by a lush green field and the Bitterroot Mountain range looms in the distance. I pop inside to pick up our box from the freezer at the main building. The first order that I placed was for chicken leg quarters. These bone-in, skin-on chicken leg quarters are the perfect size and the flavor is delicious. We began to order other meat cuts from this farm, whole chickens, steaks, and ground beef. Even though local quality meat can be more expensive, it is worth the investment in health, flavor, knowledge of where the meat comes from. Most importantly it supports our local community.

Sourcing local and seasonal ingredients from farms near us turns food into an experience. A few times this summer the girls and I drove farther down our valley to *Aspen Grove Farm* in Corvallis MT. We filled tiny green baskets to the brim with the reddest, sweetest strawberries. We navigated tall plants of raspberries to find the ones that were ripe and fresh. We tasted our first bites of honeyberry, a little tear-drop-shaped fruit. They are purple with almost suede-like skin and the flavor of a blueberry dipped in sweet honey. We traveled home from road trips to Washington with boxes of fresh nectarines and peaches in tow, filling the car with their sweet aroma. Then we processed them and my freezer has fruit for the coming winter months. I prefer a ripe peach slice frozen in its prime to the bland peach at the supermarket in the dead of winter.

Creating something from scratch, whether that be a plate, a pie, or a loaf of bread, adds depth to my daily experience. Taking the time to create something homemade is special because of the adventure it becomes. This is an adventure we can share with others. My mom's gift of a pottery class allowed us to connect outside of our regular interactions. There is something special that happens when you sit next to someone in the work of a common goal. When my children are a part of the process, there is more excitement and anticipation for tasting and sharing. When we grab the bag of frozen berries out of the freezer, we recall those fond memories of picking berries at the farm with our grandparents. The item...the plate, the bowl, the fruit, the fence, the home, becomes a landmark, a tangible memory. These enrich the experience in our home and drive conversations and inspiration.



*Author & photographer
Mackenzie Krauter is a
Pacific Northwest native
living in Stevensville, MT.
For more stories & recipes
visit mackenziekrauter.com*





Meatball Marinara on Sourdough

Mackenzie Krauter

Meatballs:

- 1 lb Montana ground beef
- 1 cup Panko breadcrumbs
- 1 cup parmesan
- 1 tsp Italian seasoning
- 2 eggs
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/8 tsp pepper

Tomato Sauce:

- 8 homegrown Roma tomatoes
- 5 garlic cloves
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 tsp coconut sugar

- Sourdough bread
- Kerrygold Butter
- Fresh Parsley

- 1) Remove the core of the tomatoes and cut them in half. Place them in a saucepan and add the garlic, olive oil, salt, and coconut sugar.
- 2) Simmer the tomato mixture on medium-low for one hour.
- 3) Transfer the tomato mixture to a food processor and blend the sauce for one minute.
- 4) Return the sauce to the saucepan and keep on medium-low heat.
- 5) Preheat the oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit.
- 6) Add the ground beef, breadcrumbs, parmesan, Italian seasoning, eggs, salt, and pepper to a bowl and mix by hand until well incorporated.
- 7) Form 12 meatballs and place them onto a parchment-lined baking sheet.
- 8) Bake the meatballs for 26 minutes or until a meat thermometer reaches 165 degrees Fahrenheit.
- 9) Cut the meatballs in half and transfer the cooked meatballs into the saucepan with the tomato sauce.
- 10) Set the oven to the broil setting.
- 11) Butter four slices of sourdough bread and place the bread on a baking sheet.
- 12) Broil the sourdough for four minutes or until lightly browned.
- 13) Place some half slices of meatballs on the toast and cover with some extra tomato sauce.
- 14) Add mozzarella and parmesan cheese.
- 15) Return the toast to the oven and broil for an additional 5-6 minutes or until the cheese is bubbly and lightly browned.
- 16) Sprinkle the meatball toast with fresh parsley and serve.