

Western North Carolina Woman

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LENORE BAUM:

traveling the road to vegetarian well-ville

by barbara hooley

“Are we there yet?” a backseat-load of hungry children inquire. “Enjoy the journey. I’m following my *wooden nose*,” laughs dad, jolting along on some back road not shown on the map.

Mom sighs and puts the map aside. One more wildflower-strewn valley? One more green canopied back road? A mountain stream with a cascading waterfall? My younger brother, predictably about to throw up his tuna salad sandwich, whines to stop the car. My sister worries, “Are we lost?” Older and wiser at the sage age of twelve I know we aren’t lost; Dad’s just taking another detour. But I also know he “wouldn’t know” how long its going to take to get there. I’ve got my nose deep in a book and barely take notice of the lovely countryside passing by.

As a child those wandering path journeys seemed tiresome. Now I find myself pulled by some invisible but powerful magnet to those off-the-map byways. I take the wondering path and discover a tiny mountain stream with moss-covered rocks, a falling down barn on a steep mountain slope, shaggy goats contentedly munching at the stubbled hillside. I’m drawn to the earthy scent of an ancient walnut grove, or jewel ripe persimmons about to fall from one lone tree, split rail fences and waving wheat as golden as honey.

Life is often like that winding journey. You think you are on your way to a destination, might even map out a route, but there are detours of your own making all along the way. And it was just such a winding path that brought Lenore Baum to her present location and her newest cooking adventure.

Lenore Baum, a perky woman with curly salt and pepper hair who radiates health and a certain *joie de vivre*, is about to open a new cooking school here in the mountains of Western North

Carolina. She has been cooking with natural foods professionally for over thirty years, has already owned and operated a couple other cooking schools, but is now bringing her considerable skills and enthusiasm for healthy tasty vegetarian fare to our area and will open **Lenore’s Natural Cuisine** just north of Asheville in what Lenore calls Ox Creek Heaven.

To get to Lenore’s Natural Cuisine kitchen I parked my car at the bottom of a gently sloping hill and walked up a picturesque garden path overlooking newly planted terraced vegetable and herb gardens and a descending woody mountain meadow. Lenore, in white chef’s coat, met me at the front door. Her cooking school, with classes beginning in September, will operate out of her home. The passive solar house, designed by Chris Larson, is built out of stone and wood and has an elegant, zen-like simplicity. Taking off my shoes, I entered into a light-filled entryway. Just to the right is Lenore’s dream teaching kitchen, spacious and airy and flooded with natural light. Windows surround the entire kitchen making you feel you are almost outside. It’s a dream come true for Lenore, but her journey to this dream is equally interesting.

Lenore has always been interested in food and she credits her mother’s love for entertaining as the inspiration for her earliest interest in cooking. Her mother, a strict vegetarian herself from the age of eight after a trip to a beef slaughterhouse, served her children and her guests meat because she believed they needed the protein. Lenore’s vegetarian mother, now eighty-eight and in very good health, has not eaten

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in a restaurant in thirty-five years. But Lenore's road to healthy vegetarianism and her various professional cooking adventures took quite a few quirky detours.

Just out of college she became a dental hygienist for about a year. While in Boston, she discovered a vegetarian health food store run at the time by two cute guitar-playing guys. Under the pretense of learning about vegetarian cooking, she visited the store often, her real interest of course being the two cute guys, but discovered a genuine interest in natural foods cooking and converted to vegetarianism. Like the newly converted, she rigorously stuck to a strict regimen of beans and rice, tofu, soy products, whole wheat bread, nuts, cheese, alfalfa sprouts, spirulina and the like. For twelve years she continued down this path but made herself sick. She developed numerous serious health problems including hypoglycemia, unwanted weight gain, arthritis, yeast infections, endometriosis and mood swings.

During those twelve years she finished a master degree at Columbia University, taught elementary, then high school and later college English, sold homemade cookies and operated a small all natural carob fudge-making company. The cookie selling business, Sunshine Cookies, was her first food enterprise. She baked hundreds of large oatmeal banana cookies, donned a bright yellow ribbon plastered with a big smiley face, and worked the crowds selling homemade cookies. She admits her English classes also incorporated some elements of her health interests. She took

her students on field trips to health food stores, had them bring in mats and taught them yoga and tumbling, and started an ecology club.


Somewhere along the line she also became a gestalt therapist and moved to Arizona.

But her interest in vegetarianism continued and so did her wandering path toward lots of food adventures. For a year she opened her home to friends and acquaintances each Monday night. The Flower House Dining Room was what she called this venture. Word of mouth advertising generated a waiting list of customers. \$3.50 paid for a six-course sit-down vegetarian meal served at low Japanese-style tables.

Experimenting with lots of soups, she became something of a soup guru. At one point she opened a vegetarian deli, Lenore's Soup's Du Jour. This operation lasted for about four years and consisted of five large refrigerators behind her home accessed by customers down a winding path through a grapefruit grove. Customers placed their orders in advance and Lenore supplied homemade soups and various other vegetarian fare by leaving the orders in the numbered refrigerators and receiving payment on the honors system. Still teaching English full time, now at Arizona State University, Lenore rose at 3 a.m. each morning just to start the soup beans, then she swam for an hour each morning just to cool off from the hot kitchen before heading off to her day job.

In the 1980s, searching for alternative remedies for her

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exacerbating health problems, Lenore heard Marcia Halpern lecture on the link between food and disease. Doubtful that changing her food habits could radically improve her health, she gave it a try anyway. Within two weeks she saw an improvement. Within a year she was healthy again, pain free, and had lost all the extra weight. Her new-found knowledge and understanding of food was inspirational. After some experimental cooking with the few available vegetarian cookbooks at that time, Lenore wanted further study with macrobiotic and vegetarian teachers. She spent a year at the Kushi Institute with Aveline Kushi, studied with Wendy Esko, Diane Avoli, Meredith McCarty, and Ann Marie Colbin. She did an apprenticeship with Marcia

Halpern in South Carolina, spent a summer at French Meadows and studied at the Vega Institute in California.

In 1987, returning from the Kushi Institute to Phoenix, Lenore opened her first cooking school. She taught two to three classes a week for about three years, teaching several thousand students about healthy food choices, and macrobiotic and tasty vegetarian cooking. One of her students, Joe Baum, fell for her and proposed marriage. Agreeing to move with him to the Detroit area, Lenore opened another cooking school, Lenore's Natural Cuisine, where she continued to teach for eleven years about healthy vegetarian cooking.

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celebrating the strength, wisdom and grace of women

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Once on a Caribbean Cruise, Lenore ordered all her vegetarian meals in advance, telling the chef what she wanted and how she wanted it prepared. Not surprisingly, whenever her plate arrived, her dining neighbors leaned over and said, "I want that."

In 2000 she wrote her first cookbook, *Lenore's Natural Cuisine: Your Essential Guide to Wholesome, Vegetarian Cooking*. Two years later she wrote a second cookbook, *Sublime Soups: Vegetarian Soups and Quick Breads*, both published by Culinary Publications. With the publication of her cookbooks, she went on book tour for over a year, traveling across the country, promoting her cookbooks at over four hundred natural food stores and educating people about healthy vegetarian cooking.

So how did Lenore finally get to Western North Carolina? With Joe's retirement, he and Lenore agreed it was Lenore's turn to choose where they would live and made a list of all the things they wanted in a city. Having vacationed several times in the Smokies, they came to a UNCA retirement weekend in Asheville and started looking around at land. When they happened onto Ox Creek Heaven, it seemed too soon to purchase, but they couldn't

resist. Now, four years later, their home is built and Lenore's Natural Cuisine cooking school will be opening classes starting in September. With over ninety classes in her repertoire, Lenore will begin teaching three-hour classes on Saturdays. Many of her classes revolve around a theme; most include the five tastes. All classes include a full sit-down organic dinner and are quite cost conscious at \$45.

Lenore has lived in Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Phoenix, and Detroit and now Asheville. She wandered down a vegetarian path more than 30 years ago that led her through numerous adventures, down various career paths and to lots of food adventures. But she has never been lost, though I suspect she followed her nose—though not a "wooden" or "wouldn't know" one—sniffing out the scents and aromas of tasty vegetarian dishes. I also suspect that she has indeed arrived. [lenoresnatural.com; 828 645-1412]

Barbara Hooley is a fiber artist, freelance writer and teacher. She lives with her daughter and husband in Asheville, NC. [blhooley@yahoo.com]

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