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# Creativity and Cooking

## *Breakfast with the Caponigros*

BY MERRILL WILLIAMS

*Breakfast on Saturday morning at the Caponigro home is a family affair. John and Ardie let four-year old Gabe mix the pancake batter while they cook eggs and bacon, cut up fresh fruit, and serve lattes from their new Italian espresso machine. John's father Paul Caponigro arrives to help Gabe pour the batter into creative shapes: aliens, cows, and stars. The conversation turns to food as an art form. We ask John to talk about how artists seek creative expression in cooking.*

“FOR ME, COOKING IS ABOUT PUTTING THINGS together in creative ways, one of the key strategies for Edison or DaVinci. I like to experiment. It’s also because I can’t really think about anything else when I am cooking. I have to concentrate on what I’m doing. I can’t be wondering whom I have to call, what would happen if I had an extra week to do a workshop, and so on, especially if I really don’t know what I’m doing as I’m cooking. If I’m experimenting with a recipe, for example, I have to pay attention.

It’s a luxury to be able to cook, but it requires some energy. I’m more of a special occasion cook, not a daily cook. I like to cook on the weekends when I have energy and concentration to give to it. It’s nice because often you’re making a meal with other people, and you’re taking the time to sit down, eat it, and make it a social event. The communal thing is an important part of it.

It’s interesting for me to see the parallels between how I approach my photography and how I approach another creative outlet like cooking. I always try to come in prepared and make the best of the situation. With photography you can’t control everything. It’s the same with cooking. You could go to the grocery store, get all your ingredients, come home, get your kitchen completely locked down with all the right tools, and you can control it to a degree.

But that’s not the way I approach it. I go to the grocery store looking for ideas. I see something and think, OK, this would be interesting, let’s try it. For example, my dad will learn a Chopin piece and play it the same way his entire life. I’d much rather play like jazz pianist Keith Jarrett. I like to see what happens. I modified my grandmother’s pizza recipe and her enchilada recipe. I added tomatoes and some chocolate because I like certain things and I like to put them together in certain combinations.

As a photographer, you can put yourself in situations where you’re likely to encounter the things you gravitate toward, and sometimes it’s a completely fresh and new experience, but you go in prepared a little bit. “Prepared but open.” That’s my motto.

On the other hand, if you start out locked into one idea, you always get the same result. You’re not going to get something different if you just do the same thing every time.

Most artists need another creative outlet. Especially an outlet where they can be less professional about it and just be an amateur. I’m always going to be an amateur cook. And I’m always going to be an amateur musician. That’s not only okay with me, it’s excellent, and I like to exploit it.

With music particularly I can approach it with an empty mind and not bring to it all the professional concerns and pressures I

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have with photography. All those things can really get in the way of creative flow and discovery and insight. It can be a problem to be too professional. So I think having another outlet is essential for any creative person and it could be anything: poetry, music, or whatever. Part of it is taking the pressure off and not trying to

be the next William Blake. I’m never going to be Emeril [Lagasse]. That’s not my goal. I just want to make a good meal, have some fun

and discovery, and find my own style. That keeps it enjoyable. To a certain degree it’s unfocused and open and flowing. It’s ephemeral. You do it and let it go.



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taught me to make pizza sauce and how to roast peppers. Nonna was the quintessential Italian cook and her food was the glue that kept the family together in so many ways. All the major holidays were at Nonna's table in Hartford, Connecticut. Look, if you're Italian and you're sad or guilty or happy or whatever, you eat! Her cooking style was very basic Italian peasant food like spinach or potato pies, pasta fagioli, pizza, and, of course, oil and garlic in everything. She taught me how to shop for bargains in the grocery store and how to shop in season.

Her specialty was thick-crust Sicilian style pizza. I actually got an A at Yale for a paper I wrote on pizza! New Haven claimed to be the home of pizza and my creative writing instructor asked for a paper on pizza. So after the requisite library research, I went to go make pizza at Nonna's.

My mother is a really good cook. She makes a lavender peach preserve that is amazing! Her roots are in Kentucky, and I have a definite love for Southern cooking, especially grits. I also love fried chicken, collards, and sweet potatoes.

My dad can cook too. Like me, he would never consider himself a real cook, but he does just fine. And like me, he hasn't really focused on it. But he can

always put ingredients together to make a very good meal. He loves the socialization that is part of a family meal and that's an important part of our relationship. That's very Italian!

My own expectations for what I do with photography are obviously very high, but when I'm cooking I have a chance to let go of those expectations. That's true with my music too. I just play at 2:30 in the morning when I can't offend anybody and nobody's listening so if I want to make a god-awful noise I can. I still have to watch how judgmental I can get when I'm playing because I have my own musical sensibility and a certain limited capacity. I'm looking for a respite and not trying to measure up to Mozart or even Keith Jarrett. But I am looking for a quality that Keith Jarrett has of discovery and really being present. If you're just reading the notes on the page, you haven't really shown up. So I try to tune in to who I really am and bring myself into the music.

So cooking is completely no pressure for me. It's more of a social act than music or photography. Cooking should be fun and spontaneous and improvisational and full of discovery. It recharges my batteries.

As a child, I had a close relationship with my paternal grandmother who





*This is a good recipe to make with friends who can help chop, grate, slice and dice. Finish the meal with a dessert of broiled bananas topped with cinnamon, nutmeg and ice cream (or whipped cream).*

## John Paul's Enchiladas

- 1-2 Tablespoons red chili powder (mild, medium or hot) to taste
- 4 Tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 small can tomato paste
- 1 cube bullion
- 3 teaspoons cinnamon
- 3 teaspoons nutmeg
- 3 teaspoons unsweetened powdered cocoa
- 2 white onions, sliced
- 2 chicken breasts, cut into bite-sized pieces
- 1/4 head iceberg lettuce, shredded
- 1 fresh tomato, diced
- 1 cup cheddar cheese, grated
- 8 corn tortillas, warmed until soft

Lightly brown the chili powder in the olive oil; add the garlic and onions and sauté until soft. Add the tomato paste, bullion, cinnamon, nutmeg and cocoa. Add enough water to make a thin paste. Adjust seasonings if desired. Add the chicken and simmer until cooked.

Place a tortilla on an individual size heat-proof plate and top with the chicken-onion mixture, lettuce, tomatoes and cheese. Repeat to make a second layer, ending with a topping of cheese. Place under broiler and broil until the cheese is golden brown. Option: top with a fried egg. Serve immediately.

**Serves 4.**

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

John Paul Caponigro is respected internationally as one of the most prominent artists working with digital media processes. His primary artistic focus is on the natural world and his photography resides in numerous private and public collections, including Princeton University, the Estée Lauder collection and The Smithsonian. An authority on creativity and fine digital printing, John Paul teaches both privately in his studio and internationally at prominent workshops including The Maine Photographic Workshops and The Santa Fe Photographic Workshops. John Paul is a Canon Explorer of Light and an Epson Stylus Pro. His book, Adobe Photoshop Master Class, is in its second edition. John Paul has been named one of the 15 best artists of the past 30 years by "Zoom" magazine, and received the Fellow award from the Maine Arts Commission.

As a young man, Paul Caponigro studied the piano then discovered a new creative medium in black and white photography. He was a young contemporary of Ansel Adams and Brett Weston, and studied under Minor White. He has photographed all over the world, has had countless exhibitions, and published several books and portfolios. He is said to have more prints in museum collections than any other living photographer, and is internationally recognized as one of the most important landscape photographers in the history of the medium. Paul's new book, Stone Churches of Ireland, is due out later this year.



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John Paul Caponigro's annual studio exhibit in Cushing will be open to the public August 5-6 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. John Paul will give his artist talk at 2:00 p.m. each day. For more information visit: [www.johnpaulcaponigro.com](http://www.johnpaulcaponigro.com) or email: [info@johnpaulcaponigro.com](mailto:info@johnpaulcaponigro.com)