On Eating Well
Elissa Altman mixes her two loves: cooking and writing

Elissa Altman fell in love with cooking at Warren Towers. No, it wasn’t the dorm food that awakened her senses; it was a book. For Christmas during her sophomore year, two friends gave her a cookbook with a card that said, “Merry Christmas! Any idiot who can read can cook!”

“I dipped in and out of it, and the cooking bug bit me, hard,” recalls Altman (CGS’83, CAS’85). “I have a distinct memory of sitting in my South Campus suite, reading my very first issue of Gourmet and thinking, I want to write about food.”

Altman now dishes on food for the Huffington Post and on her personal blog, Poor Man’s Feast. She’s also associate editorial director of Reader’s Digest (“my day job,” she says).

After graduating from BU with an English degree, Altman worked in publishing and attended the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City. The natural transition, she says, would have been to become a chef, but the long hours didn’t appeal to her. “I find myself far more interested in the way people eat across demographics,” she says.

She began writing for the Hartford Courant, and later became the paper’s freelance restaurant critic. She hated it. “Who am I to sit down in a restaurant and either make or break their future in maybe one or two meals?” she says. The newspaper fired her, she says, when she wrote a negative review of a big-time advertiser.

She decided to turn her longtime Courant column, “The Economical Fresser” (Fresser is a Yiddish-German word for someone who loves food), into a cookbook. “The point of the column was largely to show readers that what constitutes a good meal, or good food, is rarely tied to whether or not it’s ‘fancy,’” Altman says, “but rather how it is prepared and how lovingly the ingredients are treated and presented.”

Her book, Big Food, was published in 2005. Altman says she was intrigued by the popularity of warehouses such as BJ’s and Costco. Shopping at these warehouses, she writes in the book, can lead to impulse purchases and wasted food.

Altman knows from experience about the pitfalls of buying in bulk. One winter, she bought eight pounds of Meyer lemons at her local supermarket, enticed by the price and her craving for a taste of summer. She dreamed of the exotic dishes she would conjure with the hard-to-find fruit: Moroccan-style couscous, Greek lemon-and-egg soup, and candied Meyer lemon slices on top of a rich chocolate tart.

Reality soon hit. “The refrigerated shelf life of a Meyer lemon is approximately two weeks,” Altman writes in the introduction, “and sure enough, two weeks later, my glorious lemons grew hard, unattractively crusty, dry, and furry, and completely inedible. So I threw them out. Seven pounds of them.”

After a colleague introduced her to an editor at the Huffington Post, Altman moved her musings from print to online, and she now writes about current topics, such as the demise of her old favorite, Gourmet, and last fall’s film Julie and Julia.

In 2009, she decided to start Poor Man’s Feast (poormansfeast.blogspot.com), which she describes as a food memoir, with recipes, advice, and personal stories. It has more than 25,000 regular readers, which Altman attributes mostly to word-of-mouth, with a little extra help from her fan page on Facebook.

In a recent post, she recounts her scramble when some vegan friends came for dinner (note: Mexican chocolate tofu pudding needs “super fabulous high quality” vegan-friendly chocolate), and another recalls her love of Spam.

At home, in Unionville, Connecticut, she will often whip up a recipe, like one of her favorite Indian dishes, Goan shrimp curry, when she’s deciding what to feature on her blog.

For Altman, food is one of the most revealing windows into our culture. “There is nothing more human than sharing food,” she says. “It makes us who we are. And if I can contribute to the cultural dialogue by writing about it, I will have done my job.”