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PROFILE

Raging at the sky

For the past 15 years, Peggy Markel has done it all by combining her greatest passions into a dream job

By NATASHA GARDNER

Peggy Markel, slow food guru and culinary adventurer, is sipping on a chai at The Kitchen. She's talking about growing up in Alabama with her mother's fried chicken and her father's Friday catfish fries. Her voice still carries the soft cadence of the South, and it is obvious that Markel feels at home sitting around a kitchen table, talking and reminiscing. She's telling stories about her father's garden, where he planted neat rows of vegetables.

"He grew twelve varieties of peppers," Markel says. "We'd pickle them in these beautiful jars and sometimes carve out the carrots to say things." Year after year, the rich dirt yielded bounties of heirloom vegetables that were perfectly suited to the local climate. She learned to appreciate the culinary link between the soil and the plate. So much so, that her company, Peggy Markel's Culinary Adventures, is grounded in that philosophy. "I've always had an interest in food and always had an interest in where it comes from," Markel says. She was raised surrounded by people who cared about good food, and that background helped her quickly notice during her travels how much local growing conditions dictate an area's cuisine and history.

Connecting cuisine, culture, and lifestyle, became the tagline for her culinary adventure company, which is turning 15 this year. This milestone is significant, but Markel has other reasons to celebrate. "I turned 50 and a grandmother in the same year, and that's sooner than I thought either one would happen," Markel says. "If I were to be honest, I would say that it really feels great. There is a sense of wisdom gained, and I think that goes all across the board."

As she reminisces about her family and career, she can pinpoint life-changing moments in her life. At one time, she was living on the other side of the world and happy raising her children, Emily and Graham. But she could feel something churning inside. "We had been living in New Zealand," Markel says. "Before we came back to the States, I remembered raging at the sky, trying to figure out what it was that I wanted to do with my life." When she returned to Boulder in 1987, the little voice in her gut kept getting louder, and that's when fate stepped in. In a chance meeting, Markel ran into a friend of a friend who was an Italian professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. "I went up to her and asked her if I could audit her class, at 35, and she said yes," Markel says. "And I swear to you, my life changed in that very moment."

Although she didn't know where she was heading, things started falling into place. After studying Italian for a few months, Markel found a \$400 flight to Italy, got her sister to watch her kids, and headed abroad for a month to hone her new language skills. On her first day in Italy, she ran into a friend of a friend who asked why she was visiting. On a whim, she replied that she was there to study cooking. They started chatting about her philosophy on food, one contact led to another contact and within a week she made a business presentation about culinary adventures to a local villa. "Everything that has happened in the last 15 years has been just that easy and organic," she says, punctuating each word with a tap on the table. "I'm going to write a book one of these days called Friend of a Friend." Other Italian cooking tours, run by famous cookbook writers, were operating at the time, but Markel wanted to focus on culture, food and the senses. "The feel of cooking, or your approach to food in general, is a very natural, instinctual, and sensual thing," Markel says. "When you think about what you want to eat, you usually get some kind of feeling, or vision, or taste." Her programs focus on prying people away from rigid recipes, so that they learn to trust their own cooking skills. She believes that if people immerse themselves in cultures with natural rhythms established around local foods and slow cooking, they can replicate that feeling of connection in their own kitchens. Italy was the perfect place to try her experiment. "Even though I had been in a lot of different cultures, the Italian culture was the one that seemed to resonate the most," Markel says. "The whole culture was eating that way."

In 1992, she founded La Cucina al Focolare (Cooking by the Fireside), and led a group of 11 Boulderites to Italy for her first culinary adventure. The trip was a success. Within a year, her tours were drawing people across the country,

including Todd Purdum, a political writer for The New York Times, who wrote a long article about his experience on the trip for the paper. "After one year in business, I had this huge thing in The New York Times and that really put me on the map," Markel says. "Things suddenly changed in a big way." Spots filled up quickly and she added more tours and destinations. The Ligurian School of Poetic Cooking, her second program, was located at a fish restaurant in the Italian Riviera. "It was in this one little bay called the Bay of Poets, where D.H. Lawrence used to go," Markel says. "Byron and Shelley used to all hang out there, so the byline for that particular program was Eat Poetry." More programs were added in Elba, Sicily and Morocco.

"North Africa is really interesting," Markel says. "It's kind of like an extension of Spain, so it's like Mediterranean cuisine that's infused with spices." Markel's tour list creates a map of locally grown food and cultural cuisine. She can quickly describe how the spice flavors of Morocco dissipate as you travel north through the olive-tree laden areas of Italy and up to the dairy-rich mountainous land of the north. The areas she describes have a personal connection that extends beyond her business. During WWII, her father served as a sergeant in communications in the same regions where she now holds culinary tours. "My father spent time there during the war, and he sculpted and wrote poetry," Markel says. "Even though he was a soldier, he actually found time to relate." When she sat down to look at a photo album with him after she'd started her business, she realized the circular path that their lives had followed. "I didn't realize that I was actually tracing my father's footsteps," Markel says. "In 1943, he landed in Casablanca, and then came north to Sicily, and then went further north." She had grown up with stories of his service and travels, but he never pressured her to visit the area. "He never said, 'Oh, you should go here.' All he did was just infuse me with stories and images," Markel says. At the age of 17, she made her first journey to Europe and hasn't stopped touring the globe since, making trips to Europe, China, Australia and many other countries. Her travels brought her to Boulder in 1976, and she returned in 1977 to make it her home. "I was on a spiritual path," Markel says, explaining that she was a Whirling Dervish during that time. "I came to study meditation, and so I've been here ever since." While she keeps a small apartment in Florence, she still calls Boulder home. "I don't want to lose my connection to Boulder, because I appreciate it," Markel says. She lives on ten acres outside of town and enjoys the country's big sky. "I like having that possibility of coming back and really being able to breathe." Both of her children - and her new granddaughter - live in the area, and Markel usually spends winter and summer here. She tries to give back to the Boulder community when she is in town by hosting aperitivos at The Kitchen, writing for Elephant magazine and staying involved with Slow Food Boulder, a group she helped organize. Community involvement is an important lesson she learned from her business, and she integrates this message into her daily life. "I think every moment is really tremendously potent and just rich with possibility," Markel says. "That's the same philosophy that I incorporate on my trips. That every moment has the possibility for magic, if you just open up to it. It's the moments that we're not doing anything that the most exciting things happen."