

Skillet Wild Asparagus

1 large bunch (1½ to 2 pounds) asparagus Serves 5
2 tablespoons butter
Salt and pepper

“And looks like we clean forget what we come to do, what we been learning through all them trials and tribulations to do and it's now.” - The Salt Eaters by Toni Cade Bambara

Only once you have severed the connection to the land, to the knowledge and remembrance of an individual and collective past, and the hope for a future full of safety and freedom of expression have you finally killed a people. To understand what is required for full subjugation is to understand the necessity of obliterating more than just corporeal bodies. It follows then that memory preservation, reconnection to land, and place-making is historical preservation and, at times, the field for resistance. To say that we care for ourselves and those around us is to be intentional and protective of more than just the flesh, the tangible things we can touch—it is the way we care for their footprints in the soil, the oil their skin leaves on bedding, and the responsibility we accept of both safeguarding the past and building on what’s left. Our commitment to caring for and corroborating something as fragile and valuable as memory marks the spot for how far we are willing to go when we undertake this task. *Keep the bones.*

Skillet-cooked asparagus have more flavor than steamed asparagus. They finish off bright green in color, brittle, and have a flavor of the butter they cooked in. They may be fried whole or cut into 2-inch pieces. If cooked in pieces, the tips should not be added until the stalks are nearly done, as the tips cook more quickly and have a tendency to scorch. If cooked whole, they must be watched carefully.

Who is afforded sovereignty over and respect for their memories? How do we preserve and share them in a way that is reverent and protective, yet leaves the door open for the collective to continue the responsibility of preservation? In *Memory Worker*, Kelly Taylor Mitchell demonstrates what a tender, intentional, loving labor around familial, and ultimately ancestral, excavation of memories and spiritual practices looks like. Mitchell’s studio is littered with lightboxes covered in slide film photos taken by her grandfather, boxes of rescued fabric and Spanish Moss she’s collected from frequent travels to southeastern coastal communities, reservoirs of Gullah Geechee culture and sacred land. Even in the small, ephemeral effects floating around, like a left behind note by one of her students from an activity on affirmations, it’s made very clear that Mitchell is met and cradled with the same level of intentionality and tenderness she approaches

her work with. This kind of reciprocal intimacy is key to the processes and materials Mitchell makes use of. *If cooked whole, they must be watched carefully.*

How integral interpersonal connection is, both as a conduit and on its own, to the work is made plain in the way Mitchell comes to her use of shape: the outlines of two people holding hands side by side, an outstretched leg, or a pair sitting on the floor with their feet pressed against the others. The choice to weave together contents both found and made, contained by boundaries created by the body is a submission to the work she has been called to do and that she does not do it alone. We are greeted with a tapestry like a pair of ushers, hovering, waiting above their dainty sand portal for us to find our seat in the pews, because service is both ongoing and always beginning.

Across from our ushers rests a figure in either spiritual ecstasy or exhaustion, praying hands to mouth, gaze to God, defined by a patchwork of photos of food preparation and fabric. Reminiscent of family reunion t-shirts, “Blessed and Highly Favored” is dissected and placed rhythmically, a self-affirming phrase that also points back to a longstanding symbiotic relationship between the Christian church and Black spiritual practices. *Be sure they don’t burn.*

Mitchell’s foundation of study of and reverence for Black spirituality and folklore reaffirms itself constantly throughout her material choices, for example with her garlands of popcorn: corn has been used as altar offerings as well as popcorn being symbolic for healing, after a version of the story of Lazarus in which his sores fall away and become popcorn. Couched between examples of complex and enduring restoration and preservation efforts, like that of individuals and communities along the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, and love and hungry intuition that manifest themselves through anthropological, detailed observation and labor, like that of Ed Bland or Zora Neale Hurston, *Memory Worker* is both a comfort and a call. It is hearing a Muddy Waters record playing in the next hallway. It is being carried to your room when you’ve fallen asleep at a party, yet you can still hear the laughter from the living room. It is a demonstration of a good steward to a personal history, in a way that encourages us to learn how to be good stewards of a collective history. However faint the tune you hear, the practices you remember, follow it with certainty; because what one does for the olive trees, the sweetgrass, the archives, the safety of an uninterrupted walk outside at night, the future of those after us, we all do.

Rinse the asparagus in cold water. Place the butter in a medium skillet, then put the asparagus on top; the bit of water left clinging is enough. Cover the skillet and let cook about 3 minutes. Be sure they don’t burn; remove the lid and check, turning them over. Cover again and let cook for about 5 minutes more. Season to taste after cooking.

“And soon, sweetheart, this will all be yours.” - The Salt Eaters, Toni Cade Bambara