



The Path to Understanding Pollock Could Go Through the Stomach

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by Charles A. Riley II

Brace yourself, honey.

We've been invited to dinner with Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner. You remember the last time. This could be a recipe for disaster. First you need about a case or two of Cutty Sark. Marinate the host for three days beforehand. We'll probably have tongue, which Lee will have to sharpen in preparation for lashing.

On the day of the party, mix critics and artists and let stand with glasses of cheap red wine for an hour or so while the host gets further stewed. Bring the conversation to a boil by mentioning a bad review or protégée. Add more wine. Toss the table in one motion. Don't forget to drizzle the chocolate sauce on the dessert for those who don't bolt to their cars for the last train to town.

I just had to get those jokes out of my system, even though I am reasonably certain they could get me banned from the Pollock Krasner House in Springs. If I do show up, [Helen A. Harrison](#), the director of the [Pollock Krasner House & Study Center](#) and the author of the introduction to the delightful and surprising "[Dinner with Jackson Pollock](#)" (Assouline, 2015), will likely let the dogs off the leash in punishment.



"Dinner with Jackson Pollock" (Assouline, 2015) by Robyn Lea, Francesca Pollock (Preface) and Helen A. Harrise (Foreword).

That would be my serious loss, as the Pollock Krasner House is one of the most moving as well as rewarding experiences a student of art history could hope for. It certainly presents a spectacular opportunity for this writer, who lives in a dinky little 19th century house just like the one that Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner shared, and utterly identifies with the ways in which the recipes in this book reflect a simple way of life shared by a couple struggling not just financially but with their place out east on Long Island.

The first time I visited I was dazzled, as many are, by that floor with its traces of the masterpieces painted on top of it. As we see in the splendid images in this book by Robyn Lea, who is the photographer and principal author, the floor, the shelves of paint and brushes, the roughness of the building itself are all part of the Pollock legend.

Later visits to the little house in Springs brought home to me the importance of the landscape and the modest house, and this lovely gift book (you have to hand it to Assouline, the “package” is always impeccable) with its spiral binding for kitchen use can all of a sudden become a valuable supplement to what the biographers and art historians have been telling us.

There is an odd line at the end of the preface to the book by Francesca Pollock, a niece with a tenuous connection to Pollock (he died 11 years before she was born), who tells us that one of the good things about the book is that it helps in “keeping the record straight.” Too many of the tales about Pollock and Krasner, like the lurid biopic starring Ed Harris in a permanent tantrum, are like the jokes in bad taste at the top of this review, inclined to morbidly fasten on the drinking, abuse, infidelities and rage.

The other side comes across very intimately in these pages of recipes from artsy friends and Pollock’s mother transcribed in Krasner’s hand. (And yes, there is the New Yorker cartoon, perennially popular with sophomore art history professors, of Pollock’s mother with her spaghetti covered apron.) What is revealed here is the sincere and touching way that the couple, desperate to reclaim his mental and physical health from the habits he had slipped into in the big bad city, made a go of living off the land.

As when he was a child, Pollock capably tended a vegetable garden. Wild mushrooms, purslane and fiddlehead ferns are foraged. The story of how the two of them sustained themselves by digging clams in Accabonac Harbor and Gardiner’s Bay is well known, and I’d bet that today Pollock would share my own cavalier attitude toward obtaining permits.

Wheat and corn meal were ground at a mill in East Hampton not far from [Dreesen’s](#), where they bought cinnamon donuts, and the fish markets and [Springs General Store](#) where other ingredients were available. It is another side of the tragic Pollock story, a more human and healthy picture, and the book is all the more welcome for telling it. I will never look again in the same way at the large Victorian circular table, actually bought after Pollock’s death, where Krasner continued to entertain as many as two dozen people.

When I read that Lee Krasner could not even make a cup of coffee for Pollock when he first came to her studio in New York, I immediately felt like kin. It is time here to confess that I am spectacularly unqualified to review a cookbook or venture a comment on the viability of the recipes. I stay out of my own kitchen, where I was once beamed with a wok by the irate Chinese head of household.

I was intrigued by the sources of the recipes, however. For instance, a recipe for clams in garlic and dry vermouth is written on the back of a prescription from [Ruth Fox, MD](#), who was treating Pollock in the city for, ahem, alcoholism. Many of the best recipes, such as the one for potato pancakes (potatoes were and are mainstays of the East End farm stands, particularly on the North Fork nowadays) are from Stella Mae McClure Pollock, the artist’s mother, who visited Springs and seems to have conferred on Lee some of her domestic expertise garnered while raising five ravenous and hyper sons.

I would rather have been invited to the dinner parties of [Ossorio](#), which started with Dom Perignon (Ossorio’s lobster recipe, naturally enough, is in the book), or [Thomas Hart Benton](#), who regularly

fed the young couple. The Syrian style beach picnic, featuring tabbouleh, is from Lucia Wilcox, a neighbor, and Perl Fine's bouillabaisse would be worth re-creating (she lived on Red Dirt Road right near Pollock's house).

Elaine de Kooning was too busy to cook, according to Lea's diplomatic text, so her raw breakfast fruit and grain salad is that couple's contribution. It may be worth a trivia point or two to know that Pollock was a fantastic baker of rye bread and apple pie, sometimes using a Hans Namuth bread recipe. What's for dessert? Rita Benton's pecan torte.

This handsome and sturdy volume, which can be banged about on the kitchen counter instead of sitting primly on the coffee table with the other art books, will make the perfect house gift for those venturing to the East End in search of sun and free food.

BASIC FACTS: "[Dinner with Jackson Pollock](#)" (Assouline, 2015) by Robyn Lea, Francesca Pollock (Preface) and Helen A. Harrison (Foreword). www.assouline.com.

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