



How to Cook a Tapir: A Memoir of Belize (At Table)

Joan Fry

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In 1962 Joan Fry was a college sophomore recently married to a dashing anthropologist. Naively consenting to a year-long “working honeymoon” in British Honduras (now Belize), she soon found herself living in a remote Kekchi village deep in the rainforest. Because Fry had no cooking or housekeeping experience, the romance of living in a hut and learning to cook on a makeshift stove quickly faded. Guided by the village women and their children, this twenty-year-old American who had never made more than instant coffee came eventually to love the people and the food that at first had seemed so foreign. While her husband conducted his clinical study of the native population, Fry entered their world through friendships forged over an open fire. Coming of age in the jungle among the Kekchi and Mopan Maya, Fry learned to teach, to barter and negotiate, to hold her ground, and to share her space—and, perhaps most important, she learned to cook.

This is the funny, heartfelt, and provocative story of how Fry painstakingly baked and boiled her way up the food chain, from instant oatmeal and flour tortillas to bush-green soup, agouti (a big rodent), gibbon (a bigger rodent), and, finally, something even the locals wouldn’t tackle: a “mountain cow,” or tapir. Fry’s efforts to win over her neighbors and hair-pulling students offers a rare and insightful picture of the Kekchi Maya of Belize, even as this unique culture was disappearing before her eyes.

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