



Alison Walsh

206: A Literary Tea Party

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at diymfa.com/206 because it's Episode 206.

I am so excited, guys, for today's interview. I have the pleasure today of hosting Alison Walsh on the show; and we're going to be talking about her new cookbook, *A Literary Tea Party*.

Now, when I first heard about Alison's book, it was back at, I think it was at the writer's conference last summer. And I was chatting with my friend and also awesome DIY MFA contributor, Sara Letourneau.

And she told me about this amazing book that her friend, Alison, was producing that was coming out in June of 2018. And she was telling me how it was all about tea party recipes and all this awesome stuff; and it had a literary theme.

Now, anyone who knows anything about me at all – and, obviously, Sara does – knows that I am obsessed with tea and I'm obsessed with all things literary. So, this book kind of pulls together all of my nerdy obsessions in one amazing package.

I have to say, guys, I've been-- I picked up this book last weekend, and I literally read it cover to cover like a novel – but it's a cookbook and I don't even freaking cook, people. Like if I produce any of these recipes, it won't be me in the kitchen, it'll be lawyer hubby. So, that's how awesome and excited-- That's how awesome this book is, and how excited I am about it.

So, a little bit about Alison before I bring her on. She started out as a food blogger at Alison's *Wonderland Recipes*, which is a blog dedicated to making recipes inspired by classic literature. She's been a guest writer for *Real Life at Home*, and her recipes have appeared on *MuggleNet*.

A Literary Tea Party is a cookbook of teatime recipes from Skyhorse Publishing; and it releases in June, 2018. Her pastimes include pursuing the perfect cup of tea and telling her baby boy how big he's getting.

So, welcome, Alison. It is so great to have you on the show.

Alison Walsh: Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to be here.

GP: So, I got to know, like, how did this book come about, because I'm just bursting at the seams – I'm so excited about it? Like, how did you put it together?

AW: I got an email from Skyhorse, I had been blogging, I think, for about three years at this point; and they emailed me and asked me if I would be interested in working on a cookbook with them.



And the timing was kind of perfect because I had already been thinking about maybe self-publishing like an eCookbook to have on my site. So, I already had some ideas ready, and we, kind of, tossed some ideas back and forth.

And the one that we all kind of liked the most was the idea of A Literary Tea Party cookbook because tea is a big theme on my blog. I make custom teas for a lot of the menus that I feature, and I grew up in a tea-drinking household; so, it's been a part of my life for as long as I can remember.

So, I was really excited to bring those two things together, like into a cookbook.

GP: I love it. And I love how you said, you know, "I grew up in a tea drinking household", it makes me feel sort of like the black sheep of my family because my family is a coffee-drinking household. Like my dad's even in the coffee business.

So, every time I tell people that I drink tea and not coffee, they're like, 'What's wrong with you?' But it's, I love tea. Like, I don't know what it is – but like, if I had my choice, of course, I'm going to drink tea.

AW: Yeah, it's so comforting; and there's so many different kinds. Like there's a tea for every mood.

GP: Exactly. This is what I tell my coffee-drinking friends, right? Like I always tell people, I understand when someone says, "Eh, I don't really like coffee," because yes, I know there are nuances like Arabica versus whatever else, but there are nuances between coffee – but it, kind of, all tastes like coffee, like at the end of the day.

But tea is totally different. Like you've got like black teas and green teas and white teas and Rooibos teas and Tisanes, and like there's so many. If someone says, "I don't like tea," I just look at them and say, "You just haven't found the right tea yet, buddy, because there's got to be one tea out there for you".

AW: It's like saying, "I don't like reading."

GP: I know, right? It's like, 'Well, have you read all the books?' So, let's backtrack a little bit and talk about sort of even before the book got started, talk about like how you got started as a food blogger.

Because food blogging, I don't know, maybe it's just me because I am like, it's-- What's the opposite of like, the opposite of a green thumb for cooking? Like I will destroy whatever I try in the kitchen. That is just a given.

[laughter]

GP: So, to me, like food blogging, it sounds like my own personal slice of hell; like I would never survive if I had to like make it as a food blogger. So, how did you-- How did you do it? Because I have such admiration.

AW: I actually started cooking, it was actually a very practical decision. It was when I first graduated from college and I was working two or three part-time jobs, just kind of making ends meet.

And so, I really wanted to make my paycheck stretch as far as I could. So, I was trying to find creative ways to like cook things so I could make, you know, the food stretch as far as I could.

And I actually, while I was doing that, I discovered that it was really cathartic and I really enjoyed the creative side of it. So, after I found like a more stable job and you know, I kind of had my feet under me, I actually kept doing it just for fun.

And when I got married, my boyfriend, at the time – now my husband – kept saying like, “Oh you should do a food blog, you should do a food blog.” So, after I got married, I decided I would work part-time and then food blog part-time.

And since I loved reading so much, I decided to kind of bring it together – because there are thousands of food blogs out there, so I wanted to do something just a little bit different.

So, I decided to kind of bring together the classic books and food; and it actually wound up being really great for me from like a learning perspective because it pushed me to try things I probably never would’ve thought to do like Turkish delight.

GP: And you know, what’s interesting too-- I mean, for me, while I joke like, yes, I am indeed really terrible in the kitchen. Like I will say, occasionally, I will have some glorious victories – but the number of glorious failures far outnumber the victories, in part because I get a little too creative... but I love food.

So, I think like that love of food also and the love of reading, like the two things to me go hand-in-hand. Like it feels so natural to be holding a book in my hand, drinking a mug of tea, and then also having like some delicious snack next to me.

So, like for me, all three things just mesh so perfectly, which makes perfect sense to have a food blog that is around literature.

AW: Yeah, I had so much fun doing it, and it was actually-- It was an excuse to do a lot of reading too because I could just say, “Oh this is research – I have to read Moby-Dick, I need it... it’s important.”

[laughter]

GP: Well, what better reason to read any book than to get to dish about the food. But the thing that’s really interesting to me too is this idea of having to kind of break down —

It’s not like, you know, Moby-Dick or Jane Austin put recipe – you know, like it’s not like there are recipes in the book, right? Like, you have to then take that little nugget of information about, you know, the Turkish Delight mentioned in the Narnia series and extrapolate exactly how that would play out or how whatever dish is being described would play out.

So, what was that creative process like when going from the literature itself to actually pulling apart and figuring out the recipe that could be the thing that’s mentioned in the book?

AW: Usually, what I would do is as I was reading, I’d make a list of all of the food that was mentioned and then I’d kind of pick out the ones that I thought would make the most cohesive menu.

And then from there I’d kind of, I’d do a lot of research, I’d go on-- Like a really great example is, right now, I’m working on a Lord of the Rings menu for my blog. And we just put up a rabbit stew recipe with Lembas. And rabbits stew is something I’ve never done.

So, I looked at a lot of different rabbit stew recipes to see like what the common denominators were and what are common methods people used to kind of get the best product in the end.

And then I also took a really close look at the ingredients that are listed in the book, because sometimes you get really lucky and they’ll actually tell you everything that’s in it. And so, I’ll make sure to include those things.



It's nice because you're learning based off of what other people are doing, but you're also kind of challenged to make your own version or your own like creative spin on it.

GP: And you know what else I think also is interesting is like, as you're sort of piecing it together, it's almost like you're doing some detective work, right? Like you're looking through the literature for clues, not just in the dishes – but like as you said, like sometimes you get lucky, the ingredients are mentioned.

Sometimes maybe there are-- Like, are there other literary clues that you could draw on if you didn't happen to get a full recipe practically explained in the book?

AW: Sometimes it's more like the circumstances under which they're eating the food. A good example from the cookbook, Beorn's Honey Nut Banana Bread from *The Hobbit*, he serves a lot of honey and he serves--

I think they may have been like honey cakes or like nut breads, but you don't really get a full description of them. So, I kind of took a lot of those aspects together and I thought, 'Well, I know there's breads, I know there's honey... if I do like a banana bread, that's something really kind of like not too sweet, it's natural, it's got kind of a comforting homey sort of feel to it.'

And that's the feel that you get when you're reading about the dwarves and bilbo kind of hanging out with Beorn, and that's the impression that you get of like the kind of home that he has. So, sometimes you're working on something that gives you a certain feel rather than a particular set of flavors.

GP: I love that. And I also love what you said earlier about like reading other people's recipes but then kind of making your own because, I mean, while again, I'm completely hopeless in the kitchen, but one of the things I actually do love to do is read cookbooks because you see a lot of ingredients that end up together a lot of the time.

Like it didn't occur to me for a long time that like nutmeg and cayenne pepper, like they go in a lot of recipes together – and so, then all of a sudden, it makes sense when you're making something that like, oh, of course, we might put those two things together.

So, like, did you notice any clues like, for instance, the rabbit stew or any of the other recipes from the book? Were there scenarios where you saw other things playing out in parallel recipes outside of what you were making that you could then sort of borrow artfully from?

AW: I think with the Turkish Delight, there are actually several methods; and I tried a few different ones, with varying degrees of success. The one that's in the final version of the cookbook is the one that had the fewest ingredients, and it was the most consistent... and it was the easiest to achieve with the fewest unique tools. So, you didn't need like a lot of fancy stuff to be able to do it.

Yeah, I think that one was probably the one where I learned a lot about what – because candy baking is such a science, so I learned a lot about what makes Turkish Delight, Turkish Delight based off of like when certain things were done at certain times, even though the methods might be different.

GP: That's really interesting. I mean, there is something, I think, especially candy baking, but baking in general – like there's a lot more wiggle room when you're throwing stuff like into a stew or something... than when you're trying to bake something where precise measurements can make a huge difference.

So, when you were developing the cookbook recipes – and you touched on this already, like sort of trying to figure out based on the various, you know, what was going on in the books... and some of



the recipes you could sort of do more literally than others, like the banana bread example, but how did you actually choose what recipes would go into this particular literary themed cookbook?

AW: What I did was I went through all of the recipes on my blog and just kind of isolated which ones I thought would work well for tea time – just in general, because you kind of want to, it mixes out things like soups or like bowls of salad... things you typically wouldn't serve, at a tea time, you want a lot of finger food and things that are going to pair well with tea so they're not going to overpower it.

And then I made a list and sent it to my editor; and we kind of talked about which ones we thought had a similar style and kind of fit together because you kind of want the whole book to have the same feel to it.

And then from there, there were also a few new ones that we added that weren't on the blog. Like there is the Sherlock Holmes' Earl Grey lavender truffles those; were a new one. So, I got-- I got to try a few new things as well, which was fun.

GP: So, did you have like kind of the basic format drawn from recipes you'd already created and then you kind of saw what was missing? Is that how you kind of filled in those gaps? Like, how did you strategically put together so that the whole book would have like that arc to it?

AW: I think some of it had to do with the way that we chose to format it, because we talked about a few different versions of the book to begin with. We talked about the potential for doing it like seasonally or sorting things by book rather than by type of recipe.

But we decided that since most people would be using it with the kind of intention of throwing a tea party, we decided to sort the foods by types so that you get the three main types of tea time foods; the savorys, the breads and muffins, and the desserts.

And I wanted to make sure that there would be enough options in each section so that none of them felt too sparse. So, if it felt like there weren't quite enough in one section, I'd try and come up with more ideas for things that we could add.

GP: I also like how at the beginning of the book you did suggest, I mean, and maybe this might have been a nod to like the previous idea of having it by book – but like you had certain like themed suggestions of recipes that could go together, which I think works really well if people want to throw a tea party. So, what inspired you to sort of combine certain recipes together?

AW: I think, from the beginning, there were certain ones that I just thought would work so well in a particular context. Like there were a lot of autumn-themed recipes, there were a lot of flower-themed recipes... things that just kind of had a similar note.

And as I worked with them more and more, those notes tended to stand out more. And so, when we talked about maybe adding like an inspiration page, I was like, 'Oh, I already have so many ideas for this.' [laughs]

GP: Isn't it great when that just serendipitously happens in the creative process?

AW: Yeah, it's like, 'Oh good.'

GP: So, one of the other things that I loved – and you kind of already hinted at this – sort of, trying to keep the recipes such that, you know, even someone like me who would probably burn down her kitchen in the process of trying some recipes... could probably survive making most of the stuff in this cookbook. Like keeping it simple, right, as you described with the Turkish Delight.



And one of the things I loved, it was probably like my favorite part of the book were the shortcuts right at the beginning – and the fact that like, you know, because most books don't freaking do that. Like, why do other books not, like other cookbooks not have that and explain that? Like, this is what you substitute for that if you don't have X, Y, Z fancy ingredient on hand.

So, what inspired you to-- Like, did you have people requesting this? Is this something people ask for on the blog, and that's what, like, kind of planted the seed in your mind? What made you add that in? Because it's not something that I see in a whole lot of cookbooks.

AW: I actually asked the editor if I could add that in because they're shortcuts that I use all the time. Like, I almost never have buttermilk in my house.

[laughter]

AW: But I learned-- A while back, I think I was-- I needed to make a recipe – this was a few years ago, I think – and I was like, 'Oh shoot, I don't have buttermilk.' I thought I bought some and I didn't; and I had to go online and find a shortcut, and I'm like, 'Oh, well, I can, you know, put lemon juice in into the milk and let it sit for five minutes... and then that's basically buttermilk.'

Like, 'Oh, well, I'll just do that from now on.' Or I'm always forgetting to leave my butter out to soften... like last minute, I'll be like, 'Oh no, I didn't leave it out'... so I had to look up how to do that. And when I realized... I use these all the time, chances are other people are going to benefit from them too, so I asked if we could add them in.

GP: I love it. And I mean, I have to say that those two or three pages alone are something that I know I will use for way many other recipes – or if I don't personally use them, lawyer hubby will use them as he tends to be the one who has better survival skills in the kitchen... let's just put it that way.

So, let's talk a little bit about the process of publishing a non-fiction cookbook because, I mean, I've published a non-fiction book... I have a feeling that cookbook is even more complex of a process – and then it's also a very different process from what people go through if they're publishing a novel or a memoir or something with sort of a storyline to it.

So, you touched on this idea that the publisher approached you because you had this food blog, did you have to write a proposal for it? What exactly were those initial steps as you got the book, you started putting the book together?

AW: I did submit a proposal, and I think I looked up online how to do it. I looked at a few different versions, and I think they also-- A lot of publishers I found have on their site like what their proposal requirements are.

GP: And what does a proposal for a cookbook look like? I know for a non-fiction sort of How-To Book, it involves like a sample chapter – but do you like submit a sample recipe instead, like instead of a chapter? What does that look like logistically?

AW: For mine, I submitted a sample table of content and some sample pictures. I think it went in more to like how it would be structured and who the audience would be – because I think that's a big part of knowing how they'll market the cookbook, is knowing who it's geared towards.

And I think sometimes that's less immediately obvious when you're writing a cookbook than something that may be like fiction or like a non-fiction novel where you can kind of tell based off of what the story's about who's going to be interested in it.



But with a cookbook, how you market it is going to be very heavily dependent on how you format it and how everything is set up.

GP: So, can you talk a little bit about that? Like, what are some of the differences that formatting could create in terms of audience for people who aren't in the cookbook world and don't kind of know that off the top of their heads?

AW: One thing I noticed is that we talked a lot about how people would be using the book and how our structuring of it would affect the circumstances under which people would use it.

So, as I said earlier, we talked about in the beginning maybe doing it by season and so having like, you know, all the flower recipes together, all the autumn recipes together, all the winter type recipes.

But even though that's kind of fun, people most likely won't be using it as often in that kind of context as they would be to plan a whole tea party. So, that allowed us to kind of say, "Okay, so we're going to structure this for people to use in a particular way, and we're going to try and set this up so that people can get the most use out of it... and that they won't have to try very hard to kind of find what they're looking for to use it that way."

GP: I love it. And you know, I think also like the focus on how people use the cookbook is super important too. And it's something that maybe writers of fiction and memoir might not think about as much because there's pretty much only one way that you use a novel, right? Like you start at the beginning and you read it to the end, right?

I mean, maybe if you're writing short stories or essays, people might skip around – but essentially, most works... like most literary works tend to be your narrative works tend to have that kind of beginning-to-end reading process.

But when it comes to something like nonfiction, particularly a cookbook, people do skip around and they're going to-- They're not going to just go from the beginning and start with the first recipe... and work their way to the end of the book.

So, I think understanding, like that's a lesson that I think is important for listeners who are operating in other fields too. Like think about how your end-user will literally interact with the book they hold in their hand – and how they're going to need to navigate that tome... and then make sure that it's structured in a way that they can actually find the things that they're looking for.

So, one of the things I noticed was that there were definitely a few books that came up again and again, there were a lot of Narnia recipes and a lot of other books that you tended to mention or have multiple recipes from.

Was that something that came from that original idea or the possibility of organizing it book-by-book or was that just because these happened to be your favorite books? Like, how did you choose which books you were going to draw from in order to populate this cookbook?

AW: I think more fiction books have more recipes in the cookbook for two reasons. One is because there are certain ones that people, I think, really want to see; like a lot of people really love Narnia and I really love Narnia or a lot of people love The Hobbit, and so we all are going to get like excited when we see foods from those books that we recognize and we really love. And it's also because those books tend to have a lot more food in them.



GP: I mean, I think too, if people were thinking of tea time, like there's certain books where I'm guessing tea is probably a thing. I think they actually had tea at some point in one of the Narnia books when they're with... either the Beavers or with somebody, somebody else's.

You know, like so if you're writing a teatime book, it would make sense that you're pulling tea-related recipes from books where people actually sit down to have tea. So, when it comes to like creating recipes for your blog or for this cookbook – or, in general, do you have any books that are kind of like favorites, like staples that you go back to again and again?

AW: As I kind of mentioned earlier, there are certain ones that are kind of universally loved, like *The Hobbit*, *The Narnia books* – *Anne of Green Gables* is a favorite of mine – and *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*.

I actually, for the blog, I just started doing my *Lord of the Rings* menu; and I actually saved that one for a really long time because when I first started blogging, I was basically just learning how to cook. And I wanted to wait until I felt like I was a lot better at it because I wanted to do it justice because it was so important to me.

[laughter]

GP: I love that.

AW: I need to do it justice. I don't want to mess it up. So, I want to wait until I feel like I can do it.

GP: I love that. And when you-- You know, you refer to like *The Lord of the Rings* menu. When you do recipes for the blog, do you put them together as like a themed menu for that book or for that series? Like do you have *Anne of Green Gables* menu and a *Narnia* menu? Is that how you structure things or is it just kind of recipe-by-recipe?

AW: Yes, it is a menu structure. I actually chose that because I noticed there weren't very many blogs, kind of, taking that approach. And I thought the nice thing about it is you can then, if you want, you could make a whole meal – so there's an appetizer, an entree, a side dish, and a dessert for each one.

I really liked taking that approach because you kind of get a chance to showcase certain recipes that maybe don't get a whole lot of limelight... like I'm working on right now my post for *A Shortcut to Mushrooms*.

And so, it's just like a quick easy mushroom recipe – but it's such a cute, fun part of the books that I didn't want to miss out on it. And if I'd just been doing maybe one or two recipes or just choosing the most iconic ones, that one probably would've fallen through the cracks.

GP: Got it. And so, when you do structure these, you know, in thinking about it in terms of like building the platform – that is the food blog – so when you were--

And it probably fluctuated over time, but now, how do you structure, at least-- Is it like a different recipe each one gets its own like post or its own day of the week or of the month, and then you tie them together as a unit in underneath the menu? Or is it more like, you know, the menu is its own post all on one day... and it's like one big thing?

AW: I do my recipe posts every Thursday, and I pick a different book every month. So, at the start of each month, I post a hint about what the book will be; I usually do that on social media... and then on the first Thursday, I'll do the appetizer. So, that kind of introduces the menu.



And then, each Thursday, after that, is a new recipe in the menu. And then at the very end, in the archives, they are all grouped together by menu. So, if you go into the archives of the blog, you'll find like, you know, October, 2016 and then whatever book that was - and you click on it, and it'll take you to a page that has links to all of those recipes.

GP: So, as you're developing the recipes that will go on the menu, like do you develop the whole menu as a unit... like when you're literally in the kitchen, like testing it out and tasting and sort of figuring out exactly what those recipes will be? Or is it a, like you're kind of working them out each as individual units, and then you group them together under that menu?

AW: I plan each menu. I actually plan my posts about three months in advance--

GP: Oh wow.

AW: -so that I have time. I'm a big planner; it helps me keep from stressing about things because there's so much time that needs to be put into each individual post that if I don't plan far enough ahead, I find that I forget something... or if something goes wrong, I'm like rushing to get it out in time.

So, what I'll do is about three months in advance, I'll sit down and say like, "Okay, what are the next three upcoming books?" And then I'll look through the list that I've made, I'll choose the foods that I want to make, and then I'll start looking at recipe ideas for each of them.

And then, usually, about two weeks in advance of the post going up for each one, I'll start actually doing the cooking because with the baby I kind of need to do things over a span of multiple days. I'll like make the food one day, and then take pictures the next day, and then edit the pictures the day after that, and then draft the post the day after that. So, it takes almost a week to get a post ready to go.

GP: Wow. And the logistics, I mean, to me, this is fascinating because I don't food blog - I don't really know anything that goes into putting together a recipe and also putting together all of the paraphernalia around it.

Like in terms of the photography, I know that for food bloggers, photography is really, really important - and cookbooks too, right? Like you need to have great photos of the food.

So, you mentioned like you make the food on one day, and then you photograph it the next day. So, clearly, the thing that you are photographing is not the food exactly as it would be eaten or consumed because it's like a day later. How do you stage it so that it looks incredibly beautiful and appetizing and mouthwatering? Like, what are some of the tricks you use?

AW: For the ones that are very time-sensitive for things like, you know, if I cook cooked a steak or something like that, those I do take same day; I just have to start really early in the morning so that I don't lose my light to take pictures.

Because I found that - for where I take pictures in my house - if I'm trying to take pictures past noon, they look very flat... and there's a lot more editing that needs to be done to make them look the way they should look.

But if I'm making something that I need to take pictures of that same day, then I'll either start really early - or I'll wait until a day when we can have like my mother or my mother-in-law will come and babysit the baby while I'm cooking because he's only a year old, so sometimes he's not very patient.



[laughs]

But for the other things – things like cookies or something that'll kind of look the same in a day or two or three – for those, then I plate them and then I just let them sit until the morning.

GP: And so, when you plate the food to then have to take that photo and make it beautiful... like have you developed any tricks, any techniques? How do you stage the actual presentation? Like you mentioned that you need to have certain light in your house.

It's sort of the same thing in my space; I've learned that like if I try to do video at certain times of the day, it's just... the lighting is terrible where my camera has to be.

So, like, but aside from that, there are certain tricks that you can do in order to make the stuff look appetizing. Like, for instance, I had a friend who was a stylist – did food styling for, like, some magazine – and he would say that they would use glue instead of milk if they needed to have a glass of milk on the set because glue actually looked more milky than milk does in a glass.

So, are there any tricks like that, that you've found that help the food look even more appetizing in the photo – even if it's not something that might be necessarily appetizing to eat, per se?

AW: For my particular blog, I do try to stick with keeping things more organic and edible because I think that with blogging, in particular, like it's really important, I think, to have an authenticity.

And I don't want people to think that it needs to look perfect; so, if there's an imperfection, a lot of times I'll choose to leave it because I think it makes it more human and personal to see, like, see, I do this for a living and I don't always do it perfect either.

But what I do try to do to kind of show things to their best advantage is to play with color a lot – especially with foods that don't have a lot of color, in and of themselves, Like I had a really hard time, I had a plate of diced roasted turnips, which are essentially beige

[laughter]

AW: They're not a fun color at all, but I mean, they taste good, but you also want them to look good because people eat with their eyes before anything else. So, what I wanted to do was kind of emphasize like there was a little bit of char on them, so I wanted to bring that out.

So, what I did was I got up real-- I tried a few different ways, and I got up really close to them and got like a shot with the light behind them so that it really showed off the different variances in the shade of the char.

And I put a little bit of parsley in it so that it gives it just a little pop of color. I've learned that if you do what you can to kind of play with texture and introduce fresh colors into it, that'll do a lot to help something that maybe looks appetizing in real life or maybe doesn't look appetizing but tastes really good... and you can, kind of, make it look pretty.

GP: And you know, it's funny too, like taking photos of food, it's kind of a thing. It's maybe not as much of a thing now as it was like two or three years ago. I feel like two or three years ago, my Instagram was flooded with people snapping photos of whatever they had for dinner, right?

And I found like-- I went through a phase where I did that, where like I'd be at a restaurant and I'd



snap a photo... and it always looked so unappetizing when I, you know, in the photos.

Like it's hard to make a photo of food look as good as it looks in real life and then also look as good as it tastes. So yeah. Can you talk a little bit more about that? You talked about like emphasizing the texture and the color, the lighting... is there anything else like maybe in the editing that you do also to help make it look mouthwatering?

AW: Depending on the time of day, if maybe the light isn't very good... because of the tightness of my schedule, I can't really be super picky about the days when I take pictures.

So, if it's really cloudy out and the lighting is bad, sometimes things can come out looking a little bit flat. So, what I'll do is when I brighten the picture to increase the light in it so that it looks like there was more natural light than there was... I'll also increase the color saturation just a little because I've noticed that when you brighten the pictures, you lose a little bit of color.

GP: Yeah, it like washes it out.

AW: Right. I try not to like overdo it; and I don't want to make the thing look more colorful than it did in real life, but I want to compensate for the color that was lost because of the lighting in the picture.

GP: I love that. It also sounds like you've kind of had to become part like food photographer and part like photo editor, in addition to like blogger and author. Like there were a lot of these other peripheral skills that you had to learn in order to create this, you know, the food for your blog... and now for the cookbook. How did you learn all this stuff? Was this just sort of on the go?

AW: Yeah, it was-- It was a lot of practice.

[laughter]

AW: And sometimes when I look back at like my first post, I'm like, 'Oh gosh, those look terrible.' But I think that I have to remind myself that I had to start somewhere and that everybody does; it's not really fair to look back at when you started and expect to be where you are now.

But I do feel like my instincts for certain things have developed. Like I've noticed that I will automatically go to fix something that I know is going to be a problem ahead of time just because I've done it so many times and encountered it so many times that I can anticipate it now; and that's really helpful.

GP: Yeah, and I think that's something that definitely writers of fiction and nonfiction – basically, all writers – can, sort of, take to heart as well that like, even though in the beginning we might feel like we're, kind of, you know, clunky and we don't really know what we're doing, but over time, you kind of build up those chops and then you can start to anticipate some of the problem spots and mistakes... and correct them either instinctively or even before they happen because you're already anticipating them.

So, kind of trusting in the process and in the practice, I think, is super important. And it's hard to remember when you're in the trenches doing the thing and going, 'Oh my god, I don't know what I'm doing.'

AW: And I still have moments like that.

[laughter]



GP: I do too. And I've been doing this for a while as well. So, I think it's, you know, important for listeners to know that like, it's okay to-- Like you said, it's okay for things to not be perfect.

I thought that was so beautiful, like the leaving the imperfections because I think it's important for people to see that, you know, we're not all perfect all the time.

AW: And I think especially since the blog is based on the internet and, in this day and age, there's so much that can be curated on the internet. It just feels really important to me to kind of keep the very real aspects of it, even when those real things may not be perfect.

GP: Absolutely. I whole-heartedly agree. So, looking back on the blog and the book – now that the book is out in the world, and the blog has been out in the world for some time – what would be your favorite recipe? From either or both, if it's the same-- if the recipe's on both, then... from both?

AW: There are a lot of favorites.

[laughter]

GP: I know, it's like trying to pick between your children; like, how do you-- how do you choose? But if you had maybe, like, your Top-Two or Top-Three.

AW: I do really love the Dragon Scale Madeleines just because they're really easy to riff off of. Like if you decide you want to do it a little different, if you want to make them a different color or a different flavor; like I've made cinnamon ones and chocolate chip ones, they're just really easy to change one element to make them unique. So, they're really fun.

GP: You know, my daughter loves Madeleines – and she loves the color blue, so I may just have to try that and make it like, you know, mermaid scales instead of like Dragon Scales or something because it's-- Yeah, like she's just going to go-- She's going to flip; it's going to be awesome. So, I always end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

AW: Kind of heralding back a little bit to what we talked about a minute ago, I think my advice would be, don't let the fear that you don't know what you're doing, stop you from trying to begin with.

No one starts out as a professional, and it's okay to give yourself permission to be new at something. Like that's how you're going to get better, and that's how you're going to develop more confidence in doing it. So, it's okay to start somewhere.

GP: I so agree with that. I love that. I talk about it with my word nerds; I call it, the zero moment, right? Like that moment where you're still, kind of, flying under the radar and no one really knows what you're doing yet.

Like I remember when DIY MFA started and the blog was like itty-bitty and no one knew what I was doing, but that's the time when you get to experiment and try things out.

And on one hand, it is sort of being brave and recognizing like everyone starts somewhere. But the other side of it too, I think, is embrace the fact that no one really knows you're there yet, because that's when you get to make mistakes and you get a free pass.

AW: Yeah. And you learn so much. Yeah.



GP: Totally. Like I went back to my archives recently – and holy guacamole, there are posts there that I’m like, all right, we need to update these because those shenanigans can’t be out and visible in public anymore.

But there’s a point where you’re like, you know, you have to learn somewhere – but you also get that like freedom when you’re first starting to try things and make a mess... and it doesn’t have to be perfect. So yeah. So, I think that’s really like, I’m right there with you on that one.

So, thank you so much, Alison, for being on the show. It has been so much fun chatting with you.

AW: Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed this.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

