A Gifted Cook

If there is a gene for cuisine, Gabe, my 11-year-old son, could splice it to perfection. Somewhere between Greenwich Village, where he was born, and the San Francisco Bay area, where he has grown up, the little kid with the stubborn disposition and freckles on his nose has forsaken Boy Scouts and baseball in favor of wielding a kitchen knife.

I suppose he is a member of the Emeril generation. Gabe has spent his formative years shopping at the Berkeley Bowl, where over half a dozen varieties of Thanksgiving yams, in lesser mortals, can instill emotional paralysis. He is blessed with a critical eye. "I think Emeril is really cheesy," he observed the other night while watching a puff pastry segment. "He makes the stupidest jokes. But he cooks really well."

With its manifold indigenous cultures, Oaxaca seemed the perfect place to push boundaries. Like the mole sauces for which it is justly famous, the region itself is a subtle blend of ingredients — from dusty Zapotec villages where Spanish is a second language to the zocalo in colonial Oaxaca, a sophisticated town square brimming with street life and vendors selling twisty, one-story-tall balloons.

Appealing to Gabe's inner Iron Chef seemed like an indirect way to introduce him to a place where the artful approach to life presides. There was also a selfish motive: Gabe is my soul mate, a fellow food wanderer who is not above embracing insanity to follow his appetite wherever it leads.

Months ahead of time, we enrolled via the Internet in the daylong Wednesday cooking class at Seasons of My Heart, the chef and cookbook author Susana Trilling's cooking school in the Elta Valley, about a 45-minute drive north to town. In her cookbook and PBS series of the same name, Ms. Trilling, an American whose maternal grandparents were Mexican, calls Oaxaca "the land of no waste" where cooking techniques in some ancient villages have endured for a thousand years.

I suspected that the very notion of what constitutes food in Oaxaca would test Gabe's mettle. At the suggestion of Jacob, his older brother, we spent our second night in Mexico at a Oaxaca Guerrero baseball game, where instead of peanuts and Cracker Jack, vendors hawked huge trays piled high with chapulines, fried grasshoppers cooked in chili and lime, a local delicacy. Gabe was bug-eyed as he watched the man next to him snack on exoskeletal munchies in a paper bowl. "It's probably less gross than a hot dog," he admitted. "But on the rim of the bowl I saw a bunch of legs and served body parts. That's revolting!"

Our cooking day began at the Wednesday market in Etla, shopping for ingredients and sampling as we went. On the way in the van, Gabe had made friends with Cindy and Fred Beams, fellow classmates from Boston, sharing opinions about Caesar salad and bemoaning his brother's preference for plain pizza instead of Hawaiian. Cindy told Gabe about a delicious sauce she'd just had on her omelet at her B & B. "It was the best sauce — to die for," she said. "Then I found out the provenance. Roasted worms."

The Oaxacan taste for insects, we'd learn — including the worm salt spied at the supermarket and the "basket of fried locusts" at a nearby restaurant — was a source of protein dating back to pre-Hispanic times.

When our cooking class was over I saw a flicker of regret in his face, as though he sensed the world's infinite variety and possibilities in all the dishes he didn't learn to cook. "Mom", he said plaintively, surveying the sensual offerings of the table. "Can we make everything when we get home?"

Gabe is supposed to represent the Emeril generation because he...

1. ...is fond of criticizing others.
2. ...feels happy being alone.
3. ...is interested in cooking.
4. ...is good at making jokes.