

On doing what you want even when it's hard to do



Baker and author Abi Balingit discusses how she got into food writing, how her personal style impacts her baking, and how the haters fuel her creativity.

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As told to Jun Chou, 2077 words.

Tags: [Chef](#), [Writing](#), [Adversity](#), [Focus](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#).

Tell me about your journey from a blog to a James Beard win.

I love baking and I wanted to document my journey with it. So the blog itself was just meant to be kind of a diary of just things that I made.

It wasn't really until the pandemic hit that I was like, "Oh, I feel nostalgic for all the flavors I grew up with." Then I started riffing off of existing recipes but turning them more into a fusion concept.

I didn't intend for it to get bigger than it was. I just kept posting on social media, on Twitter, Instagram, and Twitter was where my literary agent, Emmy, found me and was like, "Hey, are you thinking of writing a cookbook? You should do it." I really wasn't thinking about that as a goal but having someone think that you can do it just really emboldens you to do it. I only had two blog posts under my name, which was kind of wild.

I worked on my proposal in January and then sent it out May 2021. It's months of just talking to editors, trying to see if anyone's going to bite when you're putting out your proposal. I ended up signing with Harvest, which is Harper Collins' imprint.

So I was working from January until May 2022 to get all the recipes done, the writing done, and then rounds of revisions. And the book came out February of 2023.

So much has happened, but that's the nitty-gritty of the book. But I've been baking since I was 13 for fun, just learning by myself online. That's my journey in a nutshell.

I'm sure it feels like such a whirlwind for you as well. When you're living something like that, it feels like you're just on autopilot probably, right?

Yeah, I feel like for my own mental health, my editor would only tell me things coming up. Now that I've gone through the process from beginning to end, I'm like: "Would I have done this if I had known how much work this is going to be?" And honestly, yes. No regrets, obviously. I think it's just like you're building the ship as you're sailing it.

It was really nice to have something that was very much my vision from the beginning, and I think it came out better than I thought it could. So yeah, I'm very proud of the book that happened out of it.

That's amazing. Yeah, it seems like the recognition you've been getting for it too has been incredible. How did you react to getting the James Beard nom?

Oh my God, I was so shook. In January, my editor reached out to me and was like, "Hey, we're thinking of nominating your book, putting in your written name in the ringer." So you write a little blurb of why you think you deserve a James Beard nomination and then you don't find out if you're actually nominated until April 30th.

My first text was from my friend Bettina, who's an amazing writer at Eater, and she's like, "Congrats." And I was like, "For what?" So I checked the James Beard website and they had the nominations online. I cried. I called my best friend, she cried.

I called my mom, who is an immigrant from the Philippines. She was like, "What's that?" And I was so excited to tell her.

She was like, "Oh, I'm so proud of you. That's so exciting!" I think everyone has different relationships with their parents, especially when you're first generation. My mom has always been: "As long as you're happy, but also you should maybe be an accountant or maybe work at LinkedIn to get money."

My parents are proud of me but in some ways I don't think they realize the gravity of certain things that I do or because it's such a new thing for them in creative fields.

There's a certain invalidation or deescalation of a creative field or position as a legitimate role so much of the time because they're so used to corporate structures where there's a ladder and a clear hierarchy. But when you're in a world of artistry and creativity, there's no sense of hierarchy in that way. You can win an Oscar—the James Beard as the Oscar of the food world—and it'll still be like, "Your cousin went to Harvard and got an MBA."

It's an uphill battle for sure. And it's tough because at certain points when you're aware that you don't need this because there's validation you get from your partner or your friends and people that know you, you beat yourself up more. You're like, "Wait, I shouldn't feel sad about this. I know they mean well." But everyone who's Asian American and creative I've talked to has also felt some levels of this. Sometimes it's just really difficult.

Would you say that you've always considered yourself an artist?

Yeah, I was an overachiever and really wanted to do well. The things that I naturally shined at were writing and soft skills. I always thought my path was going to be a business woman. When you're a kid, you think you're going to get a briefcase and you're going to go on business trips, and you're going to have clients.

I stuck with that for so long, well into college, but when I realized I wasn't good at finance and I wasn't good at accounting, I was like, "Well, I guess it's going to be marketing." I always liked the storytelling aspect of marketing. This is a way to be creative, but in a corporate structure.

But creatively I just have so much more fun writing for myself. I blogged for the school newspaper and I did a music blog that is now defunct, but it was basically me interviewing independent artists, usually artists of color, and talking about their journey and I was just really excited hearing how other people accomplish their goals and their dreams creatively. So yes, I would say I was always a creative person, but for a long time I didn't know how to implement that in my career.

How did you make the pivot to food?

I love Filipino flavor but I learned how to make cupcakes or cookies first. A lot of Western types of desserts are my forte so let me just try to implement that into this mold. I am from California, I live in New York; my worldview is very diverse around the people that I grew up with. So there's many influences that are global, which is at the heart of being American.

How does your personal style impact your creations and your creative living?

I love clothes. I love jewelry. I love playing dress up. And I think that it has translated itself in my food. I gravitate towards a lot of color and a lot of my clothing is now food related. It's cakes and fruits and strawberries. If I'm wearing a black parka in the dead of winter, I feel so sad.

When I'm not investing in myself the ways that I know I can, it really motivates me. This is another way for me to express who I am without having to say anything.

Being in New York is another blessing where no one will really bat an eye as much if you're wearing something a little more out there. You can dress however you want and hopefully no one will judge you. It helps me practice, "Oh, I can literally do whatever I want." And if people don't like it, then people don't like it. But if people do, then that's great.

Do you find yourself stuck on the people who don't like it, or do you have a pretty healthy relationship with that?

It's so difficult because I'm a people pleaser and I really want people to like me. I've had the nicest interactions on social media and had the meanest, most horrible things that I've ever seen. Some people would just comment on my appearance like, "This troll doll doesn't know what she's talking about." I was like, "Troll doll, a compliment!" The haters really do fuel me.

There's a point where you just have to laugh. I am salty on the inside and taking the high road is hard for me but I do it because it's worse to actually just go in the weeds and trenches and fight trolls for no reason.

I feel like the hardest comments are from Filipinos across the diaspora, but also in the Philippines. Those are the more hurtful comments that are actually tough on me. I'm trying really hard to just do my version of Filipino food and recognize that that is just one version of it. And people just think that in totality, this is Filipino food, but not necessarily.

I think that's a lot of pressure for folks because as a Filipino American creator, there are not that many people like you in this field. Then the pressure of being the sole representative is unrealistic, right? Of course you're not going to represent every experience because you are your own experience; that's why your art and your food is so colorful and it's so American and it's very Filipino because that's who you are. So what fuels you beyond the haters?

I feel rejuvenated by meeting other creatives, not even just in food. It's an infectious kind of passion that I really gravitate towards. I always thought of myself as an introvert before but getting older, I do think I get my energy from other people. The reason why New York just makes sense for me is I feel like I can be in proximity with so many creative people.

You get to see the best versions of people and that kind of makes you want to be the best version of you.

It sounds like you're pursuing your passions and following it and seeing where it takes you. I'm sure with meeting so many people throughout the process, it's been like "Oh, that's possible? I didn't even know that was possible!"

Exactly. I feel like it's weird too when you're just in your head about a lot of things like, "Oh, I couldn't possibly do that with this budget." I've seen so many people DIY, but also have friends who are really good and talented. Being in community with other people, whether it's online or in person, is so important.

A lot of artists, especially during the last four years, have seen a lot of existential crises around the frivolity of art, like does it even matter? For you working in food, specifically with desserts, it is literally sustenance but also just brings so much joy. You don't need it but it is so vital to your existence.

It's the duality of those experiences where I know crazy things are happening in the world and if I can do something to help, I will. The nature of capitalism is to produce, produce, produce and keep making things. But when you just want to do things for yourself or for your community, you have to sometimes take a step back and be like, "I can't do this right now and I need to recharge and do better for next time." You have to do what you can do to survive and to hopefully thrive later on.

Describe your personal flavor profile.

Loud. There's ways to have a lot of flavor in something, but still be able to taste every single taste. Loud encapsulates everything about my personality and a love for being all parts of yourself, even though someone might think it's too much to handle. But I think people are able to withstand it, so that's great.

You're not going to be everyone's cup of tea because if you were, you'd be water.

Exactly. When people actually have an opinion about something, whether it's good or it's bad, then that's great. Then it's worth having a conversation over.

Abi Balingit recommends

[@raeswon's](#) needle felted art, especially their headpieces

Decadent and inspired Filipino pastries from [@delsur.bakery](#)

Tower 28's [ube vanilla lipsoftie](#)

Going from URL to IRL friendships

[My fav summer songs right now](#)

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Vocation

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