

On finding community by doing what you love



Recipe developer Pierce Abernathy on how his video production skills and social media acumen helped him continue to connect with the world through food.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2573 words.

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How does where you live impact the way you create and edit your work? Did returning to Kentucky from New York have a big impact?

Yeah! During the pandemic, my lease had ended and my job at that time went completely remote. I was not going to renew a lease and pay New York prices and be cramped in a 200 square foot apartment when I was fortunate enough to have my parents let me stay in their house. I was there for about a year as things took off for me with cooking and recipe videos. I had so much free time and the opportunity to have a larger kitchen. My social life in Kentucky was pretty much nonexistent. I was cooking a lot for my family. But in the same sense, as I started seeing this as a career opportunity, I did miss New York. There's such a hustle and drive around the city that's really inspiring. New York was a much stronger hub to network, to potentially work with brands, work with media companies, connect with other people in similar spaces.

Making these videos in New York is a whole other story. It's much more difficult. I'm on a street right now with horns, sirens, and buses coming by all the time. Natural light is limited here. I have roommates here. It's definitely been tricky, but in terms of the ingredients and the farmer's markets, it's been exciting.

Limitation is an interesting notion when it comes to creativity, though! What role does the notion of stress have for you? Some people feel you have to have that stress-bomb to get to the end result.

At first, making videos was this creative outlet that felt pressure-less. It wasn't like making a YouTube video or a cooking show that you invest so much time in. With how social media has changed in the past two, three years, with TikTok and now Instagram reels, people want to see [something] organic, messy, and quick, and to lean into that was so rewarding and fun. I look at these recipes as diary entries. I don't want to be super sacred about them. I don't want to overthink these things, because then ultimately I lose that passion and joy of making it.

As I've grown and had to look to this more as a career and as a business, you ultimately feel more pressure. You do have to take it a little more seriously. Then, with all of that, you start overthinking. It feels like a competition. It's tough to take a step back and be like, "Hey, just take a breath. Realize why you're doing this." I'm definitely still trying to navigate that and have fun.

When you do feel that pressure, how do you step back from yourself if "yourself" is what's needed? How do you not get burnt out and overwhelmed by something like food, which is literally a physical requirement?

I do get burnt out, for sure. Exercise is really big for me. Meditation in a very small amount, I try to pursue as well. Within the space, I just try not to take it that seriously. I am in a very privileged place where I am

able to make this kind of content and do something I love and, as of right now, make a living off of it. That should ultimately be it...When I have a lot of fun with an idea, I go into shooting streamlined from pre-production and creation, to execution, to editing the video, that's what gets me excited. Ultimately, if I have that feeling with a video, even if it doesn't perform super well, I'm still happy about it.

In the way that you frame your videos, the ingredients and the process are the stars. But at the same time, you are at the center of everything. What did you do before this that made you feel comfortable with making videos and social media?

I was set up pretty well for this. I did go to film school, which helped. But I also think that what social media video is now is a completely different wheelhouse than making films. One of my earlier jobs living in New York was working at Tasty, which was [Buzzfeed's] food vertical. That was really fast-paced food content. I was making foods and dishes that I personally just wouldn't really eat. It was very novelty food, over the top, indulgent. You would use the same four or five ingredients and just try to showcase them in different ways. It was ground beef, potatoes, cheese, and cream. I would not feel good sharing any of that food with people that I love, my friends, my family. When I started making these videos, it was an outlet to share the food that I like to make, this healthy-adjacent, fresh, whole food mentality that's ideally focused around eating seasonally, somewhat locally, and realizing you don't have to fuss with your food that much to make something delicious and rewarding.

Developing a recipe takes food from a biological necessity to a creative endeavor. What is it like working in that gray area between what you need to eat and what you want to eat with the people that you love around you?

There are a lot of times when I'm just eating alone and I think about food more as a necessity. It's nice to realize that I don't have to be extremely creative all the time with food and it can just be a necessity. But what I've always loved about food is that it's such a uniter. It brings people together, and it's a great way to express yourself and express love between people. When developing recipes, I always think: "Can someone make it at home? Is this fun and creative? Is there some sort of visual or name association that they might recognize, but it's also something new?"

Growing these videos, I was just thinking, "Let me find one ingredient that is the hero and try to build a recipe around that." That was a fun, creative task for me. Before I didn't even think about recipes like that. I cooked a lot for friends and had dinner parties. I cooked at a restaurant for a couple of months. But I had never really thought about food in that way.

The concept of understanding when a piece of creative work is done sits in that blurred subjective space. What marks the end of your process for each of your recipes?

As I started doing this more, I set a tagline of approachability in my recipes. Within that phrase, there are guidelines that I try to adhere to. So I know that I don't want to be overly aggressive with ingredients. I don't want to use things that people can't access. I don't want to showcase a technique that is too difficult for someone to do. I do love showcasing techniques that maybe someone who doesn't cook too much doesn't know, but I do think is accessible to them. There is this educational element while still trying to ride the line of accessibility. [There's] this fear that you always need to continue to add to your food when sometimes the simplest food can be the best...The more you cook, the more you realize you don't need to keep adding things, or keep doing all these different things. Sometimes simple food is great.

Right! The revelation that simplicity is great. You mentioned meditation and exercise as escapism, but where do you find creative inspiration?

Oh man. All over. More recently at restaurants in New York and cookbooks. Honestly, finding other people through social media, whether they be home cooks or chefs. Watching YouTube. Sometimes I get visual inspiration from simply looking at a dish. Other times, I learn about an ingredient or a technique and think that's really exciting. Like, "Okay, how can I highlight this in my own way?"

If I took inspiration from [only] one specific thing, I think I would find myself repeating a format too often.

Earlier on, there was a point where it started to feel like that. I started doing these videos just making dips. A lot of people did enjoy that, but for me, it started feeling less and less creative, because it was like, "Cool, here's the same format: vegetable, I'm going to cook it. I'm going to process it. I'm going to add a few other ingredients and I'm going to garnish it with a few different things." Repetition causes a loss of creative excitement.

Starting with dips is interesting. As a food, it's usually for a party, for being with people, which is so impactful as a concept right now.

Absolutely. The [other exciting] thing for me was I didn't see the same guardrails around the idea of dip as other dishes. It felt like there were no rules. It wasn't based on a certain cuisine or style. I could really just let loose and get creative.

And I was missing this idea of being able to host people. One of my greatest joys is being able to curate a dinner party for people, to have people come over and curate this evening around eating and drinking. I do think that same mentality is rooted in all of the food that I still do. Everything is kind of small plates and salads. The majority of the foods are things that you could bring to someone's home and share.

What part of the process is most rewarding for you?

Being able to have people share photos of recipes that they made of mine and sending notes that they enjoyed it is so, so rewarding. I try to present these recipes, yes, as something that you can follow word for word, but in how I format my videos, I want you to see that I'm testing as I go as well. I don't have this fully fledged recipe that I'm creating every time. I'm kind of winging it in the video. I think a lot of people have caught onto that because some people will share videos, like, "I used this instead of that." Kind of sparking this idea that, "Okay, this is an inspiration, but not a word for word recipe that I'm going to follow," is really exciting. Getting people to be creative in their kitchens themselves has been really fun.

The overhead cooking tutorial has become more commonplace as the years have gone by, but you blend that with to-camera explanations which makes it feel more personal. How did you develop that style?

The first video I made was when Instagram reels could only have 15 seconds. It was quite small. And I'm a home cook. I've never seen myself as a chef. I don't want to share this overarching level of expertise. I wanted to initially introduce it with this idea of humor and personality, and not taking it that seriously. There were always cut-ins of me being silly...I think that it's a way of differentiating myself between other food videos and introducing this personality to it as well...The food has always been first, but it's been interesting to see that people have enjoyed that aspect as well.

You recently posted about modeling at a Gucci fashion show. Did you see those two worlds ever coming together?

Absolutely not! I did do a very small amount of modeling before any of this happened, but it was something I never took seriously, especially during the pandemic. Through these videos, it's been something that's come back into my life. I now have a modeling manager, but my focus is on these videos and trying to navigate what my career's going to be in this food space and creative content space.

It was a dream to be able to walk in a Gucci fashion show. I would love to try to find ways to merge food and fashion. I think we've started to see that a lot more. Food draws people in. It's a cool way to connect with your audience, whether the root of what you're doing is food-based or not. All of that aside though, I couldn't get star struck because I wear glasses and I'm quite blind. I saw no one. I couldn't make out anyone's faces. That was probably the best thing ever, is that I couldn't see if anyone was even looking at me.

Social media has this fascinating slant where at times it appears that you are just working on your own, but you've posted about learning a lot from others as well. How do those people figure into your work?

There's a variety of inspiration that comes from the community that I build, whether that's me directly asking this community about ideas, what they want to see, or what they want to learn. I've met a lot of friends now who are also making these kinds of videos and I'm constantly inspired by what they're sharing and what they're learning, and their perspective on food. The community I've built here in New York has been food-focused and food-centric. Going over to a friend's house for a meal and seeing what they cook, it's been really cool to realize how connecting food can be, even during such a time where we can't always be together. I think that was initially surprising, but ultimately there's no wonder that all this food content and these food videos were so successful during the pandemic. It's because food has always been this connector and sharing it has always been a great way for people to learn about each other.

What's the next challenge you want to take on? How do you approach new projects?

I'm still in this test and learn phase where I want to take on any new and exciting opportunities. My approach is that I will try something new or take something on as long as I feel like I can do it authentically, and do it authentically myself. I would love to eventually try to grow as a host or someone who has more of an on-camera presence. I've definitely thought about writing a cookbook, but that's something that makes me a bit nervous because it's such an investment. I want to make sure that I have a perspective and a reason to write this cookbook.

I want to enjoy what I'm doing. I want to be trying out new things and finding out what works, finding out what my audience enjoys, and basing my moves from there. I have my plan in life. The past couple years have been to ultimately try to find a way to work for myself. I did that in a very, very odd way. Now, it's just trying to figure out how I can take the steps to make this feel long-term and make this something I can be passionate about for years to come...If I'm complacent, or trying to base everything off of success metrics, or what I've done in the past, that joy is going to slip away pretty quickly.

Pierce Abernathy Recommends:

Long walks or runs

Wine from Beaujolais

Eating dessert before dinner

Petting a dog as often as possible

The YouTube channel [Terminal Passage](#)

Name

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Vocation

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