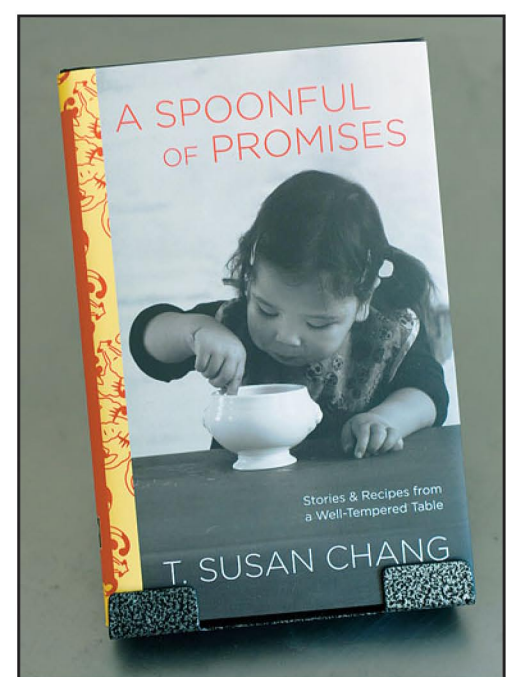




A food writer and recipe tester, T. Susan Chang, shown in her Leverett kitchen, recently published her first book, "A Spoonful of Promises: Stories and Recipes from a Well-Tempered Table."



## 'The Curious Incident of the Funnel Cake in the Lawn'

By T. Susan Chang,  
from 'A Spoonful of Promises'

I suppose that a person's first spectacular failure in the kitchen is a kind of coming of age. You could call it a rite of passage, as necessary as embarrassing first dates and awkward job interviews.

But my first culinary fiasco — which I shared with my sister — took place when we were at the tender ages of 6 and 11, and in a manner quite devoid of ceremony.

We knew about funnel cakes, those gilded, decadent spirals of deep-fried batter found at fairs of all stripes: street, county or state. Maybe we'd sampled one or two, our eyes streaming as we burned the tips of our tongues, our shirts snowy with spilled powdered sugar.

My sister had gotten hold of a recipe in Home Ec (remember Home Ec?), so one afternoon when both parents were out, we decided to make our own.

The kitchen was my mother's realm. I felt anything but at ease there, among the pots and pans huddled like feral pets in the dark berths of a floor cupboard; the mysterious, sticky bottles of oils swarming out of the Lazy Susan corner cabinet.

Most daunting of all was the waiting stove, with the numbers worn off its knobs and the dangerous-looking grates. It looked as though it was entering into a battle of wits with two unarmed girls, and you could tell it knew who would win.

We measured out and mixed the wet and dry ingredients without mishap. We washed and filled a pan with oil and waited as it heated, fingering the slotted spoon with its scarred plastic handle.

Suddenly, the oil in the pan began to splatter and pop, spraying us with scalding drops; we hadn't thought to dry all the water off the pan before we started. Yelping in pain, we raised the heat, thinking that would evaporate the water faster — and jumped back as the oil burbled harder and began to smoke.

Surely it was hot enough now! We raised the funnel and attempted to pour batter through it while moving it in spirals. But fear of hot oil and our own unsteady hands fouled our aim, and the batter spilled liberally over the grates.

I ran for paper towels, which ignited while we attempted to sop up the mess. We threw the flaming wad in the sink and ran back to the pan, where our first and only funnel cake was sizzling loudly, burnt black on the bottom and raw on top. As dark smoke filled the kitchen, we tossed the whole experiment into the sink, on top of the smoldering towels, and climbed on the counters to open the window.

No expert was needed to pronounce it a disaster. I am sorry to say we tried to dispose of the evidence by eating it — it was a funnel cake, after all, how bad could it be? — but this proved impossible. We spent the next hour clearing the countertops and scrubbing the stove — hungrily, I might add.

Afterward, we got a shovel and buried the funnel cake in the backyard — where, in a rare burst of good judgment, we figured no one would think to look for it. I went back three times to check it, feeling sure some sort of spiral-shaped bare patch would bear witness to our ignominy in future years.

In the end, we needn't have worried. If our mother noticed something awry in her suspiciously tidy yet reeking kitchen, she gave no sign of it. She may have arched an eyebrow, but she never said a word.

In the grown-up years that followed, I came to love the smell of a New York City street fair, the sausages and peppers, the arepa fritters of fried corn and cheese, and

See CURIOUS Page D3

# 'Food isn't what's on the table'

Story by Tinky Weisblat / photos by Paul Franz

**T.** Susan Chang of Leverett maintains that she is "vague ... about everything except food." Nevertheless, Chang, a food writer whose first book, "A Spoonful of Promises: Stories and Recipes from a Well-Tempered Table," was recently published by Lyons Press, sounded highly organized in a recent interview. Here is a typical Susan Chang day:

"I'm up at quarter of five," said Chang. "My husband teaches in Westfield so from here, it's a serious commute. If I didn't get up with him, we wouldn't see each other. It enables me to make him a salad, which otherwise he wouldn't eat ..."

"And I have all this time before the kids even wake up. I check email. I work on the treadmill. Sometimes, I make the kids' lunch. Sometimes, I bake something, which is a fun thing to do when it's dark and cold outside."

"It's a very peaceful time until seven o'clock. We have some quiet time reading and snuggling for about half an hour. And then we do our chores."

While the youngsters — 11-year-old Noah and 5-year-old Zoe — gather wood and get dressed, Chang prepares their breakfast. She likes to get protein into her children every morning in the form of eggs. Some mornings, the only eggs they will eat are complicated.

"The eggs can take anywhere from five minutes to half an hour," she sighed.

At 8:30, the children go to school, conveniently located across the street. Then, Chang's real day begins.

First, she makes herself a little breakfast. "I have to have a little treat, like, three times a day," she said with a smile.

By nine o'clock, she is hard at work. She works on an essay for National Public Radio's Kitchen Window series, a cookbook review for the Boston Globe, or her next book.

Most of these tasks involve recipe testing. Chang devises a weekly menu every Wednesday based on what she needs to test and tries her best to stick to it.

She also spends time organizing and winnowing the cookbook collection she has amassed from her reviews. She estimates that the books number around 770.

"It's probably going to go up to 800 pretty soon. I try to keep the increase on the slow side because you can only buy so many bookshelves," Chang noted ruefully.

When school gets out, she explained, she fetches her children and organizes them to work and practice the piano. "Then, I immediately start making dinner," she added. "Dinner's on the table at 6. Zoe's in bed at 7:30. Noah's in bed by 8:30, followed



Chang makes almond brioche toast. "The most important lesson is to keep an open mind ... Because when it comes to food, you only cheat yourself if you don't keep an open mind," she said.



Chang with her cookbook collection, which she estimates at around 770 books.

quickly by his parents."

Chang has always been "crazy about food," but she didn't learn to cook as a child. Her mother prepared all the family food in order to make sure that her children focused on schoolwork and music.

Chang's first job after studying ancient Greek and English in college was in publishing. "It was the only thing that I could

do with my degree, basically," she recalled. "I started out right at the bottom as an editorial assistant. I liked the work."

Almost immediately, however, she found herself focusing increasingly on food. "I didn't have a whole lot of money," she explained. "And I wanted to eat out all the

See CHANG Page D3

Greenfield, Massachusetts

## MILESTONES

The Recorder Saturday, March 10, 2012 D1

# Chang: Food shapes us

From Page D1

time. I told myself, 'You have a problem. You need to learn to cook.'

Her boss gave her a copy of Marcella Hazan's "Essentials of Italian Cooking," she remembered. And she cooked and cooked and cooked. At the end of each workday, she began to plan increasingly elaborate meals.

When she married and found she had more resources, she went to cooking school.

Chang obtained a degree in culinary arts and she and her husband, Randy te Velde, left New York to look for a place in which they might explore the idea of opening a restaurant. They ended up in Leverett because both had ties to New England.

In the end, they decided to use their savings to buy a house rather than a restaurant. Chang had tried working in restaurants and had done research about the business.

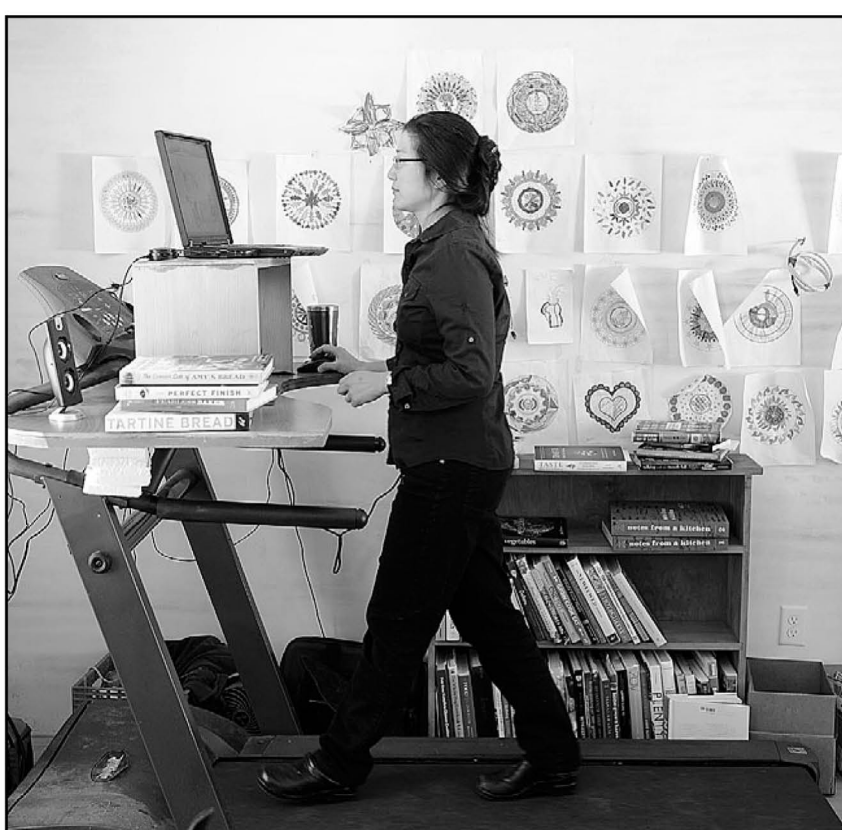
"It's a lot of work. And a lot of risk," she said. "I wasn't really afraid of the hard work without the risk. I wasn't afraid of the risk without the hard work. But the two together: no."

When they started thinking about children, Chang's husband trained as a teacher and got a job in a school. Chang herself started sending articles about food to editors.

Little by little, she built up her career and reputation. "It took a long time, but one way or another, I discovered that it is possible to become a food writer," she said. "You just write and write and write and you try, and, eventually, you get a toothed."

Writing a book was a new venture for Chang, one she adored. "A Spoonful of Promises" was the first of the essays she began writing for the Kitchen Window radio series, then just beginning, in 2006.

The book features a number of excellent recipes, but at heart it is not a cookbook. Instead, the author



Chang in her treadmill office.

endeavor.

"I hope that anyone who has a real love of food will enjoy my book," said Chang. "I don't think it has to be someone who is crazed about cooking or ambitious about cooking. Anyone who enjoys sharing food from the point of view of the experience, not just the taste, will enjoy it."

"Food isn't just what's on the table. It's who you're sharing it with. It's memories from the past. It's memories you're creating. And it's the emotions that go with the meals."

Chang writes about the food she remembers best from her youth, about her greatest triumphs (and, yes, disasters) in the kitchen, about her love of gardening and family.

The book features anecdotes about and photographs of her family,

"The most important lesson is to keep an open mind," she explained during our interview. "Because when it comes to food, you only cheat yourself if you don't keep an open mind."

Chang hopes to write more books — and to continue nurturing her family and her audience with her food and her writing.

T. Susan Chang will read "A Spoonful of Promises" at the Odyssey Bookshop in South Hadley on Saturday, March 24, at 7 p.m. — if she hasn't been crushed by her hundreds of cookbooks. The book is also on sale at other area bookstores.

Tinky "Dakota" Weisblat is a food writer and singer who lives in Hawley. Visit her blogs, in Our Grandmothers' Kitchens, www.ourgrandmotherskitchens.com, and Pulling Taffy, http://mytaffypull.wordpress.com.

# Curious

From Page D1

yes, the funnel cakes.

Blessed with an iron-clad stomach, I could eat my way up and down the avenue all day. The next morning I would feel nothing worse than melancholy as the carts packed up, leaving behind a pavement slick with grease.

But even as I grew confident around a stove, progressing from roasting a chicken to boning a duck, I avoided my affections to culturing sourdough, I avoided making funnel cake. I guess I was still harboring a 6-year-old, oil-smudged fugitive, pursued by the twin furies of incompetence and guilt. Now that the story's out, I think the prisoner is free to go.

The truth of the matter is that funnel cake — for those with a clear conscience — is just not that hard to make. Just be sensible when you deep-fry:

1. Use a splatter screen if you have one.
2. Test for temperature, either with a deep-fat thermometer or by using the cube-of-bread test (the oil's the right temperature if the cube turns golden in 30 seconds).
3. Fill the funnel first, stopping the hole with your finger until you begin pouring.
4. Pour as close to the oil as you can so that the batter doesn't cause the hot oil to splash you.
5. Start with a dry pan.

Don't worry about cleaning up right away. Eat your funnel cake hot and dust it liberally with powdered sugar. If you eat it outside in, the center will still be warm when you get there.

When you're done, you probably won't feel like doing much of anything. Funnel cake has a way of bringing life to a standstill. But I can tell you one

You'll need a funnel with a 1/2-inch opening at the base. If you can't locate one with an opening that wide, you can cut the bottom off a regular plastic funnel (typically with a 1/4-inch opening).

### Funnel Cake

Yield: about 6, 8-inch funnel cakes (plenty for 6 people)  
2 cups all-purpose flour  
2 tablespoons granulated sugar  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1 1/2 cups milk  
2 eggs  
Vegetable oil for frying  
Confectioner's sugar

In a medium bowl, combine the flour, granulated sugar, baking powder and salt. Stir with a whisk until thoroughly combined.

Pour the milk into a measuring cup and add the 2 eggs. Whisk with a fork until combined. Pour the milk and egg mixture into the dry ingredients and whisk thoroughly until you have a smooth batter.

Add 1/2 inch of oil to a large, heavy skillet or deep pot and heat to 350 degrees (use a deep-fat thermometer or cubes of bread to test: if the bread turns golden brown in 30 seconds, the oil is the right temperature). Fill the funnel with batter, holding your thumb over the opening.

Drizzle the batter out in a spiral, starting from the center of the pan. Hold the funnel as close to the pan as you can to minimize splatters. Let the cake cook until golden brown (about 45 seconds to a minute), then flip to the other side with tongs and brown the other side. Drain on paper towels. Sift confectioners' sugar. Serve hot — it's best to serve