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Hated it as a kid? Try a better version of that food

BY DAVID HAMMOND June 12, 2012 4:18PM

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I watched as Stephanie Izard of Chicago's Girl and the Goat carefully sliced through lush Skuna Bay salmon.

We were in the kitchen of the Lodge at Golden River on Vancouver Island, and the "Top Chef" winner was confessing, "I used to hate salmon. When I was little, it was always so dry and, um, fishy-tasting."

"I hated salmon for the same reasons" chimed in Lee Hillson, "Iron Chef America" competitor from Arizona, who was cooking alongside Izard. Hillson's hate became love, with his first taste of Skuna Bay salmon, which is, indeed, exceptional, marbled with thin layers of luxurious fat and with flesh so firm it actually crunches pleasantly when bitten.

What I found most intriguing about my time in the kitchen with Izard and Hillson was how childhood experiences can turn a person against certain foods. Such loathing can last a lifetime — unless you turn it around by eating a better version of the stuff.

Asparagus came to our suburban household in a can when I was young. Canned asparagus is a pale, mushy thing. Years later, fresh asparagus became a revelation; it's now one of my favorite vegetables.

Until recently, strawberries seemed to me a drab fruit: not very juicy, white and pulpy in the center, flavorless. One day at Green City Market, however, I bought a carton of wild strawberries, small and glistening red as rubies. Biting into one, I immediately realized I'd disliked strawberries because I'd never had a really good one. When not rushed to market before their time, and especially when taken in the wild, strawberries are a magnificent fruit. Now I know.

If there's a food you hate — maybe lima beans, maybe liver — consider that perhaps you learned to abhor that food because the first time you had it, it wasn't served well. Maybe the stuff was frozen, or the sorry product of a corporate feed lot, or simply wrecked by overcooking. You might consider giving foods you hate another chance.

Hate frozen peas? Check out the fresh pea puree at Elate in River North.

Can't tolerate canned sardines? Try the fresh Italian beauties at Moderno in Highland Park.

You might be surprised how much you love what you once thought hateful.

With me, it's still chitterlings. But I'm working on it.

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