

Mount Potato Salad dominated the patio table at the baby shower. Ferried carefully into the house by the soon-to-be-father, from the truck cab of one of the arriving guests, it presided over the quacamole, brie, Chex mix and fruit salad the way Denali looms over central Alaska, or the way Ranier owns the sky over Seattle.

Now, something you need to know about me (well, need is probably not the word) is that I am on a lifelong quest to find the perfect potato salad. I grew up surrounded by stout German farm grannies who competed ruthlessly in the food ring. Whether it was coffee cakes, jams and preserves, or cold salads, these were farm wives to be respected and culinarily feared. They often gathered on the weekends, everyone invited, for coffee-klatches. We kids would chase around the laden tables, overdosing on lemon cake, butter cookies, pickled everything, and galaxies of cold salads that had been perfected in European kitchens when God was a kid. As I grew up and journeyed out into the rest of the cold world, I realized that my childhood had been extraordinarily, epicuristically, blessed. And I mourned the loss of perfect pickles in my life as well as the potato salads I'll never know the likes of again.

But I keep trying them as I find them, and hoping.

I spooned a promising mound of this newest contender onto a paper plate and jabbed at it with my clear plastic fork. Things looked hopeful. And you know what? It was divine, DIVINE potato salad. I hustled to thank the creator thereof. And there she sat, gracious elbow on the patio table, perfectly and nattily dressed, dangling oodles of gold jewelry and keeping an eye on her stooped, ancient husband. She was one of the stately women of the older, cowboy, generation of Maui. A corollary, perhaps, of all those German farming family grannies of my Texas youth. I crouched by her white plastic patio chair and told her basically what I've just told you, and she smiled at me, leaning in closely to gift me with a couple of carefully-guarded recipe secrets.

One secret to perfect potato salad, she told me, bangles jangling, was to cook the potatoes in their skins, and to put garlic and onions in the water with them. And never too much mayonnaise, either. She said, "a little sugar and salt, too, always, in everything. It brings out the flavor, you know." A matriarchal smile spread across her face, lines fanning out from the corner of her eyes like sun rays. I expressed surprise at the sugar/salt combo, and she said yes, that those two are necessary ingredients to full-flavored dishes. And then she said, very matter-of-factly:

"But not that black pepper. That stuff gets hung up in your anus and it just never comes out." Momentarily unbalanced, I stopped in mid-chew and said, "Oh? I'd...not heard that."

"Yes, yes", she said in the most serious of voices. "That black pepper just hangs up in the anus and that's just not good for anybody, especially for the men, with those cancers they get there".

"Mmmmm hmmm," I added, looking around for the rest of the Monty Python cast. Surely they were around here somewhere, ready to pop out singing and dancing from behind the grill or the door to the house--singing that catchy Pepper In Your Anus song that's destined to get stuck in your head for a week.

She leaned in closer to make sure I was hearing her correctly and amended, "Not that flaky shaker kind of pepper, that's OK, but that fresh grinder kind. It just doesn't come out." Well, good to know. I'll be keeping that in mind, to be sure. Every time a waitress grinds fresh pepper on my salad, I'll be thinking of this moment.

The architect of the perfect potato salad leaned back into the plastic lawn chair and I mumbled an excuse and fled. Again.

Am I fleeing the little old lady I'm destined to become? Will I be sharing intimate details about my family and anus with those who stray into my orbit? Am I seeing the future?

I was telling these stories to my friend Pono, asking if there was something in particular about me

that triggered bizarre tales to erupt from people in my presence, particularly the older ones. He said no. He said, "Your mistake is that you actually listen!"

And so it is. And maybe these are the dues we pay so that someday we, too, can feel free to lean over to the young(er) person kneeling by our walkers or levitation assist devices, we can tap his or her surgically-enhanced, bionic shoulder, and we can say, in a voice that carries clearly across the crowded Moon Station snack bar:

"Honey, did I ever mention that Earth blueberries come out the same color they go in? I guess that blue color just somehow gets hung up in your anus."