In those heady, halcyon days of my childhood, our diversity of gastronomic bliss was taken for granted. Twenty years passed before I realized my palate had been fine-tuned by experts.

My father's flourishing Manhattan business, wiped out due to unforeseen and tragic events, forced our small family to leave our lap of luxury and journey from palatial digs on Riverside Drive, over the bridge and into the heart of Brooklyn.

A potentially traumatic move, especially in my tender, formative years, this abrupt change of scenery and pampering withdrawal, bore all the signs of a depressing and bleak future. Instead, as fate would have it, the unforeseen repositioning turned out not to be a negative move at all. On the contrary - it was the catalyst for the most exciting cultural awakening of my life.

For it was during this time that the full compliment of my senses, my taste buds in particular, leapt gloriously into existence.

There were numerous eye-openers in this new, radically different environment, but the diversity and richness of its food and cuisines was awesome.

It was my induction into the smells and tastes of ethnic food and the birth of my life-long love affair with gastronomy.

Though a mere five or six miles from our former home, our new neighborhood was another world. A veritable melting pot of transplanted Europeans, the heady stew was thick with southern Italians who hailed from Naples and Sicily, Jews who fled with their lives and not much more from Germany, Poland, Russia and Hungary, small samplings of Estonians, Lithuanians and Latvians, a handful of Spanish and a sprinkling of Irish.

There was Joe, our Polish seltzer man, who stopped by monthly to refill our case of Czechoslovakian etched-glass containers. Tony, the Italian fruit and vegetable man, drove his cart and horse down our street, ringing his bell to alert housewives. The Good Humor ice cream man also announced his van's arrival with a cacophony of tingalings, but we all knew the crucial difference in cadence and timbre.

Three blocks away, a bakery supplied our family with wonderful fresh bread daily. Always a long line awaited and you would take a ticket and wait your turn, "Who's my next?", the saleswoman behind the counter would call out. "Who's my next?" I bought a whole seeded rye for six cents and she would place the caraway-studded loaf in this amazing electric slicing machine. The button was pressed and it began to whirr and tremble as two rows of blades, like prehistoric metal teeth, moved menacingly toward each other and crossed over, neatly biting the bread into a dozen uniform slices. A bit taken aback at first, I soon became quite enthralled with this magical invention.

Years before the first supermarkets my Mom would sometimes send me to the local dairy for a pound of butter, a quarter pound of cheddar or a portion of pot cheese. The sweet or salty butter and cheddar were cut to order from huge blocks kept in the icebox and the homemade cottage-cheese predecessor was scooped out of a big bowl and spooned into neat little paper containers.

No need to buy milk; good old Sam delivered a fresh quart bottle with cream at the top to our door every morning, just in time for breakfast. Mom would skim off the cream for my Dad's coffee and
pour the pure milk over my cold corn flakes in summer, oatmeal in winter.

All the women had “a special relationship” with the butcher. I wasn’t permitted to deal with him until I was at least twelve. Apparently the high cost of meat made this purchase a job for the more experienced shopper. I tagged along with Mom on these excursions and carefully observed the ritual of smiling demurely and chatting up the man with the blood-flecked apron - a shameless flirtation employed by most to get on his good side and receive some preferential treatment. This coy ploy might result in the acquisition of the choicest cuts for a better price and invariably garner us a few extra little tidbits in the way of highly sought after marrow bones or a few slices of homemade baloney. In later years, I found I could flutter my eyelashes with the best of them.

Being second generation Americans, our family’s meal times were rather prosaic and untouched by the likes of imported seasonings or exotic spices. There was salt, pepper and for some reason, a rarely used bottle of paprika. (Dried oregano, chili seeds and Dijon mustard didn’t appear in my Mother’s kitchen until I was in high school.) Meats were grilled or boiled, chickens roasted or boiled, fish fried. Heinz ketchup and tartar sauce, were our condiments of choice. Nothing much changed at our home since we left Manhattan. The word gourmet did not exist in my Mom’s vocabulary. Nary a cookbook was to be seen. But when I was stunned one day to bump into her without a clean, crisply ironed white apron. And she made every luscious bite herself…with her own two hands…from scratch. I was under the impression she never left the kitchen and was stunned one day to bump into her at the bank.

The tastes, smells, flavors and presentation of Mama Acerno’s cooking formed my definition of Italian food. Anything less was simply not the real McCoy.

Then there was my Russian grandmother. The gustatory experience was equally impressive at her house. A short car ride away and you were back in Ukraine as it might have been in the turn of the 19th century. Here, amongst the trappings of her former life, you could treat your palate to a wide variety of entirely different sensory stimulants. The table was as big and every bit as crowded with chattering people, but this time it was in Russian, Yiddish and various middle European dialects.

A couple of Sundays each month we would assemble around the dining table that fit the dining room like a glove. In order to get to your chair, you had to squeeze along between table and wall. Once seated we would start passing platters of homemade chopped liver and onions and bowls of kasha varnishkas. Often there would be chicken soup afloat with amazingly light matzo balls or Jenny’s own handmade noodle krepelach. The kids were treated to a cache of highly sought after bones, filled with marrow ready to be dug out, their ambrosial contents spread on a chunk of sweet bread torn from a knotted loaf of challah. Then came the stuffed cabbage, melt-in-the-mouth brisket of beef, candied carrots, maybe a plate of...
homemade pickled tomatoes or perhaps a bowl of Jenny’s sauerkraut dotted with tiny juniper berries and always a platter of crisply roasted potatoes.

My maternal grandmother came from wealthy landowners near Odessa. My grandfather was the son of the people who worked their land. Falling in love while still in their teens, elopement was the only solution. Headstrong and courageous, the young couple packed their belongings, leaving their homeland with the Cossacks nipping at their heels. They eventually sailed to America, got through the checkpoint at Ellis Island, and settled in Missouri.

They never saw Russia again. Over the years, my grandfather’s little general store blossomed into a prosperous three-story emporium. But my grandmother remained steadfastly in charge of the kitchen. Her repertoire of recipes (not a single sentence committed to paper), with all their myriad details, remained permanently filed in her head.

Who needed the Russian Tea Room? It was just a cheap imitation of Grandma Jenny’s.

When we did venture out to local restaurants for a change of pace, we experienced the same purity, the same authenticity, the same devotion to ethnicity as in the homes of my grandmother and the Acerno’s.

Aside from some teeth-gnashingly sweet sacramental offering sipped on Jewish holidays, my first real glass of wine was given to me on my fifteenth birthday by Mr. Gragnano at his popular local pizzeria, who poured it from a raffia-bottomed bottle of Chianti.

The neighborhood boasted quite a few Chinese eateries, too. These were family businesses, owned and operated by Chinese, from the cooks to the waiters to the cashier up front who was invariably the wife of the owner. More often than not these gilt-dragon and red-lantern bedecked establishments were set up and run by folks from Hong Kong. While they didn’t live in close proximity, they were certainly “part of the neighborhood.” None of us could have survived very long without consuming some of their delicacies.

Infrequently at first, but then as often as once a week, my Dad returned from work and announced he was taking us out for “Chinese.” If Milton Berle or some other hot show was on the TV, he brought the meal back home. It was the Chinese who taught us about take-away.

How could we show anything but deep affection for the people who filled our bellies with steaming hot wonton soup, gravy-doused egg foo yung pancakes studded with bits of spring onion, crunchy homemade noodles, tasty yellow fried rice, diced chili chicken with cashews and still hot- from- the- skillet spring rolls. Without a doubt these folks from the East made a distinctive contribution in shaping our culinary prowess and were considered an integral part of our immediate dining family.

And, ah, the corner deli. Those were the days before calories and cholesterol where we gorged ourselves on hot pastrami, fat-rimmed corned beef, boiled tongue, hot Reubens oozing melted Swiss cheese and Russian dressing and other thick comfort sandwiches served with sides of quartered pickles, mayo-packed potato salad and creamy coleslaw.

How we ever survived this artery-clogging onslaught is a miracle. And we didn’t need the excuse of meal time to stop by. Mr Pincus had a huge brine-filled barrel at the end of the store where hundreds of cucumbers were aging gracefully. New pickles at the top, half sours in the middle and at your urging, Mr Pincus would roll up his sleeve and lower his entire arm into the vinegary liquid, to search out a real sour specimen. This beauty, its bottom half wrapped in a piece of a waxed paper, set you back a cool five cents and boy, you made it last, one crunchy bite at a time, all the way home.

All food served in our local eateries were 100% true to their roots. The same held true in our homes. No Jewish wife and mother would ever contemplate producing, for instance, her own version of Italian lasagne. It was unthinkable. Nor would Johnny’s Mom dream of concocting her own kind of borscht, even though I am certain she could have whipped up an award-winning version. It just never entered anyone’s mind to copy another’s cuisine or even bend it ever so slightly to one’s own brand of cooking.

This was life before fusion. Well, I finally grew up, went to university and left Brooklyn behind, but I took my palate with me. Not surprisingly, I went on to write magazine and newspaper columns and a number of books about the glories of food and wine and as a restaurant critic, my readers religiously followed my reviews as though it were the gospel.

After all, I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. It was rewarding, but inevitable. Not only did I learn to eat from the best of them, it was my destiny to become a food writer.