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UK

Angle/London

A Tale of Two Caravans

In the southern UK, at roughly the same latitude but separated by 420 kilometers, reside two caravans. Depending on where you come from, the expression might be *camper vans* or *Winnebagoes*, *trailers* or *roulottes*. Whatever the word, they are boxes made of aluminum and plastic and wiring, stamped with different brand names, sitting on blocks or small wheels, dragged behind trucks with large engines or attached to cabs with bench seating. In the case of these two caravans, they are also containers for ideas about food, and while each is quite different from the other, they are also very similar.

One caravan sits in a field.

One has been decorated with pretty curtains and nice blankets, a few toys for kids to play with, a new lamp, and some flowers. There are books about food and birds on a shelf, and the galley kitchen has been scrubbed clean. So clean.

The field is in a walled garden, where a few stalks of asparagus have started to poke up from the soil. The sun warms the earth, and the old stone walls reflect the heat. It is cozy here and smells of green things.

This caravan was bought second-hand, a bit banged-up, from a seller just down the road. It belongs to Tom and Lara Bean. He is a farmer, a pizza maker, a teacher, a fisher. She is a medical herbalist, an administrator, an ethnobotanist, a cultivator. They are father and mother of Luna, Freya, and Rosa. Freya and Rosa are twins.

The caravan provides a bed when guests visit Tom and Lara at their slightly-too-small-for-five-people house in Angle, West (*way west*) Pembrokeshire, Wales.

The other caravan sits in a parking lot.

The other has been stripped bare of its entire interior. On the ground outside, a water pump, a broken fridge, and a crusty toaster-grill sit in a pile of paneling and insulation. The wind blows pieces of fibreglass across the asphalt.

The parking lot is surrounded by urban buildings—a mixed-use apartment-and-office complex, warehouses, storage and industrial units. The air is a little chilly, especially when there is a brief shower from the grey sky.

The other caravan was also bought second-hand, from a guy in London that Cristiano Meneghin found in an advertisement. Cristiano is a street-fooder, a comic philosopher, a traveler. He is the husband of Kyrie, a planner, a preserver, a household manager. They are the parents of another Luna and a new baby boy called Rei.

The caravan, once it is rebuilt, will be an experimental food truck, an opportunity to do new things in and around central London where Cristiano sells food.

Tom is a gastronome: he does many things that involve making, talking about, and sensing the importance of food. In the field, he is making plants grow, which will feed his family, and which will help him figure out what this walled garden can do, both for the family and for Welsh food culture. Along one of the walls, Tom is reconstructing a greenhouse for seedlings, for plants that need extra warmth and protection, for experiments that will help the field show him what else it can do. Around the corner and down the path, his workshop is a place to fix tools and repair parts for his mobile pizza oven. The oven goes to events and parties and gatherings where he and Lara make food for Welsh people from ingredients that the Wales countryside and coast offer up—things like laverbread and shrimp and nettles and primroses. When Tom and Lara make pizza for people here, they are teaching them about what the land and the sea have to offer, what ‘local food’ can mean and can do for a place.

In the caravan in the field in the garden in Wales, the light filters through the little lace curtains very early in the morning, and a raucous cacaphony of birds can be heard. A portable heater keeps out the dawn chill. When you wake up and go over to the house for bathing and breakfast, you have to step carefully from the caravan doorway down to the grass, because the sill is a little uncertain. Other people will sleep here over time, and watch asparagus and beans and sea spinach sprout.

As Luna and Luna and Freya and Rei and Rosa grow up, they will have had these caravans in their lives for a long time. They may sleep and work and play and eat in them over the years. They may inherit them or reject them, renovate or sell. They will think of them as spaces in which their parents made food, made projects, made mistakes, made businesses. The caravans will have been part of how Cristiano and Kyrie and Lara and Tom make and think about and sense how food is important. Both similar, both different.

D. Szanto
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Cristiano is a gastronome. He brings together his Italian heritage with his love of innovation and design, his nervous energy, his commitment to making food that is really, really good, and his infectious personability. At his food stand, he goofed around with customers and co-workers, mixes ground ox heart with grass-fed beef, and cleans his equipment rigorously. In his rattling red van, he thinks up weird things to do at food festivals and urban markets—things like making ‘Sutra Naan’ (hot, hybrid flatbread with indo-euro sex appeal... sort of). Cristiano is constantly coming up with new ideas and new projects, making connections, building a community, and talking, talking, talking. Kyrie is constantly reminding him to pick up this or that, order new supplies, get the right licences and permits, and come home on time for dinner. When Cristiano feeds you a burger, he is feeding you some of his own blended spirit, a bit of him that wants food to become always more interesting.

In the parking lot in the industrial complex in East London, the scrap from the caravan’s deconstruction will be swept up and cleared away. The water pump will be fixed and reinstalled, and new floors and paneling and kitchen equipment will be installed. A clever illustrator will paint the outside, and in a while, clever things will start being cooked inside. Eventually, lots of people will line up to eat them, think about how remarkable food really is, and then talk with each other about it.

Tom Bean and Cristiano Meneghin were roommates in Colorno, Italy, while studying at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in 2005–06. They were my friends then and now, colleagues in gastronomy and innovators in their worlds of food. I visited them both during my travels for the Eco-Gastronomy Project, just prior to the Scotland’s Foodscape symposium in Edinburgh. Neither of them knew that the other had recently purchased a caravan.



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