

The Only Person Who Could Get Mark Bittman to Follow a Recipe Was J.D. Salinger

He wasn't there, but his son's presence did the trick



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J.D. Salinger and his son, Matt. Used with permission from Matt Salinger.

My current offering isn't a mystical story, or a religiously mystifying story, at all. I say it's a compound, or multiple, love story, pure and complicated. — J.D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*

When Matt Salinger was about 10 years old, his father, J.D. Salinger (known as Jerry), had hypoglycemia. He visited a homeopath in Colorado who rejiggered his diet and put him on raw foods. "It was really humiliating," Matt — who looks a whole lot like his revered dad — told me,

when I met him a couple of years ago. "We'd go to restaurants and he'd order lamb and he'd say 'Almost raw. Blue!'"

Fathers embarrass us in their own unique ways; my dad (Mark) used to blast Roxy Music and David Bowie and Elvis Costello in the car while I sat in the back seat with a friend, cringing, rolling my eyes, apologizing. Naturally, he thought it was hilarious, and turned up the volume. (And now I'm embarrassed that I didn't recognize it for how cool it was.)

But dads also have a unique way of making things better, which Matt and I talked a lot about when Mark and I met him in late 2019 at the New York Public Library, at a poignant exhibit of Salinger's work that Matt assembled; it seemed appropriate for dad and me to go together, since he introduced me to *Catcher in the Rye* when I was around 13, and, naturally, it became my favorite book. (My son's name is Holden, which Matt handled better than you might imagine. Traces of panic crept into his features when I told him, but all in all, he hid it well, and I like to think he's now convinced of my relative sanity.)

The NYPL exhibit felt sort of like a debunking: If you didn't know anything about J.D. Salinger, you would think he was just a modest, kind guy who loved his son, his friends, and family. As many fans know, however, people are hell-bent on characterizing him as a nutty loner. I asked Matt if, when he was building the exhibit, his goal was to offset that stereotype.

"It was torturous," he told me. "I was offering a demythologized version, I was offering who he was to me, and who I think he was in a much more profound way. But nobody knew him. So people were picking at straws that were laid by other people who didn't know him, who had heard thirdhand from a mail carrier." Matt managed to track the language of how his father's retiring in private morphed into becoming "reclusive," and then "notoriously reclusive." How, he wondered, "can someone be 'notoriously reclusive?' What's notorious about it?"

Still, though, Matt is cautious of coming across as his dad's "prickly protector," and speaks conscientiously when it comes to his father. As he puts it, "instead of me or some biographer saying, 'Wait, he wasn't a hermit, he wasn't this, you know, freak that lived on a hill,'" at the exhibit, you got to read the letters that Salinger wrote to his close friends, to Matt, "and you think, 'wow, he stayed friends with these guys for 50 years?'"

The letters go a long way toward disproving any characterizations of Salinger as surly. In one of them, an old friend Salinger had known for decades humbly asks him to borrow money, with some confessed embarrassment. Salinger's response is one of nonchalant generosity, basically, "absolutely, of course, it's already in the mail." As my own father noted, "It's really very humanizing." (Another favorite bit, from a letter Matt's dad wrote to him: "How are you, my

handsome giant of a little boy?" It captured so beautifully — in a way that only a certain caliber of writer can — the way I feel every time I look at my lanky, lovely child.)

Also featured at the exhibit, written on index cards or scraps of paper, were J.D. Salinger's recipes — Matt says he had about a dozen. Each is a concoction dreamed up by Salinger that he wanted to keep handy; they were his go-to meals, and he kept them taped up inside his kitchen cabinet.

Since Salinger was often alone — yes, it's true — as well as a believer in small portions, many of the recipes serve just one ("three teaspoons of oats," "three teaspoons of lentils," "three Brussels sprouts"). Matt can't remember his father ever using a cookbook, which isn't to say that Jerry wasn't fastidious — scattered throughout each of the recipes are notes like, "Use one of our two biggest pots for a week's daily portion," and "Add two tiniest" — tiniest is underlined — "spoonfuls," and "three middle small spoons of millet flour." Our unanimous favorite, though, is in "Soup, June 2007": "Broccoli, size of a child's fist, sliced entirely into tiny pieces, dime thickness." (Mark: "We need two child-size fists of that broccoli. Matt, how old do you think the child is?" Matt: "I think the child would be 5 or 6.")

SOUP, June 2007

VEGETABLES: 7 small, fresh
Red potatoes, Quartered or
eighthed.

Broccoli, size of a
child's fist, sliced entirely
into tiny pieces, dime thickness.

Same quantity and
cuttings for: 2 scallions,
3 good-sized Brussels Sprouts,
5 slender carrots, coined and
halved; 7 KALE leaves and
stems, as nearly confettied as
feasible; 1 small onion, or,
better, 2 whole scallions, minced,
child's fist-sized cauliflower,
crumbled.... (option) raw,
similarly treated, sized, cut
raw, fresh vegetables. The
entire, heaped mass to be
sufficient to be covered
just barely, but completely
to 7 cups of water.

Add one shallow Tablespoon
"BETTER THAN BOWTIE"
Two and a half shallow
Tablespoons Tomato paste.
Half Teaspoons, each, THYME,

That meticulousness “is something he had in everything,” Matt says, of his father. It should come as no surprise to those of us who have read and reread Salinger’s books that “he was that way with words, too. Finding the exact right word for the exact right occasion — he would rejoice in that. He relished it and then when he found it — he would sometimes come out and say, ‘Matt, I found the most marvelous word.’ He loved his encyclopedia. That kind of precision.”

The week Jerry died, Matt reread all his father’s work (his favorite: *Zooey*) and made a list of the words he wanted to look up. “You want to be challenged like that,” he says. Matt enjoys writing, too, but not for publication. “I toyed with it in college, I took a couple courses with Joyce Carol Oates. I was proud when something turned out well, really proud: but just too big of a shadow. And it wasn’t joyful for me. And I saw his joy in writing and I knew I wasn’t feeling that.”

Jerry was perhaps less scrupulous when it came to his organic garden: “He would always experiment with new techniques that would promise less time weeding, and some worked and some didn’t,” Matt says. “I remember one year he was just casting fistfuls of seeds.” In summers, Matt would run or bike over to his dad’s, and Jerry would put together a soup, using greens from the garden (he loved kale and beet greens). Other times, Jerry would pick Matt up from his elementary school in Norwich, VT; Matt would bring a friend, his dad would cook. “He certainly wasn’t a brilliant cook — but it was always kind of an event, kind of exciting, like whenever he would cook meat, he’d cook it on a little grill with bricks that he would fashion right in the fireplace. So I’d look forward to whenever he was cooking.”

In February of 2020, right before the virus took over, Matt visited my dad’s house, and the three of us cooked together, using Jerry’s recipes, which were all remarkably clean, except for some standout wacky ingredients (i.e. Bearitos canned rice and beans, which we could not find; lots of Better than Bouillon; Mrs. Dash). Growing up, Matt says, they’d have the aforementioned big soup, usually with nice bread and either a salad or a sandwich with sharp cheddar cheese and a heaping amount of sprouts tossed in soy and peanut oil. So our 2020 group did just that: We made “Soup, June 2007,” plus another soup, a porridge, and a cheddar sandwich — on *Bittman Bread*, naturally — with the sprouts, which I totally recommend, because how can you go wrong with soy sauce and crunch?

Incredibly, my dad did two things that day that he never does: Followed a recipe (with precision that I like to think would make Jerry proud), and put together an actual mise en place; these things can only be described as careful gestures, perhaps out of some nerves, definitely out of respect to Jerry, and to Matt, who was so generous with his time and conversation. (“Incredible!” Matt said about my father. “So you can teach an old dog...”) There was a bunch

of teasing (much talk about “middle small spoons” and “hippie food”), but the meal itself was, much like the NYPL exhibit, a tender ode to fathers.

There was a lot of war talk, as you’d expect from two men who both had dads in World War II: “It was interesting for me to see your dad’s stuff from the war because my dad never talked about anything, from the war,” my father told Matt, fairly sentimentally. “There were no letters, there were no photographs” — there were, I think, two. “He never told us anything.” We know two things about my grandfather Murray Bittman’s time in the war, which started a month or two after D-Day: He got into some sort of motor vehicle accident (this, according to my great-grandmother, and never confirmed), and he and his squad liberated a concentration camp. (This he did talk about, but, according to my father, precisely twice.)

Turns out, J.D. Salinger — who went over at D-Day — and his regiment liberated a few of them, too. “My father always downplayed [the war] to me,” Matt says. “And yeah, he checked himself into a hospital at the end of the war. I remember checking myself into the infirmary at prep school before exams because I couldn’t bear studying in my hovel of a room, and he was thrilled. He loved the fact that I’d done that and he said, ‘I did the same thing at the end of the war, Matt. I needed to get someplace the hell out of the way.’ But you read the biographies and they pathologize everything. All that just to say that there are benefits to having a father who just doesn’t talk about it.”



Ritchie Boys; J.D. Salinger on far left. Used with permission from Matt Salinger.

As a parent, I can only dream of Holden, when he's older, talking about me the way Matt does about his father — and, really, not to get *too* sappy here — the way that I talk about mine. The Salinger relationship, by all appearances, was loving, mutually supportive, and protective; and Matt speaks about his own two sons — who are in their late twenties and early thirties, respectively — similarly. (Yes: There was a lot of love, some declarative, some not, in that room.)

The NYPL exhibit, for which Matt pored over boxes and boxes of his dad's writing, fiction and otherwise, was an outward love letter to a parent and must have taken an extraordinary amount of time. "But," Matt says, "I loved him, and I loved his writing, so that makes it easy."



Matt and Mark, February 2020. Photo: Kate Bittman



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What a beautiful piece. Thank you, Kate.

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Reminds me of a recipe that I have from my bubbe, which specifies "eggshell of water". Thanks for sharing.

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