

I LONG TO LIVE IN A NANCY MEYERS MOVIE

Heading toward the jagged coastline, a mourning dove flies over the terracotta roof tiles that cover the elegant Spanish Colonial homes of Santa Barbara. To the east, the Santa Ynez Mountains rise dramatically from the town, offering majestic vistas of a crisp clear blue sky kissing the aquamarine waters of the Pacific Ocean. Seductive Brazilian music mixes in with the light chatter of partygoers. We are here on a breathtaking bluff to celebrate old friends.

And so begins the first few moments of Nancy Meyers' film, *It's Complicated*. Even before I see Meryl Streep banter with Alec Baldwin, I'm totally hooked and dying to see the inside of the house. I long to live the life of a Nancy Meyers character and I can easily satisfy my fantasies on any device, thanks to Netflix.

Movies offer the best armchair travel. I don't have to worry about lost luggage or getting ripped off at a tourist trap. I get to see the most romantic version of a city through the fabulous life of someone else. I can't imagine walking down the steps of Montmartre on a crisp autumn day without hearing Edith Piaf's *La Vie En Rose* blaring out from the open window of someone's posh atelier. The Eiffel Tower, lit up in all its glory, becomes my North Star as I walk alone over the Pont Neuf, envying the Gitane smoking lovers. It becomes clear that the romance of Paris is the only thing that can mend my broken heart. Yet, I don't actually have to be there to feel as if I'm experiencing it.

Of all the filmmakers who can make me fall in love with a time and place, no one does it better than Ms. Meyers. She just doesn't take me to a location, she let's me live in it alongside her affluent, slightly neurotic characters that always

seem to be looking for lasting love. The weather is as perfect and cheery as her storyline and it only rains for dramatic effect. She can make me feel the cool air rushing in as the day's heat dies away with the descent of the sun into the sea.

It's this snapshot of a charmed life that Ms. Meyers is so good at creating. It lies somewhere between truth, fantasy and longing. Take Jane, for example, Meryl Streep's character in *It's Complicated*. She's a fifty-something divorcée who has raised three nearly perfect kids, lives in a graciously appointed home with an impeccable kitchen that she thinks needs remodeling, and has Rita Wilson, Mary Kay Place and Ali Wentworth as best friends. They're the type of friends that really know and love you, not in spite of your quirks and foibles, but because of them. Instead of wearing old sweatpants and downing a pint of Haagen Dazs when things go wrong, they get together in their tunics from the chicest boutiques, eat Jane's homemade lattice topped pies, and drink Chardonnay. How bad could their problems be?

In reality, Jane's house is an hour south of Santa Barbara in Hidden Valley and the asking price is \$12 million. Only the exterior shots were filmed there. The sumptuous interiors were designed by Jon Hutman and Beth Rabino and shot on a sound stage in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. But, that's OK. I don't mind suspending my disbelief if I get to hang out in their world for two hours. I admit it, every time I watch the film – and I've seen it far too many times – I have been known to check out the current real estate prices in Santa Barbara.

In her film, *The Holiday*, Meyers creates a fantasy within a fantasy. The two lead characters, both let down by love, switch homes with hopes to escape their heartache. Kate Winslet's character, Iris, lives in a charming English cottage set quietly outside the storybook village of Surrey, just southwest of London. She's as warm and cozy as her sweet little stone house that's heated by a tiny wood-burning fireplace. It's Christmas time and there's just the right

amount of snow dusting the narrow cobblestone streets. The locals make their way into quaint corner pubs with names like "The Dog and Pheasant" and "The Grumpy Mole."

By contrast, Amanda, played by Cameron Diaz, is a Hollywood movie trailer producer who lives in an Architectural Digest inspired villa complete with swimming pool and gardener. The kitchen is one of a professional chef's dreams and there's an entertainment room with multiple remotes to turn on a wall filled with state-of-the-art electronics. The shades in the bedroom even have black out curtains that can go down at the flick of a switch. It's not surprising that when the taxi turns onto Sunset Boulevard, Iris's mouth is agape as Beverly Hills comes into view. Admiring the excesses of wealth, she passes manicured gardens and palm trees hiding the lavish mansions she longs to see. As she opens the door to Amanda's house, she can't believe her good fortune, screaming gleefully as she checks out each of the many sleekly decorated rooms. Iris is living the Nancy Meyer's fantasy in a Nancy Meyer's film and I'm right there with her.

My own experience in LA was not quite the same. I was working there on a project for about four months and I needed a place to stay. Of course, with the movie in mind, I searched AirBNB, hoping to find a place just like Amanda's. It became quickly apparent that I couldn't even afford to park my car in Beverly Hills. All I could manage was a tiny one-bedroom bungalow tucked away in someone's overgrown backyard in West Hollywood. I was told that Renée Zellweger had once lived there before she was Renée Zellweger, so that offered a touch of tinseltown allure. It almost made up for the leaking toilet and constant rattle from the nearby dry cleaner's air conditioner.

Ms. Meyer's take on Manhattan's nightlife in the first few moments of *Something's Gotta Give* makes the Upper East Side seem sexy and filled with only the young and beautiful. Long-legged girls in short dresses work their way past the bridge and tunnel riff raff as they cut the line for easy entry into

the club-of-the-week. The taxis come and go, their lights reflecting in the late summer rain puddles. But I hear no honking or city cacophony, only the thumping beat of the soundtrack. In less than a minute, I am transported to the fantasy version of the city that never sleeps.

But can real life ever live up to the romance and hype created in the movies? As a native New Yorker, I spend most of my days crushed in a subway on my way to and from work. I order in Seamless for lunch and work too many hours. I step in gum on the street and get hassled for loose change. I am no different than most New Yorkers, except that I am a hopeless romantic and watch far too many rom-coms.

It's the week before Christmas, and New York is magical with holiday lights hanging over the avenues like strings of shimmering diamond necklaces. Storefront windows along Fifth Avenue are dressed with oversized ornaments and mannequins dressed as Santa's helpers. People are loaded down with shopping bags and rushing about waiting for the dazzling light show projected against the walls at Saks.

I'm on a first date and we just finished dinner at a cute French bistro in the mid-fifties and decide to walk a bit. We nudge our way past the rushing masses and find a spot at the southwest corner of Rockefeller Center to admire the magnificent 75-foot Norway spruce Christmas tree. With its thousands of twinkling lights, it is more magnificent in person than any NBC-TV special can ever show. He reaches for my hand and the orchestra swells in my head. It is a movie moment. The smoky aroma of chestnuts roasting on the coals of the nearby street carts wafts past us as we share our first kiss.

It's been 36 years since that day and every Christmas I drag my husband into the city to stand in that very spot where our magic began. He begrudgingly indulges my flare for the romantic, never admitting that he enjoys our annual ritual

just as much as I do. As if on cue, the snow starts to lightly fall from the sky as he takes my hand and pulls me close. The sound system from the ice skating rink below is playing “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” As we cuddle and watch the skaters, it is in that moment I realize, I actually do live in a Nancy Meyers movie.

CHAR SIU SLICED PORK CHOP

I have been known to walk miles in search of good Char Siu (Chinese Roast Pork). Its sweet and sticky sauce is about as naughty as any food should be, but of course, that’s what makes it so irresistible. My friend Grace introduced me to a great place down in NY’s Chinatown (Big Wong) where you can get it to go. But I thought it might be fun to see if I could get close to replicating it and I think I came close. Give this recipe a shot and let me know what you think. (It’s also a great marinade for chicken too.)

INGREDIENTS (SERVES 2)

2 bone-in pork chops

MARINADE

1/2 cup hoisin sauce

2 Tablespoon ketchup

2 Tablespoon dark brown sugar

1 Tablespoon Shaoxing rice wine

1 Tablespoon honey

1 Tablespoons soy sauce

2 teaspoons oyster sauce
1 teaspoon molasses
1 teaspoon five-spice powder
1 teaspoon grated ginger
1 teaspoon grated garlic
1 teaspoon sesame oil
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup canola oil

PREPARATION

Combine all the marinade ingredients in a bowl and mix well. Slit the fatty side of the pork chops with a few shallow cuts so that the edges don't curl up while cooking.

Place the pork chops in a Ziploc bag. Pour in $\frac{3}{4}$ of the marinade. Close bag and massage pork chops so that the marinade covers them. Place in fridge for 24-hours, turning over mid-way. Reserve $\frac{1}{4}$ of the marinade in a separate container and store in the fridge.

Take chops out of the fridge 30 minutes before cooking. Oil a grill pan (or outside grill grates) and bring to medium high heat.

Take the chops out of the Ziploc and lightly scrape off excess marinade. Discard Ziplock. Place chops on grill pan (or direct heat on grill) and cover for six minutes until you get a nice char. Flip over and grill another 4-6 minutes until internal temperature is 140°. Allow to rest for ten minutes before slicing.

In a small saucepan, bring the reserved marinade up to a boil and then simmer for one minute. Drizzle on top of sliced pork once plated.

Serve with fried rice and/or bok choy.

THE GREAT BARBECUE CRAWL

I'm on a mission to visit all 50 states and I'm getting fairly close. So when a family wedding brought us out of the comfort of our Brooklyn home into the backcountry of Arkansas, I saw an opportunity to scratch off a few states on my list. I convinced my husband that a road trip would be a great idea with the selling point being a barbecue crawl through the south. After all, what is the point of a road trip if you can't eat all of the delicacies of the region?



We started in Nashville where there were ample opportunities for barbecue, but we settled on Hattie B's Hot Chicken to grease our stomachs in preparation of all the pork to come. There are six levels of heat from which to choose. We got medium for fear of indigestion, but we could have gone one or two levels higher in retrospect. A side of waffles, fried pickles and mac and cheese fortified us for the four country music bars we visited, ending at Johnny Cash's Bar and BBQ where a nine-month pregnant woman sang a respectable cover of "Shallow."



Next stop was Memphis, which was surprisingly quiet downtown. It was mid-week and off-season, but we expected a bit more action. A friend insisted we check out Rendezvous for their dry-rub ribs. It's in a back alley a few blocks off the main drag. I have to say, although I liked their sauces, the ribs seemed as if they had been hanging around a few hours too long.



En route to Arkansas, we stopped in at Whole Hog. It was here that I hoped to answer that eternal question – which is better, dry or wet rub ribs?



After sampling both, I've come to the conclusion that it must be a personal preference. For me, it's definitely a wet rub.



Our final destination was Chicago to visit more family, so that gave us an opportunity to knock off Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri with of course, a stop at Arthur Bryant's in Kansas City for the ultimate taste test.



By this point in the trip, I could barely zip my pants, but that didn't stop me from ordering a half-rack with tons of sides. And I so wanted to just taste the burnt ends that the guy behind the counter gave me a small bowl to sample. It was a good thing I asked, because, by far, the burnt ends were the best barbecue of the trip.

So now, that just leaves seven more states for me to visit. Next trip I can knock off four – North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Wyoming. If you've got any good recommendations eating wise, send them my way! And it doesn't have to be barbecue—I'm an equal opportunity eater.

LASAGNA LOAF

If you're like me, sometimes the bargains at Costco are just too much to pass up. The other day I bought an enormous container of ricotta and a one-pound brick of mozzarella with hopes of making a big pan of lasagna. But the party plans fizzled out and as much as I like lasagna, eating twelve portions over the course of the next week didn't seem like the healthiest of ideas. And don't tell me to freeze it unless you can find some space in my freezer.

Speaking of my freezer, way in the back I noticed a container of turkey Bolognese I had made last month. Light bulb! Since it's just my husband and me, I thought I'd make a quickie mini-loaf of lasagna. It took me half the time as my usual from scratch lasagna, but it 's equally delicious.

INGREDIENTS (Serves 4)

1/2-pound oven ready lasagna noodles

2 cups leftover turkey Bolognese, heated (or your favorite jarred meat sauce)

2 cups mozzarella cheese (grated, large holes)

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup Parmesan cheese (grated, small holes)

1 tablespoon butter

FOR BECHAMEL

2 tablespoons butter

2 tablespoons flour

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups of milk (warm)

Grated nutmeg

Salt & pepper

FOR RICOTTA MIXTURE

2 cups ricotta

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup Parmesan cheese (grated, small holes)

1 tablespoon fresh oregano (chopped)

1 tablespoon fresh basil (chopped)

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon red pepper flakes

Salt and pepper

PREPARATION

FOR BECHAMEL

In a saucepan, melt butter until it starts to foam. Add flour and whisk for two minutes until sandy colored, but not brown. Slowly pour in milk and whisk until it starts to lightly boil. Lower flame to simmer for eight minutes to thicken, whisking often. Turn off heat, season with pinch of grated nutmeg, salt and pepper, and set aside. If film forms on top, remove before using.

FOR RICOTTA MIXTURE

In a medium sized bowl, mix the ricotta, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Parmesan, oregano, basil, garlic powder, and red pepper flakes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Set aside.

FOR ASSEMBLY

Preheat oven to 350°. Butter a large loaf pan. Spread $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of béchamel on bottom of pan making sure the entire bottom is covered. Place a layer of lasagna noodles on top. (NOTE: Since lasagna noodles are oven ready and not pre-cooked, they need

moisture from the béchamel and sauce to soften them while the dish bakes. Always make sure the whole noodle is covered by some liquid).

Spread a $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of meat sauce on top of noodle. Spoon a layer of ricotta mixture on top. Sprinkle a layer of mozzarella, followed by a layer of Parmesan.

Repeat all of above three more times.

Place loaf pan on top of cookie sheet and bake in oven for about 50 minutes.

Allow to cool on top of stove for 30 minutes before serving.