

# A Berliner Speaks

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I happened to be in Berlin for something else entirely, but I was happy to meet up with Louisa Weiss, one of the early stars of food blogging, creator of *The Wednesday Chef* and author of *Classic German Baking*, *Classic German Cooking*, and *My Berlin Kitchen*. We talked about how she got started and where that led her.

**Luisa Weiss:** I had been reading blogs for a few years at that point, and before I read blogs, I read cookbooks. I mean, I read books. First of all, I was a bookworm from an early age, and sort of the second I figured out how to read, that was it. I read cereal boxes, I read books, I read books under the table. I mean, reading was just the only thing I ever wanted to do. And I majored in English, and I went into book publishing, and it was ... And all the time I was reading cookbooks, sort of like novels, and I just found cookbooks sort of endlessly interesting. And they also seemed so far away and so unattainable, Kind of like they, like cookbook authors were these mythic creatures whose jobs it was to write about food. I mean, it just seemed like this impossibly far away life. And then the internet was created and websites came along, or blogs came along, and I started reading them. And when I discovered my first food blog, it really was like the sun coming up. I mean, I was like, wait, normal people can write about food. It doesn't have to be this, I don't know this, like, you know, Italian noblewoman in a castle in Tuscany. Do you know what I mean? And so, yeah, that was a real, real revelation to me.

And so I read food blogs obsessively, obsessively, for several years. And then at some point in 2005, I remember I was taking a walk with my father around a pond, and I said, why can't I do that? Like, what? These people writing blogs are just like me. They're just random 20 year olds, 20 somethings and who are really passionate about home cooking and writing and what's stopping me? And so I went home and I started my blog. I mean, it really was like that.

And I wanted to have a framework for my blog because I was sort of nervous about having no framework for what to write about. And so I came up with this, this concept, to blog about the two different food sections in the New York Times and the LA times, because I believe that there was a bit of a rivalry, and I thought it was sort of interesting, and I wanted to write about it.

**Jeremy:** Your blog was Wednesday Chef. A lot of blogs were kind of, in a way, anonymous.

**Luisa:** I was anonymous for a good two or three years. I was terrified about putting my name on something public. I don't ... It was a mix of things. I think, first of all, I was just frightened that I would be judged or that ... I was also kind of worried because I worked in publishing full time, that my employer would think that I was putting too much time in this side gig. It's just so funny because now, of course, 25 years later, things have changed so much that it's assumed that you have a side gig and a blog and an Instagram account and whatever. But at the time, I was really, really worried that I would be penalised in some way. And so I kept it completely under wraps, completely anonymous for years, until one day I was out to lunch with a literary agent for work. I was a cookbook editor at the time, and we were talking and I sort of ventured that I also had a blog, but that it was secret. And she said, it's anonymous. You're crazy. Put your name on it. Put your picture on it. Come on. It's okay. And that's when I started then coming out of the closet, so to speak.

**Jeremy:** And how did that then lead to as it were, full time and working and becoming essentially a mainstream food writer.

**Luisa:** Yeah, it's kind of wild. I really never in a million years thought that starting that blog would end up doing that for me. Of course, now, in hindsight, I look back and it's all so obvious, but at the time it did not feel obvious at all. It felt like ... I had majored, I had wanted to write, I had wanted to go to graduate school for creative writing, and my advisor in university said, don't waste your money on an MFA program. Go and live your life and work. And if you have to write, you will write. You'll find a way. And I didn't really believe him. But then, of course, he turned out to be right.

And so what happened was, I started the blog, eventually through the people that I was meeting, through the blog, the other writers and the chefs and the cooks, I began developing this network of friends

and colleagues. And when a job opened up at a publishing company editing cookbooks, I applied for the job. And the woman who was hiring was actually really excited by the fact that I had this whole other sort of world to draw upon for future projects and things like that. And so the the blog helped me get into cookbook editing. And then, the more I wrote sort of personal things, that got a lot of attention as well from agents and publishers. And then eventually, I got a book deal to write this ... my first book, which was a food memoir about my life growing up in Berlin and in Boston and feeling sort of all over the place and how I dealt with that. And the blog training turned out to be perfect training for writing a book.

**Jeremy:** So the first book, when did you know what you wanted to write? Or were you kind of approached by an agent who said, look, I think you've got talent. Why don't you do this kind of book, which is what the market's looking for.

**Luisa:** It was a sort of a kind of a mix of those two things. So I had ... My childhood was a bit complicated, let's say. And it left marks that needed to be dealt with and that I really needed to work on creatively, I think, to sort of process and then also move on from. And my agent, to her everlasting credit, was the one who was able to see that and to say, listen, you have a book in you. This is what you should write about. The market is interested and ready and open, and I think that this is what you should do. I had wanted to do it, but I think I was much too timid or insecure or unsure really that people would care about my particularly unique little story. But she was the one who said, no, no, there's something bigger here, something more universal. Go for it.

**Jeremy:** And how different was it for you? You said that writing the blog was good preparation for writing the book, but how different is it, I mean, turning out a book to turning out, say, 100 blog posts?

**Luisa:** Well, first of all, the number one difference, which is a pretty big one, is that when you write a blog post, you get immediate feedback, and when you write a chapter or a paragraph or a page or whatever, you get zero feedback for months and months and months. And that adjustment, to just sort of writing into the void and being so solitary about it, because at the end of the day, of course, blogging is a solitary job, but it feels so communal because you're at least in those days, the commenters and the connections and the friendships you

were making were ... That was the reason why everybody kept doing it, because it was so intoxicating and wonderful. And writing, of course, writing a book is not that. It's a lot more solitary, and it's a lot more fraught. But I always had the great good fortune of having a contract and an editor and deadlines and money and all of those things helped me stay on track.

**Jeremy:** Some people, some bloggers, when they get a book contract, they actually sort of dribble out the book in part on their website. Were you tempted to do that or was it a completely separate ... Did you keep blogging?

**Luisa:** I kept blogging. I didn't blog quite as much as I did before I was writing the book. But no, I kept blogging and I tried very much to not cannibalise the blog. There were a few recipes that I took from the blog, that I incorporated into the book, but the text was ... All the stuff that was, all the text that was in the book, was completely new. I always felt and I still feel to this day, I have this sort of thing in my head that everybody who's reading me must have been reading me from the beginning, which is total baloney. And so I don't ever want to repeat myself. And my colleagues in the food writing world online are always like, you need to be just reusing your content. It would be so much smarter if you just reused it. And they're so right, but I somehow, I can't bring myself to do it. It feels sort of not what I'm ... Not what ... It's not what I'm here to do. I don't know.

**Jeremy:** You mentioned a community and the instant feedback of writing the blog, of writing online. Did you get much in the way of positive, helpful feedback, for example, on recipes?

**Luisa:** Recipes? Funnily enough, I think we're always ... I would say that if anything, the best relationships sort of developed out of friendships that were made online, where we just kind of wanted to be there for each other as sounding boards, like, we're having this interesting, unique experience, and there aren't that many people that can relate to it, except for the other ones. And we lived all over the world or all over the United States. And so we didn't really see each other, and we developed these sort of epistolary friendships either in the comments or in emails. And I don't remember really much advice going on. It was more just kind of revelling in the fact that we had met each other online. And none of us ... I think a lot of the people that I met, we all sort of were surprised by the fact that we developed

these careers online. None of us had thought that that was going to be something for the kind of bookish, literary people that we were, and none of us were like tech people.

**Jeremy:** And how many of those people have you met in real life?

**Luisa:** Oh, so many, so many. Countless. Yeah. Some people are just exactly as you thought they would be. They are exactly who they are from the writing. And so when you meet them, you're like, yes, of course you're you. But a lot of people are actually quite different in real life than they are online. And that was illuminating. I mean, when I ... You know, I was a young woman in those days when, when I was first making these realisations and it was kind of mind blowing, actually, to me that, oh, you mean you can actually be someone completely different in real life than you are online? I don't think I'm capable of that. I'm always sort of just ... I am who I am. But I think for people who are, you know, shy or who struggle ... I mean, I am shy, but if you struggle with real life, developing a career online is actually a really wonderful thing too. It's very safe and cozy and full of possibilities for yourself to develop moving forward.

**Jeremy:** Now, you don't have your own blog really. You're on that newsletter platform. So is almost everybody else. I have questions about that. So first of all, why? Why is having a newsletter better than having your own website?

**Luisa:** It's not. I really miss the way things used to be. But through the enshittification of the internet, blogs long ago stopped being usable. I think there was a shift in 2009 or 2011, when Google stopped its, changed its algorithm in a way. And the blogs that had been showing up in the first couple pages of results just dropped away, unless they did SEO, search engine optimisation, you know, unless they were optimised for that. And what that did was reward people who who blogged only ... whose goal was only to be noticed and not to write. And so the heyday of literary food writing or online literary food writing kind of evaporated because ads became much more important. SEO became much more important. And those of us who were there just doing it for fun and for the passion of it, we all kind of faded away.

It's not that we faded away and stopped producing work. We still worked. But the blog, the way that we worked before, just went away. Newsletters are, or let's say Substack has tried to go back to the the

golden age of blogging, but I don't think it can. I think the problem is that that age is over and this new age with monetised newsletters and sponsored content and all of that has taken hold. And there's no ... It's very hard to to strike a different path. It's very, very hard. And so if you want to write and you want to be noticed for your writing, you kind of have to make your peace with the platforms that are available. And Substack is a very low effort platform that's ...

**Jeremy:** Yeah. I mean, I find it absolutely maddening if I go online and look for a recipe and I, you know, there are places that are still effectively blogging recipes, but I have to scroll for five minutes to get to the bottom of the page.

**Luisa:** Just getting to the recipe becomes so much harder. And also the people blogging have ... There are so many millions of them now that you no longer understand what differentiates one from the other. And there are these content farms. And yeah, it's all just become incredibly bland, anonymous, uninteresting stuff. And so in the end ... Actually, I was thinking about this the other day that when I, when my son was asking about a recipe, I just go on the New York Times cooking app. And so that's where I get all my recipes from, unless I'm obviously cooking from a book. But I don't go to any other website online. It's too overwhelming. It's too frustrating. It's just not enjoyable at all. And at least at the New York Times — I love the New York Times. I love the people there. The team's amazing — and so I have the cooking app, and I was cooking from them 25 years ago, and I'm still cooking from them now.

**Jeremy:** Let's talk instead about food. I mean, what you have to say is fascinating and interesting and this whole idea. Actually, let me just ask you, the cohort of friends and colleagues and online friends and colleagues, they really have come a long way?

**Luisa:** Yeah. Yeah, it's really wild. I mean, we're cookbook authors, we're podcasters, we're novelists, we're newspaper columnists. We've made a life in food writing. And that feels very special. Very lucky. Yeah.

**Jeremy:** Do you think today's 20 year olds are going to be able to do the same?

**Luisa:** I don't know. I unfortunately ... I think I'm over the hill almost at this point, because I can't really ... I mean, I have a very bleak view of what's coming. I'm very worried about our children, young kids

coming up now. I really don't know, because the internet was this hotbed of creativity and possibility and every ... the most minute interest could be followed and developed, and now it just feels like it's this terrible hit of garbage. I mean, it feels so bad to be online now that I can't really see how young people are going to use it to their advantage. It feels just like a bad place.

**Jeremy:** Let's talk about food. Wandering around looking for restaurants, it seems to me that everything is quote unquote ethnic. Indian, Thai, fusion, Vietnamese, Turkish kebabs have been here forever. But is Berlin really a food city?

**Luisa:** Historically, not at all. It was always a working class city where people really didn't have much money and didn't really have any interest in fine dining or any ... I mean, I'm talking about 100 years ago, 50 years ago, whatever. And I would say that when I moved back here in 2010, it was a lot better than it had been when I was here as a child. But it still felt like a different era, a different time, from when I was coming from New York, where you can get every kind of meal under the sun. And in Berlin, everything felt still very sort of old fashioned. And it felt like if you did go to a Vietnamese restaurant or something, they were cooking for the German customers and so things weren't that good.

But over the past 15 years, there's been an unbelievable change and now you can get the most incredible Vietnamese, Thai, Chinese, Japanese, local. There are different Thai regions represented in restaurants in Berlin. And the plethora of immigration has brought so much good food to Berlin and it's so exciting, I find, to be here now as an eater because there's just a lot going on. And along the way, recently some German restaurants have kind of ... German restaurateurs have realised that, oh, there is a way to do classic German cooking in a way that's interesting and attractive to diners. And so now there are also really cool German restaurants opening up. And you can get delicious German food as well. But I would say that in general, I find that Berlin is really, has come a very long way when it comes to food.

**Jeremy:** Do you find that inspiring?

**Luisa:** I do, yes. I think it's wonderful because I think that food is the best way to break down all kinds of misconceptions, you know, prejudices. When you're sitting around an amazing meal, it's such an

easy way into a culture. It's an easy way to understanding other people. And I think that Berliners themselves, you know, German Berliners have also become much more open, much more sort of interested in the world and in the people living here. I mean, Berlin, West Berlin, in the olden days, it was so closed. And of course, through the allies there was an aspect of international life here. But Berliners were quite closed and cold and a little bit prickly. And of course, many of them still are. But in general, I find the city has mellowed so much. People are much more open and generous and gentle and kind than they used to be.

**Jeremy:** Is there any nostalgia for old Berlin food?

Luisa: Yes, there is. So there ... For example, up the road, a young team who I know from my son's teacher actually, they opened up. took over an *eckkneipe*, which is an old Berlin corner bar that the owners or the previous tenants had sort of reached retirement age and they were giving it up. And this young team decided to take it over. And they had all gotten their training at a Michelin starred restaurant down in the other part of the neighbourhood. And so they came with these sort of fancy skills, but they wanted to keep and sort of honour the spirit of the bar, and they didn't want to chase away any of the regulars and any of the locals who'd been coming there for decades. And so they basically introduced a new menu of small plates of super traditional, excellently cooked Berlin food, and it is a smash hit. You cannot get a table in this place in this *eckkneipe* unless you reserve a week in advance. It's packed every night. Young, old, hipsters, normal people. It's so exciting and wonderful to watch because they are ... nothing on the menu costs more than €7. It's super fair, well priced, and it makes everybody in the neighbourhood happy. And people come from far and wide and it's just so well done. It makes me so happy.

**Jeremy:** So after the memoir, German Baking and I have one crucial question that I have to ask you here.

**JFK:** All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin. And therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words: *ich bin ein Berliner*.

**Jeremy:** What is a Berliner?

**Luisa:** A Berliner is a person born in Berlin.



**Jeremy:** You knew that was coming.

**Luisa:** Aha! And a jelly doughnut in Berlin is called a *pfannkuchen*. Outside of Berlin, it has a lot of different names, including Berliner. But here it is always and always only a *pfannkuchen*.

**Jeremy:** So, was Kennedy ill advised? Did he make a mistake?

**Luisa:** No. His heart was in the right place, and he ... Every Berliner understood him. People outside of Berlin made the joke that *ich bin ein jelly doughnut*. But for Berliners, we don't call *pfannkuchen* Berliners. So what he said was taken in the spirit with which he said it, absolutely. Berlin loved JFK. Berliners loved him.

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