

Travelling China's Edges

An interview with Naomi Duguid and Jeffrey Alford

By Mary Luz Mejia



Photo by Mary Luz Mejia

Though they call themselves “just home cooks,” Naomi Duguid and Jeffrey Alford also happen to be two of Canada’s most accomplished food and travel writer-photographers. I met the hospitable cookbook authors and seasoned explorers in their Toronto home recently, where several walls were decorated with intricate handmade quilts. In many respects, the quilts reminded me of their sixth and latest book, *Beyond the Great Wall: Recipes and Travels in the Other China*. Part travelogue, part cookbook and part cultural study of the lesser-known minority cultures of China, this multi-layered work is truly a labour of love. The husband-and-wife team has been travelling through the region for decades, and in this book they share their richly woven experiences. *Beyond the Great Wall* flips back and forth between the 1980s, when Duguid and Alford fell in love as travellers in Tibet, to more recent trips, when they found that the China they knew has changed dramatically. Introducing us to the Dai, Uighur and Tibetan peoples they meet, the couple knits food, culture and politics together into one inspired journey.



Steaming noodles at a Yi market stand in Yuanyang, Yunnan.
(Photo by Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid)

All your books make travelling in even the most remote regions seem so doable. Weren't language barriers a problem?

Naomi Duguid: Not really, no. We have some Mandarin and Jeff's Thai is pretty good, and we've got some kitchen Thai, too. It's amazing how many food words we find we know in Thai, Hindi, Mandarin and Russian.

Jeffrey Alford (laughing): People get suspicious about that – they ask, "How do you know all of these food words but you don't know how to say 'tree' in Thai?"

You come home and develop recipes here in your kitchen, relying on photographs taken when the dishes were being made instead of on field notes. Why?

ND: If you're sitting at a soup or noodle stall in the morning and there's steam rising and people there, you're going to order your noodles and sit there eating them and slurping the soup and watching, watching, watching and taking the shots – being a bit of an oddity, goofy even, because you're taking photographs and everyone else is just having their noodles. But if you were to sit there with a notebook, it would make everyone else really uncomfortable.

"Good travel is when you're vulnerable. Putting yourself out there, taking that risk."

JA: I don't even know what I'd take notes about. Sometimes I'll put my hand near a pot to see how hot something was. That's how I know how to make something here. It all comes back here.

ND: Yeah, and sometimes I'll look to see, "How much did she drop in? A big handful or a small handful?" Sometimes you're lucky and it works, sometimes it doesn't. The *teff injera* (Ethiopian flatbread, from their third book, *Hot Sour Salty Sweet*) was tough. And sometimes there are things we give up on because we can't analogize – if someone is making something over an open fire, there's no way we can make it work easily for people. And there's no point in putting a recipe in a book that doesn't work or is really iffy. If that's the first recipe the person tries, then they're never going to try another recipe, and what you're wanting is for people to have confidence.

You make it sound so easy...

ND: It's like you walk down a path and you come around the corner and then whatever is there, you just engage with it and deal with it. So maybe it's that we're not loaded with

control issues or deeply anxious with outcomes.

JA: Travelling gets easier as you get older, too. And work is interesting because it gives you a context for things. You wake up in the morning and think, "I want to get a shot of that rice terrace." It gives meaning to travel. A lot of international travel is very self-conscious, especially when you go from a rich country to a poor country. Anyone who isn't a little self-conscious isn't thinking very much. There's good travel and bad travel.

ND: And that's what makes it good travel – when you're vulnerable. Putting yourself out there, taking that risk, which often includes being on your own.

JA: It's those things and experiences that you most remember.

Did those experiences prompt you to write Beyond the Great Wall?

ND: Yes, we spent a lot of time travelling in those regions, and this is why the book is written the way it is, in layers. We have always been interested in the non-Han cultures of China. We got to draw on all those old travel experiences and photographs, and we took some new trips to places we hadn't been before. And we said "the Olympics" to our editor, and that helped seal the deal.

Speaking of the upcoming Olympics in China, how do you see the protests surrounding the games?

ND: I don't think it's going to get figured out *because* of the protests. I think the protests add to pressure, and long-term, somebody is going to have to figure out a better strategy (for responding to dissent) so the country can have the progress and success that it deserves.

JA: It's in everyone's best interest if China figures out their domestic issues. They care. And the Dalai Lama is very clear about not wanting independence but just autonomy.

What's your perspective on the Tibet issue?

ND: Tibetans have a very strong sense of identity. It's a very old culture, it's a literate one, and they have existed as an entity, they have a sense of themselves as Tibetans.

JA: It's like that in Canada – we have smaller cultures living amongst the bigger ones. There needs to be good models for retaining culture. It's like that with Quebecers.

ND: And some of the native cultures where people have a

really strong sense of who they are. But they've been really wrecked by putting up with oppression from central powers – whether it's the government or the church. So it's not like any one of us has a right to be self-righteous, but we can say, "We now have some experience with navigating difference and figuring out how to have mutual respect and have dialogue."

JA: I think we can all agree that it's better for the planet to have cultural diversity.

ND: And it's better for people to feel anchored and confident about who they are, and have the ability to create themselves.

TIBETAN RATATOUILLE

By Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid

On a recent trip to Lhasa, I had several versions of this simmered tomato-eggplant stir-fry in small Tibetan-run restaurants and in one private home. The dish was new to me, a sign perhaps of the greater availability of vegetables in Lhasa and a greater preparedness among younger Tibetans, at least those in the larger towns, to eat more vegetables. Make it in mid- to late summer when vegetables are at their peak; or substitute canned tomatoes in other seasons. Serve with plenty of rice to absorb the full-flavored ginger-garlic broth. There's no chile or chile paste in the dish, but there is a small taste of China: a touch of Sichuan pepper and a hit of soy sauce.

- 2 long or 4 short Asian eggplants (about 1 pound total)
- 2 to 3 medium tomatoes (¾ to 1 pound), or substitute 2 cups canned tomatoes
- 2 scallions
- 2 Tbsp peanut oil or vegetable oil
- 1 Tbsp minced garlic
- 1 Tbsp minced ginger
- 2 tsp salt, or to taste (less if your broth is salty)
- ¼ tsp ground Sichuan pepper, or to taste
- ½ to ¾ cup Tibetan Bone Broth or mild vegetable, chicken, or meat broth
- 1 Tbsp soy sauce, or to taste

Trim the stems off the eggplants. Cut lengthwise into long narrow slices (about 15 per eggplant), then cut these crosswise into 2- to 3-inch-long strips. Set aside. Cut the tomatoes into thin wedges, about 12 to a tomato, or chop canned tomatoes into coarse dice. Set aside. Trim the scallions, and reserve the greens. Cut each scallion lengthwise into ribbons, then cut into 1½- to 2-inch lengths. Set aside. Mince the scallion greens; you should have about 2 tablespoons greens. Set aside.

Why is the politics of a place as important to you as its food?

ND & JA (together): Because it's inseparable.

ND: How people live, what are the elements of that – they're all connected.

And even though the food in Beyond the Great Wall may be unfamiliar to some, you also work at staying connected with your readers.

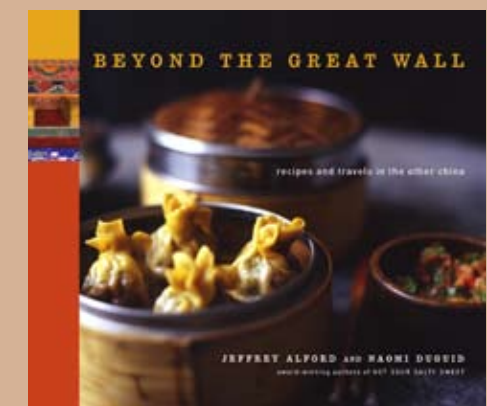
ND: Our language is always, "Try this, don't worry about it. It'll still taste good even if it isn't perfectly right." Food is a human artifact – it's not engineering. 🍴

Place a wok or heavy skillet over high heat. When it is hot, add the oil and swirl to coat the bottom of the pan. Toss in the garlic and ginger and stir-fry briefly. Add the eggplant and stir-fry for a minute; press it against the hot sides of the wok (or bottom of the pan) to try to scorch all surfaces. Add 1 teaspoon of the salt and stir-fry for another minute, then add the tomatoes. Stir-fry for 2 minutes, or until the tomatoes are softened. Add the scallion ribbons and stir-fry to mix. Add the Sichuan pepper and the remaining 1 teaspoon salt and stir-fry for another minute.

Add ½ cup broth and continue to stir-fry until it comes to a boil. Cover and boil hard for 3 minutes, then uncover and stir. Cover again and cook for another 2 minutes. Uncover, stir, and taste the eggplant for doneness. Cook it a little longer if necessary.

Stir in up to ¼ cup more broth if you'd like a more saucy texture. Add the soy sauce and the minced scallion greens, stir, and taste for seasonings. Turn out into a shallow bowl and serve hot.

Serves 4 as a side dish, 2 as a main course with rice and a side dish.



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