

Partners Transcript: Wendy & Samin

- Wendy: We both are big personalities. Sometimes we can butt up against each other just space wise a little bit.
- Samin: Oh yeah. One other thing Wendy taught me, sorry to interrupt while you're talking about me interrupting.
- Wendy: Case and point.
- Samin: I am Samin Nosrat, and I'm the author of Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat.
- Wendy: I'm Wendy MacNaughton. I'm the illustrator of Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat.
- Hrishikesh: Samin Nosrat is a chef, writer and teacher who was called the next Julia Child by NPR. Wendy MacNaughton is a New York Times bestselling illustrator and graphic journalist. The book Salt, Fat Acid, Heat: Mastering The Elements Of Good Cooking was published in 2017 and became a New York Times bestseller. It was critically lauded and in 2018, it won the James Beard Award for best general cookbook and was adapted into a Netflix TV show that was a hit in its own right. But, it took a long time to get there. It was an idea that Samin had had for almost two decades, and together Samin and Wendy spent four years working on the book.
- Samin: I didn't actually really want to write this book. I was teaching cooking classes. One of the things I would always talk about is once you understand how salt, fat, acid and heat work, that's at the basis of all good cooking. And, Michael Pollan who's my writing mentor, I taught him how to cook. And, every week I would bring him a different book idea, and he would always be, "That's bad, that's bad, that's bad." And, eventually he was, "You have this perfectly good idea, why are you not working on Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat?" And, I was, "Because that book won't have beautiful photos."
- Samin: I had been mulling over this book for a really long time, and to myself, I called it an uncook book. And, I knew that it looked and felt different from any other book I'd ever seen. The idea is to free you from having to use recipes. So, even though I love beautiful photography, photography was not the right thing for this book because this is about teaching and also making sure that people don't feel intimidated by one static idea of what a dish should look like. And, also knowing my own self, I have a lot of trouble learning by just reading some words on a page, and I wanted to make a book that would work on a lot of different learning levels. And, so pretty immediately I knew the solution was that it would be illustrated, and the only illustrator I could think of was Wendy because I stalked her.
- Wendy: I don't think I had ever heard of Samin before I got an email from Samin. What was the subject line?

Samin: "You might be wondering..."

Wendy: It was very enticing. And, so I opened it and inside I got one of, I would say the top two love letters I've ever received in my life.

Samin: Thursday, October 13th, 2011 "You might be wondering...if I'm stalking you. Well, the answer, yes. I'm obsessed with your work. Obsessed, and I have a secret dream, about to be not so secret, that we can collaborate and that you'll illustrate the cookbook. Let's call it better than a cookbook actually that I'm starting to work on." Blah, blah, blah. "I don't expect you to say yes right away, but perhaps we can meet and you can come experience some of my work. Come to one of my Tartine dinners." Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. "I'm pretty certain that you are about to hit the big time and may already have other big book ideas in the works, but I'd be kicking myself for the rest of all time if I didn't even bother asking. So, if you like, I'll show you my proposal when I'm done and you can let me know if you even have an inkling of interest. At any rate, I hope you're well. Ever so warmly. Samin."

Samin: Wendy at that time, one of the things I really loved about her work was all of these amazing charts and diagrams, and she would make these really funny and sort of thought provoking Venn diagrams. So, I made a Venn diagram of all of the ways that our lives intersected.

Wendy: It was a beautiful email. It was very thoughtful. It was really detailed. It was clear Samin had spent a lot of time looking at my work and was really familiar with it in a way that I wasn't used to hearing. At the time, my work was on a small literary publication online called the Rumpus. And, so some people had seen it but I didn't think enough to get an email like that.

Samin: I mean how creepy is that? She is, "I've never even heard of you." And I'm like, "I know everywhere you've been published. I know this, that and the other." But, I knew there was no other person who could do this thing of conveying information but not taking herself too seriously, being funny and silly and bringing whimsy and joy, which is all stuff that I want to convey in my message and in my cooking.

Wendy: I got my graduate degree in social work and something you do in social work is you literally make diagrams of people in their environment with their families, in their economic systems and political systems, all this kind of stuff. And, so I had never made diagrams before going to social work school actually. And, when I came out, that's where all those Venn diagrams that I was making and flow charts and all that came from was from mapping out social systems.

Samin: Creating hierarchies of information.

Wendy: Yeah, exactly. Just to understand them.

Samin: I just was, "This is my collaborator, this is my person."

Wendy: And, we agreed to have coffee and I think we hit it off.

Samin: You kind of said you were going to do it. You were, "Yeah, let's try this."

Wendy: I'm in. Yeah, I think we had good chemistry as they say. We hit it off really well and it was also clear, I mean, even though I hadn't heard of Samin, as soon as she started explaining like kind of here's my story and here's what led me to here, here's where I worked and who I worked with and all of that. I mean, those names I was very familiar with and I was pretty bowled over.

Wendy: So, Samin had been doing these dinners at Tartine where she would take over the restaurant for the night, and it was really limited space. And, that kind of experience was outside of my world. She invited me to go. I brought my wife and we sat and it was this amazing, beautiful communal meal. It was accessible like in a way that wasn't fancy and off putting. It was just delicious. And, there was conversation about food and my mind started to open about the stories that are behind food. So, it's not just about this fancy stuff. So, I got to know you I think also.

Samin: Yeah. And, you drew me the first drawing you ever gave me.

Wendy: Was that night?

Samin: Yeah, at the dinner. Yeah, you drew a picture of a turnip and you sent it to the kitchen.

Wendy: At that point I was trying to woo her. You sent me letters, I sent you pictures.

Wendy: I think that's something that we realized as soon as we met and started talking. We do not fuck around. When we work, we work hard and we are completely committed. And, I think that's a rare-

Samin: That's super important I think. A lot of collaborative mismatches I've had start with people who don't work like I work.

Wendy: When you get two of us in a room together who have that ethos, that turns out pretty well. I guess, it also turns out to take a long time.

Samin: It takes a long time. Well, I think for me, I'd never worked with an illustrator before. I'd done in plenty of food magazine shoots and a little bit of video and when you do that, you make the plate, you put it down, the person comes and takes two to 50 pictures of it. That could take anywhere from two to 30 minutes and then it's done and then you move on next or whatever. And, you're moving fast and cooking is all about efficiency and moving fast. And, with Wendy, that's not exact, that's not how, and it took a big adjustment for me to understand. First of all she has to stand there and draw everything in real time, from the actual thing that I'm cooking.

Wendy: Yeah, I draw from life. It brings something of the moment. The line itself, I believe captures the energy of the moment. So, in order to do that, yeah we had to spend a lot of time in the kitchen.

Samin: We spent a lot of time together and going to the farmer's market, going to the store, yeah, in the kitchen at the table and then she'd be, "Don't move your hands. Stand right there." Wendy's pretty fast drawer and she can draw without looking, which is amazing. She can look at you and have her pen on the paper.

Wendy: I mean, it's a messy drawing, but.

Samin: And, so she would draw this and then she'd have to come back and take the reference photos so she could have the right angles and shadows and light and all that stuff. And, then she goes to her studio and paints, which could take any amount of days.

Wendy: I used to paint with oil paints and that can be something that is very arduous and you can work out again and again. But, watercolors, they dry instantly. And, I don't work with a pencil. I work with a pen. And, so once you hit that on the paper, you can't erase it. So, you just have to deal with whatever unfolds in that moment.

Wendy: And, if it works, great and if it doesn't, you have to throw it away and you either start over or you just work from the mistake and move forward from there. And, I think that that is a lot like Samin's approach in the kitchen. At least that's what I felt is one thing that Samin said that made me feel like cooking was accessible was, "Oh don't worry, it's just dinner." If it burns or whatever, you can just throw it away and you start over or you just use whatever's left over and make something new from it.

Wendy: Hopefully the artwork in there, it gives people a sense of not what something should look like, but maybe what something should feel like. So, even if it's a drawing of a green bean, it should look like that green bean that Samin had just blanched so perfectly. But, at the same time, it's a green bean that anybody can make and that anybody can feel like they could achieve. Luckily, Samine has taught so many classes and had worked with many people in the kitchen. I think that me hovering, it didn't bother her at all and it got a conversation going. And, like I mentioned before, I had zero understanding of cooking whatsoever so, I would ask questions.

Samin: You were a gift in a lot of ways because if I couldn't make you understand something.

Wendy: Yeah.

Samin: Then how on earth was I going to make a reader?

Wendy: Right, because I'm lowest common denominator.

Wendy: I don't know if it's every project, but in our project there is like this whole first part-

Samin: The honeymoon.

Wendy: It was the honeymoon phase, right? Yeah. Where we just got to have fun and kind of create and make a mess. And, then we both had to create order from that chaos. And, do you remember that? We were doing a dinner and we were cooking and drawing one day and we were both saying this is so much fun. Isn't this so great? And, I think I said "Yeah, but we haven't actually started working." I mean there is this process and you with the writing as well.

Samin: It was hard, yeah.

Wendy: It was really hard. I mean you went down a few different roads.

Samin: I mean I basically, we wrote the book three times. I think in the beginning we're, "Oh yeah, we'll just have all these dinner parties and make this book together." And, then I also had never written a book before, so I had to realize, "Oh, there's going to be a lot of dark times." The room by myself. It's not fun.

Samin: It's just sitting there and redoing this and redoing this and redoing this. One thing I said, I was, "I just need you to know I'm going to ask you to redo it as many times as we need to until we get it right." Because, this was going to be this thing that had been in my head for all, 18 years and I needed to get it right. And, so I think Wendy was going to kill me a bunch of times.

Wendy: When did I want to kill you?

Samin: When, it took.

Wendy: Well, I'll tell you when. I'll tell you the first time.

Wendy: Well, this is early on and it's to be expected. I just hadn't had this experience before. You weren't writing and you were going down one path and I did a bunch of sketches and then it was, "Wait a second, you know what? Maybe the book's going to be completely different." And, then you went down another path and there was just, this time slowed down.

Samin: Yeah, it took a lot.

Wendy: That's what it felt. It felt like we had an idea, we had a timeline, it was going to be a couple of years and I was used to thinking with timelines and people keeping the timelines. I'm married to someone who's very timeline oriented and with Samin it was very different. It was more about the time that Samin was going to

take to make it right and that was frustrating to me. Samin and I are both big personalities.

Samin: We're both Scorpios.

Wendy: Yeah, we take up a lot of space and we like a lot of attention, but we also don't want any attention. But, we like a lot of attention.

Samin: Just recognize all my work but don't look at me doing it. I mean that's definitely my MO and Wendy's too I think. It's like, "Wait a minute, why aren't you acknowledging the hard stuff that I did and how good I am. But, don't look at me too closely."

Wendy: "Ask me a lot of questions but I'm so sick, I'm talking about myself."

Wendy: So, sometimes we can butt up against each other just space wise a little bit. I mean we made a book together that both of us put so much time and energy to and it is Samin's book and it is also our book, right? So, naturally that created I think some tension as far as space in the room.

Samin: Oh yeah. One other thing Wendy taught me, sorry to interrupt while you're talking about me interrupting.

Wendy: Case in point. Go girl, go.

Samin: Was, well, when I was writing the introduction to the book, I said "Dah, dah, dah, dah and my illustrator, Wendy MacNaughton."

Wendy: Yeah.

Samin: And, you wrote to me and you said, "Please don't call me your illustrator, I don't belong to you."

Wendy: Right.

Samin: And, that was really good.

Wendy: [crosstalk 00:13:02].

Samin: I was, "Oh God, she's right."

Samin: There were also so many unanticipated challenges that we had along the way from various forces involved. Our publisher didn't really believe they were very traditional in how they approach the making of a book, which is that the author comes first. And, this for us, I never believed that I came first. Yes, it was my idea and it was my book or whatever, but it was our book and I knew from the first moment that Wendy could bring a lot to the making of it, that was only going to make it better.

Samin: And also when we started making this book, there was only one person who had already published nine books and was a multi times New York times bestseller, and that person was not me. Wendy was an incredible asset and it was really important for me that she was in the process and there were times a lot of times in the making of the book that she was marginalized. And, so then I had to on top of doing the work and being her collaborator, I had to be your advocate.

Wendy: You were a champion. I mean that was something that I don't think we anticipated. Historically in publishing, the author is always primary and the illustrator is always secondary. Let me rephrase that. The author is primary and the illustrator illustrated the book, it isn't even a whiff. And, although I will argue with you and say that this was definitely your book, but it was with me.

Wendy: And, so I think we had this understanding it was a partnership from the get go and the publisher had a very difficult time understanding that a partnership doesn't stop and start. It's the whole way through and that we were in everything together. I mean, Samin was off writing it and she has all of her background and everything that she brought to bear on it. But, the actual process of making the book was completely collaborative. And, so at one point I was pushed out of the process pretty severely in ways that I think I might not even know the full extent of.

Samin: I was trying to protect her.

Wendy: Yeah. I think and, that is I think one of the best measures of a successful partnership and collaboration is that you went to bat for me in ways that I don't even know. And, you made sure that I was part of this partnership. And, so there were some challenging times that we had, because it was hard for me to be totally honest, to be working on something with all of my heart and soul when I felt like the publisher didn't give a crap about my work.

Wendy: So, when I knew that you were really sticking up for me and I could keep kind of my eyes on the prize of us making this thing that would eventually come out. And, it was just be about this thing we made together. It made it possible to go through those hard times. So, wait, the moment we finished it-

Samin: I don't remember the moment.

Wendy: But when we published it-

Samin: Coming out.

Wendy: Coming out was a big deal. We were in New York and I remember we were both totally overwhelmed. I just remember a feeling of stress. I don't know if that was the publisher us or all around.

Samin: We were staying in next door rooms in the hotel and Wendy forced me, she's really good at forcing me because I would just be, "Let's just keep going, work tomorrow." And, Wendy's really good at being, "No. We need to commemorate this moment." So, we went downstairs at midnight and we had a glass of champagne and sort of were, we did it. We got here. I've had incredible friendships throughout my life. I've not had my one romantic relationship that's lasted very long. In a lot of ways, this working relationship with you has been the closest I've been to somebody in a lot of ways. And, also there's a lot of challenging parts in that. I go to a lot of therapy. I think the main thing that I've learned in my therapy is that it's my job to communicate stuff with people.

Samin: And, so when it came time to sell our next book, we're figuring out the money of that was, really money's hard.

Wendy: Money, sex. Because, it's about money. And, also because it's not about money, there's a lot of other things.

Samin: A whole lot of other stuff. It was just about us feeling appreciated and by the other person and not, I think for me I was worried. I was, "Oh no, she doesn't see the wholeness of me."

Wendy: Right. And, I was feeling that you didn't see the wholeness of me and it just brought up, I think that neither of us were feeling fully seen and maybe recognized by the other person, which honestly if we hadn't had that confrontation and that conversation.

Samin: There would have been no next book.

Wendy: Or it would have blown up a hundred times worse in the middle of it.

Samin: Yeah.

Wendy: Because, there would have been maybe some resentments or some kind of lack of clarification on stuff. So, we were able to sit down and cry.

Samin: Also, this came six months after, Wendy gave me the most serious talking to of my life.

Wendy: You're going to talk about that?

Samin: I mean I'm really grateful for it.

Wendy: Wow.

Samin: It was one of the most meaningful, generous things someone's done for me, which was, she took me aside and she was, "Listen, these are the ways you're letting me down. These are the ways you're letting the people around you down."

And, I'm worried that if you don't address them now it's going to blow up in a lot of your relationships." And, she was, "You need to invest in mutually supportive friendships and you're being a taker right now and not a giver." And, it was like a punch in my gut. It was so intense. But, I also was, "Wow, what a person who cares so much about me to take the time."

Samin: Because, I know what, how hard it must be to tell anybody else that and, Oh I can't even imagine holding that inside and crafting that talk and getting to a point where you tell somebody that. So, as much as it hurt and I cried, I didn't really get defensive, I just was, "Wow." I really felt cared for. I was like, "Wow, this person cares enough to tell me this stuff rather than to go talk about me behind my back to all my friends and just write me off."

Wendy: That was one of the hardest conversations I've ever had. It took me weeks to figure out how to say it and to muster the strength to do it. And, I think we went on a walk and I almost didn't say it because I was just afraid. But, also if I hadn't said that to you, I knew that there would have been a limitation of our relationship, our friendship and our working relationship going forward. And, that's not okay. We have to put it on the table in order to-

Samin: Work through it.

Wendy: Be cool. Yeah. So, we have a good thing going back and forth.

Samin: And, I'm really grateful for it. It's been a very grounding force in my life.

Wendy: Me too. This is so cheesy and cliché, but I look at the time that I went to this event and I happened to meet my wife there. Or that I had a bad day at work and decided I'd go back to art school. I mean just these moments that decide our lives and the trajectory of our lives and I have no idea what my life would be like right now if Samin had not written me that letter. If I had not gotten that email. I have no, I can't even imagine my life without you.

Samin: Me neither. I love you.

Wendy: I love you.

Samin: I mean, I don't even know. Yeah, I love you.

Hrishikesh: Samin Nosrat and Wendy MacNaughton, are partners. Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat is available in bookstores everywhere. I've given copies of it as gifts to at least half a dozen people in my life. You can find out more at saltfatacidheat.com. Partners is made by me Hrishikesh Hirway. I produced, edited, and made the music for the show. Production assistance from Olivia Wood. This interview was recorded at Women's Audio Mission in San Francisco. Partners is a MailChimp podcast, made in partnership with Radiotopia from PRX. Find our more at mailchimp.com/presents and at radiotopia.fm. Thanks for listening.

