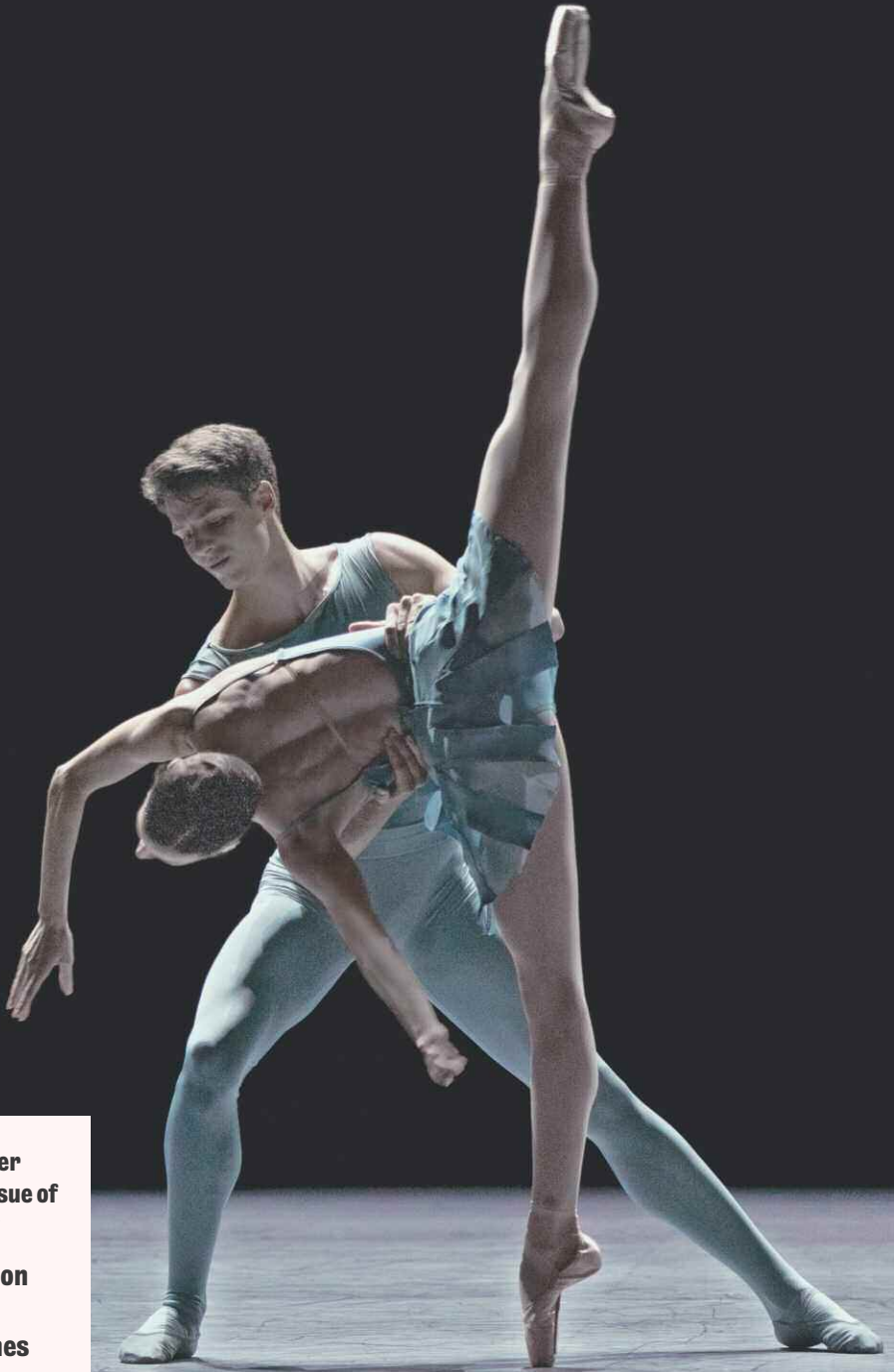


Winter 2016-2017

Ballet Review



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Ballet Review

A Conversation
with
Marcelo Gomes
by
Michael Langlois

**Ballet Review 44.4
Winter 2016-2017**

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Cover photograph by Ann Ray, Paris Opera Ballet: Ludmila Pagliero and
Germain Louvet in William Forsythe's *Blake Works I*.



Marcelo Gomes in Alexei Ratmansky's *Firebird*. (Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, American Ballet Theatre)

A Conversation with Marcelo Gomes

Michael Langlois

BR: You live in Hell's Kitchen?

Marcelo Gomes: Yes, I really love the neighborhood. One, I'm a big foodie. I love exploring restaurants and new stuff is always opening all the time. And, in general, I like the vibe. You get the tourists from Times Square, and Broadway dancers and actors are going to their shows in a hurry [laughing]. There are the local people who support the area bakeries and coffee shops. It's a mixture of people that I really enjoy, plus it's in the middle of Manhattan so it's perfect for me.

BR: Do you walk up here to the Met?

Gomes: Sometimes, yes, but I took a cab this morning because I was running late [laughing]. And I have a bike. New York is becoming a little more bike friendly, which is nice.

BR: Let's talk about your life in Brazil before you came to the States.

Gomes: I was born in Manaus but my parents moved us to Rio because they wanted more opportunity and a bigger experience for my brother, my sister, and me. Manaus is a city now, but at the time it was a much smaller town. When we came to Rio I was five and that's when I discovered dance.

BR: How did that happen?

Gomes: My family always had dancing around the house. My parents loved to put music on and let everybody dance. It was a very festive household. My sister used to dance. I always went to her shows, but I never looked at her and thought, oh, I want to do that. Apparently, one time when I went to pick her up at her gym class there was a musical theater class going on and I opened the door and the teacher said, come in, and I did and I started taking class, dancing with all these kids. I didn't know what we were doing.

This interview took place in the dancer's dressing room at the Metropolitan Opera House in May 2016.

Rolling on the floor and expressing ourselves to Madonna and Michael Jackson and what not [laughing].

The teacher said, "I want you to come back." So I went home and said to my parents if I could please go to this class and they said, yes, which was really incredible for a Latin family in Brazil. They could have just said, no. They could have denied it then and there but they were open and so okay with me going to take a dance class.

Then a few years later, when I was about seven or eight, another teacher saw me in one of our shows – Helena Lobato, a former principal dancer from the Teatro Municipal in Rio – and she said she thought I had the possibility to dance classical ballet. I trusted her and my family trusted her so I started taking classes with her and her son.

We wore little shorts, you know? And little white socks. We took ballet almost every day, and then she would take us to her house after class and put on a VHS of all these amazing dancers: Misha and Fernando and Julio Bocca and Nureyev. We would see them do *Corsaire* and *Paquita* and *Giselle* and that really fed us both to keep on going back to the studio and keep trying that pirouette or that arabesque.

I think my knowledge of classical ballet came very early as far as the music. I knew all the music from *Giselle* at a very early age. We spent hours at her house. It was crazy. Then I left Helena and went to a bigger school in Brazil.

BR: Did she encourage that or was that your idea?

Gomes: One of my teachers was studying journalism with my mom and my mom told her about me and this woman suggested I go to this larger school, Dalal Achcar. So they took me there and I met this French teacher, Alain Leroy, who started working with me and it was better because he was a man and that was important in my development.

BR: Was there a boy's class in that school?

Gomes: No. It was just me and all the girls [laughing]. I was there for about three years,

until I was thirteen, and then one of my partners sent a tape to the Harid Conservatory in Florida. She was auditioning for the school. I wasn't. She was accepted but at the same time the people at Harid saw me and wanted to know who I was and they offered me a scholarship. It's an amazing place. They only accept thirty kids a year at Harid.

BR: Yes. It's run by Victoria Schneider, Jurgen Schneider's widow. [Jurgen was a ballet master at American Ballet Theatre from 1975 to 1991.] That transition must have been incredibly difficult at age thirteen.

Gomes: Yes, it was really scary. I didn't speak any English. And, as you say, I was just thirteen and I had lived a very sheltered life in Brazil. I knew how to take the bus by myself and go where I needed to go, but I never learned how to tidy up my room. In our family we had a nanny, like many people in Brazil do, and she cooked and lived in our house so I never learned how to do these adult things that you're required to know when you leave home. I had to learn really fast.

We lived in dormitories at Harid and they provided meals and we had academic classes, public school in the morning. That was impossible for me. I had to learn as I went along. I like contact with people. I feel like I'm a friendly, open person, and I needed to make friends very quickly and learn English as quickly as possible, so I just did that.

I knew I was in the right place in the studio and that Harid was the right place for me. I had a wonderful ballet teacher, Olivier Pardina, who took me under his wing, and that was fine. But outside the studio my life was quite difficult. We didn't have cell phones or computers then so contact with my family was through letters, postcards, and the payphone. We had one phone in the dormitory and when it would ring everyone would run to see if it was their family calling. It was tough, really tough, and we all had to be strong.

BR: How often did you go home?

Gomes: Once a year. Then when I was sixteen, Harid took me to the Prix de Lausanne. It was 1996 and I won a scholarship to go the

Paris Opera Ballet School. I spent a year there and then I came and joined ABT.

BR: That's a lot of upheaval.

Gomes: Yes, I had to do the same thing in France that I had done in Florida all over again. It was crazy, but also an incredible experience. I learned French. I had almost finished my academic work for high school but I had to continue on correspondence when I went to France and that was difficult.

When I came to New York to join ABT in August 1997 I still had two more courses to complete for my diploma. I remember getting it from Harid and coming in to work at ABT and saying, hey, I graduated today! And somebody said to me, yeah, great, now can you learn this part please? [laughing]

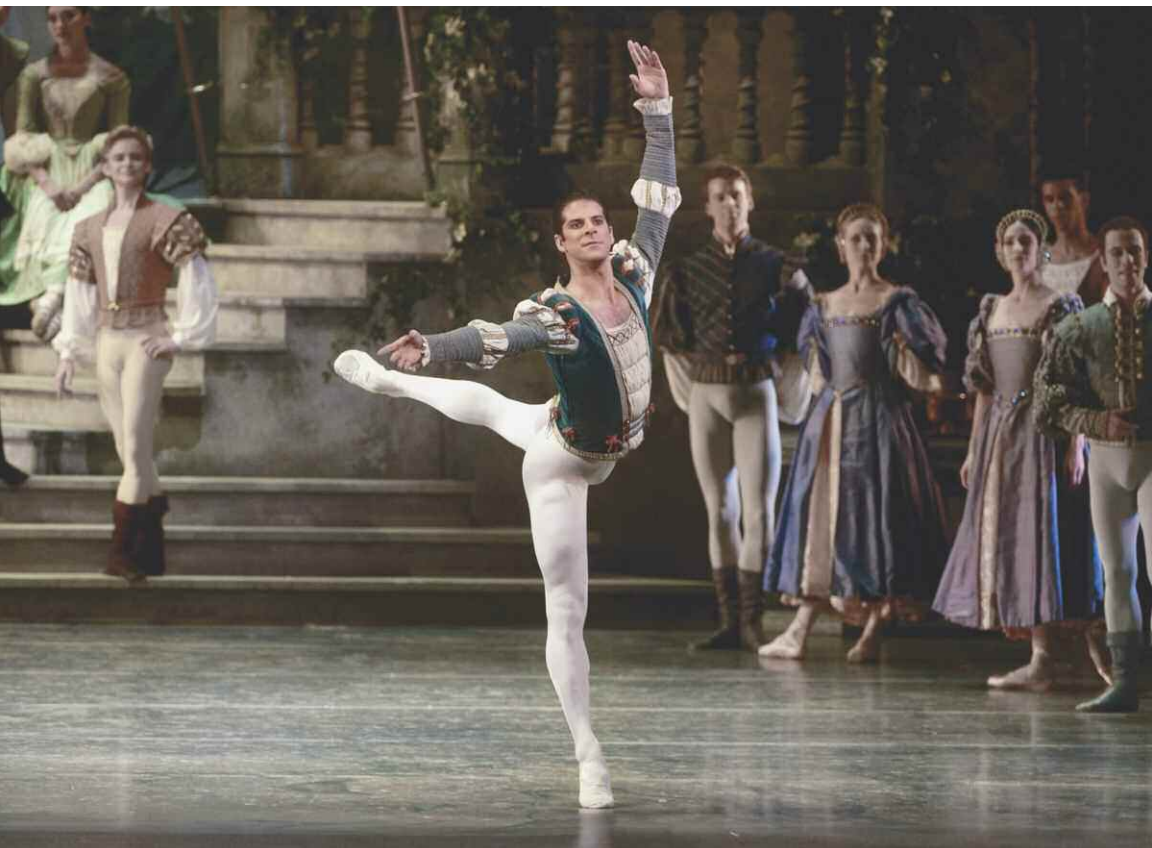
BR: Did you have any interest in getting your college degree?

Gomes: No. I think I did the right thing. In fact, I remember my last year of correspondence thinking, I can't wait for this to be over so I can focus on my dancing. Going from high school to a professional ballet company is not for everyone. There are some great colleges for dance in this country, and my view has changed a lot now. I think it is possible to become a professional dancer if you go to college.

In fact, I think many people join companies too soon. Mentally, you have to be ready. You have to know how to work for yourself, because probably you are the best dancer at your school and then you come to ABT and you're doing the Mazurka in the corps. You have to really work extra hard in class and do everything you can to keep your body stimulated and your brain active.

BR: I think a lot of dancers don't realize that when they join a company like ABT or City Ballet, the work is just beginning. Mentally, emotionally, and physically, it is really challenging to not lose hope in the corps de ballet when all you're doing for a solid week at the Met is peasants in *Giselle*.

Gomes: Absolutely. I was lucky because when I came to ABT the company had a lot of principal men and you'd think that wouldn't



Swan Lake. (Photo: Gene Schiavone, ABT)

be so great, but there were a few injuries so I was able to replace some dancers at different points and I was able to seize those moments and prove myself to Kevin McKenzie.

BR: Leaving home at such a young age, did your sexuality create more challenges for you, in terms of a feeling of isolation?

Gomes: It didn't really make a difference, no. I was starting to become aware of my sexuality at Harid because it was the first time in my life that I had a men's class. I was thirteen, so I was really becoming aware of myself. But it wasn't until I went to the Paris Opera school in Nanterre that I really grew up. I was scared coming to the United States, but I was even more scared going to the Paris Opera because I knew the tradition of the school and how some of the kids have been there since they were eight years old and I was coming in, straight to the last level.

It was amazing how much I discovered myself as a man then, at sixteen. I fell in love for the first time, with another student, and we had this amazing romance but then I had to leave and come to New York so I was heart-broken for the first time. It was a real moment of self-discovery that I couldn't believe.

When I came to ABT only my close friends knew that I was gay. I wasn't out, publicly. As I became more well-known, if I was having an interview during that time and someone asked me if I was dating, I would completely avoid the question. I was getting sick of sitting in front of a journalist and not being able to answer honestly. I started thinking, why can I not be myself? What's the problem here? I would see some of my fellow dancers who were gay, but were also in the closet. I remember when I came out, my mother said, do you think this is a good idea?

BR: When did you have that conversation with your parents?

Gomes: After Paris Opera, within a couple of years of being in New York. And both my parents were okay with it. Actually, they asked me many times if I had a boyfriend or a girlfriend [laughing]. You know, when you're not ready, you're just not ready. But to go back to my mom, I said to her at the time, I don't know if this is going to be a good or a bad thing, but if people can't suspend their disbelief when they come to see me dance then I'm not a good actor. If they can't think of me as Romeo or Siegfried or Conrad then I am really not doing my job of being a masculine character onstage.

BR: People confuse masculinity and homosexuality all the time, sadly. Do you find it tiresome that you continually have to portray these straight characters?

Gomes: [Laughing] No, I don't feel that. I have done ballets where there were undertones of a love between two men, but that's not very often. What I think is amazing, and what I tell my friends all the time, Gillian [Murphy] and Stella [Abrera], is that I'll never get to feel what it's like to dance with my husband. Gillian has Ethan, and Stella has Sascha. But that's something I will never experience and I wonder what that must feel like? Of course it could also be very difficult [laughing]. Because the boundaries are different. Most directors and choreographers, I think, don't like to put couples together.

I recently did Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* in Japan. I played the Swan and danced with the Prince. It was an incredible experience and although it's two men I didn't think of it as being sexual. Of course it's extremely sexual, but at the same time when I was deep in the story I really saw it as the Swan being like an angel who saves the Prince from his troubled life, from having to make a decision about an arranged marriage. That brought the story to a different level for me – how I view *Swan Lake*, even in its traditional form. It's less about a woman and more about an incredible creature who comes into his life. And that could be the

same for anyone – this attraction that is not defined as to whether it is a man or a woman. I thought it was beautiful and it opened my mind to something very different.

BR: When you're dancing with Diana or Gillian and you are portraying someone who is madly in love with them, do you have to spin it in your mind?

Gomes: No, I don't. I am so present with them, so in love with them or whatever feeling it is I'm trying to portray at that moment. They are the most beautiful creatures to me and I must take care of them, as a lover would. I use my life experience, certainly, whether I'm tapping into a feeling of love or a feeling of loss. If I have to cry onstage I think about how I've felt when I've lost someone in my life, whether that is a family member or a loved one or being betrayed by someone, an ex. You draw from those feelings. But right then and there I'm with them. I'm with those ladies.

BR: How did that evolve for you, your dramatic abilities onstage? Because I think it's typical for young dancers who have wonderful technique to tend to want to highlight that aspect of their craft at the expense of character or dramatic interpretation.

Gomes: It's interesting for me, because it was kind of the opposite. I felt that I wanted to portray the story before my technique had really developed. I've had many incredible coaches here at ABT, starting with Guillaume Graffin, who is now a ballet master at Dutch National, and my coach now, who brought me back from two different surgeries, Clinton Lockett. He and I have a very intimate professional relationship. He warms me up before a performance and he watches my performances. He is an extra set of eyes for me. Both Guillaume and Clinton really affected not just how I approach each role dramatically, but technically as well. I'm extremely grateful for that.

I do feel, however, that as the years go by, of course I want to keep my technical level high, but I'm more interested in how I am going to tell the story. I'm not so interested in how many pirouettes I can do or how high my



Alexei Ratmansky's *Serenade after Plato's Symposium*. (Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, ABT)

jump will be. We've been doing this *Swan Lake* for sixteen years. How am I going to tell that story differently? How will my arabesque be different from the one in *Sleeping Beauty*, or *Romeo*? What sort of texture can I put into these different ballets? That has become more of what I focus on at the moment.

Years ago I might have been concerned about how I was going to land in fifth position. Of course I still have to land in fifth [laughing], that can't go away. But the emotion before the steps helps me execute them. There's more weight to it, more meaning behind everything, and that's something that I've learned with experience, which is tough to see nowadays with younger dancers coming into the company. Perhaps that's just something they will have to learn as I did.

The key thing for me, when I sit in the audience, is that I want to feel something. I want to be transported. I don't really care if a dancer has 180 degrees of turnout and perfectly arched feet and everything is in place.

Or if they can sustain a pirouette past the moment that they're supposed to be coming down. That is not going to make me feel something. But a person who might have less ability or less facility that has a heart – you just know it, you feel something. That's the most important thing to me.

As a dancer, I'm trying to do onstage exactly what I would want to see if I were sitting in the audience. That focus. You are completely 100 percent invested in what's happening, and it is really hard to keep that concentration. There are so many elements all going on at once. Maybe your costume isn't working the way it should or your body aches or you can see somebody in the wings walking around or the tempo is not the one you've asked for. It's a gift when all of those elements are going in your direction as a performer.

I can count on one hand the performances I've had where I felt that way, where everything just worked. People will say to me, oh, you've never had a bad night. That's just not

true. I know immediately when I sit down in my dressing room here. I know what I've rehearsed and I know what I've given onstage. For me it's a pleasure, and I want to honor the work. When I step onstage I know that I'm blessed, so to honor that moment is something very fragile and special. So I try to concentrate on what is going on onstage and not lose that focus. You see people go in and out all the time, I'm sure you're aware of this, and that's because it is a really difficult thing to do [laughing].

BR: What is your life like outside of the theater? What do you do to relax?

Gomes: I have a dog, Lua, and I try to spend time with her. She's thirteen now but she's still pretty spry. She has her vision. I don't take her on tour. Scott, my manager, takes care of her then. And I'm dating a wonderful new man. He's a dancer. Actually, he's the first dancer I've dated [laughing]. He's going to be in Radio City's spring show. I'm excited, because it's a brand new show with the Rockettes and it's an iconic theater. I remember going there when I was young so it will be nice to revisit that.

During the weekends I try to see a movie. And I like to go out and have dinner or drinks with friends. I try not to take that out of my life. Otherwise, I try to rest my body as much as possible. During the Met season we have one day off a week and that goes by really quickly [laughing]. One Sunday is just not enough for your body to recover but you do what you can. You do your laundry and sleep and try to eat well.

I have a wonderful team here at ABT. Peter Marshall is my physical therapist along with Julie Daugherty. I also have a chiropractor and an acupuncturist and a masseuse outside of ABT as well as a personal trainer who is an ex-dancer from Boston Ballet. He's wonderful and that helps me a lot.

BR: Are you dancing in pain?

Gomes: No, I'm okay [laughing], knock on wood. But there are always things to fix. My lower back, my knees, my ankles – things that need constant maintenance.

BR: Where do you go on holiday? Do you go home?

Gomes: It's hard, because when ABT is off I generally book guestings, but that's really wonderful. It's nice to dance with other companies and see how they work. Open up your mind. See other artists, and put myself in another environment with a different energy. I try not to make it about me when I'm guesting. I try to put myself into the place where I'm working.

BR: How has ABT changed over the nineteen years that you've been here?

Gomes: It's changed a lot. I just choreographed my first ballet for the company and I tried to give the men a lot to do because it's not easy for them to stay at their best with the repertory that we have. Alexei [Ratmansky] is doing the same thing, really, trying to utilize the men more.

But ABT has come full circle for me. So many of my ballerinas have gone. Nina, Julie, Alessandra. And I partnered Susan Jaffe and Amanda as well, so I caught the end of that whole generation. Then I met Diana Vishneva, and she and I became this amazing partnership. Now I'm partnering Stella and my first *Swan Lake* was with Gillian. So you build a history, you build a family, but unlike your real family. People come and go here, so you have to be able to adjust to the group that's here for that particular year. It's not resetting the clock, it's just different energy. Different weight.

In one year we lost Julie [Kent], Paloma [Herrera], and Xiomara [Reyes], three ballerinas that have so much maturity and carry the company. Suddenly they're gone and you think, what is going to happen? But then it just evolves into something else where the younger ballerinas like Misty [Copeland] and Isabella [Boylston] are beginning to find their own place. That's a wonderful thing to see. It's an exciting time because it's letting go and embracing something new.

The company evolves that way. It keeps on circling and for me it's wonderful. In one year I was doing *Othello* with Julie and bidding her



Romeo and Juliet with Diana Vishneva. (Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, ABT)

farewell and also dancing maybe the third or fourth performance with a younger ballerina who's just beginning her journey. The common thread is me [laughing], because I'm still here, so I can pass my experience on to a different partnership, to the younger men, from what I saw Julio, or Robert Hill, doing.

When I came here I was sitting in the studio watching them do the *Manon* pas de deux, and I was thinking, "Wow, will I ever do that?" Now I'm that guy. It's a different responsibility, and a really great one, which I have, obviously, accepted.

BR: As I'm listening to you I'm thinking, you might direct this company some day.

Gomes: [Laughing.] Yes, well, I would like to direct a company one day. Any company. I like working with dancers. I don't feel selfish. I like passing on my knowledge. I like to work with dancers that are right in front of me. Instead of saying something like, when I did this

part . . . I don't like it when a coach starts by saying something like that. I'm looking forward to that time in my life.

BR: Given how well you know this company, I would imagine you'd like to stay here once you stop dancing.

Gomes: Yes. I think I would enjoy working here in whatever capacity. And as far as how much longer I dance, I think I will do it as long as my body holds up. Little by little I'm letting go of certain ballets, like *Don Q* and *Corsaire* and *Bayadère*. I've done them enough. Now it's time for another dancer to explore them.

I am liking more and more being a choreographer and being at the front of the studio and indulging in whatever energy a dancer is trying to give me, to help them if they're not feeling well and encourage them. We'll see where this all leads. I think if I didn't stay in the ballet world I would go to school to become a chef. I just love food and I love making food.