

Learn with mother

SKILLS, PASSIONS AND LIFELONG PHILOSOPHIES – THESE WOMEN HAVE EACH INHERITED UNIQUE QUALITIES FROM THEIR MOTHERS, WITH CHILDHOOD LESSONS CARRIED INTO THEIR ADULT LIVES

Interviews: JO TINSLEY



“Mum refused to throw things out. For ages I thought that everyone had seven spinning wheels in their home”

Growing up in a bungalow in Dorset surrounded by canvases, sewing machines and stacks of fabric, Zosia Brett – an artist, naturalist and workshop leader – didn’t think anything of the craft materials she played with. Nor the way her mother refused to throw anything useful away, or how they never moved. “For a long time, I thought everyone had seven spinning wheels in their home. Looking back, I think my mum had such a transient start to life, she needed to stay still and to keep things.”

Born in a Polish air raid shelter seven days after the Second World War broke out, Zosia’s mother, Barbara, had a traumatic start to life. “My grandparents were a young, happily married couple expecting their first baby,” she says. “My grandfather was a pilot instructor, so he left for the

border on day one. My mum didn’t meet her father until she was six.”

When the war ended, Barbara and her mother set out to find him, travelling overland by truck through Czechoslovakia and the Italian Alps. “My mum often talked about first meeting her father in Italy, smelling her first ever orange and him taking her to a shop with dolls stacked to the ceiling, saying she could choose any one.”

Zosia still has the doll, along with the spinning wheels, 35 ceramic thimbles and 97 wooden darning mushrooms. Barbara taught her daughters to sew, encouraging them to play with the wealth of materials on hand. “We could mess around creatively, and she positively encouraged it,” says Zosia, who recalls making seven pairs of cotton trousers one summer. “I didn’t appreciate at the time how special it was.”

She describes her mum as a natural teacher, often going to courses only to pass everything she learned onto her daughters. “Every time my sister and I visited, Mum would be excited to show us something new, like lace making. Even in her late 70s, she would have a craft project planned for us to do at Christmas.”

Inheriting her mum’s treasure trove inspired Zosia to open her studio near Bath, sharing her mother’s wisdom with others through workshops that range from making Amish knot rugs from old T-shirts to ‘Wild Creativity’ sessions, where an element from nature encourages experimentation with various craft techniques.

“Mum was curious and playful, with a have-a-go mentality that fed into me,” she says. “Growing up, we were free to play with all these craft resources. Now I just want to share this creative freedom with others.”

While Barbara couldn’t have known where her lifelong curiosity and craft



collection would end up, she trusted her daughters to know what to do. “My mum’s best friend once asked her: ‘Why have you got so much stuff? You’re never going to be able to use it all.’ To which Mum replied: ‘Don’t worry, my daughters will use it one day.’”
zosiabrett.com



“People come here and experience the food of my childhood. It’s such a beautiful thing”

A tangible craving for home inspired Amber Smithwick’s mother, Aurora, to learn to cook traditional Filipino dishes after moving from Tondo, Manila, to the UK in the 1970s. “It was nostalgia; needing something familiar,” says Amber, who owns two Filipino

restaurants in Somerset with her husband Ross, a chef. “She could only write to her family, so she had to work hard on a connection.”

Nothing feels more like a hug than home-cooked food and the meals Aurora made were warm and comforting. Like Chicken *Adobo*, the unofficial national dish of the Philippines, and *Monggo*, stewed mung beans, which Amber ate from the age of two. “If I’m in a need of comfort, this is still what I make.”

Some of Amber’s earliest memories are of being given jobs to do around the kitchen, like filling spring rolls while her mum busied around her. Aurora always encouraged her daughter to be curious and to ask questions. “She used to say: ‘You’ve got a mouth, use it!’” She was strong minded, courageous and willing to take risks – traits that Amber feels proud to have inherited.

Amber drew on all these qualities when, during lockdown, she and Ross started delivering Filipino meal kits from their kitchen in Bristol. “People lost so much connection during that time; cooking food that reminded me of my mum and our heritage felt important.”

They went on to open Aurora Kusina (‘Aurora’s kitchen’) in Shepton Mallet in 2022 and Tondo, a grab-and-go eatery in Frome in 2024. The menus feature a host of Amber’s childhood favourites together with twists on recipes picked up on their annual trip to the Philippines.

“Sometimes it hits me,” Amber says, looking around the convivial space where fragrant dishes are being served in deep bowls just made for wrapping your hands around; “how people come here and experience the food of my childhood. It’s such a beautiful thing.” aurorakusina.com »

“Mum approached our childhood with the brilliant vital fierceness of someone who wanted her children to have a life full of adventure”

Roisin Taylor, a flower farmer living in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, remembers how her mother, Caroline, used to be known as ‘the rebellious flower grower.’ She was talked about as “the one cultivating an ‘inedible allotment’, because all she grew were flowers upon flowers. It was a truly beautiful plot, all wild and higgledy piggledy,” says Roisin.

It was on that allotment that Roisin and her sister spent most of their time, stealing peas and pocketing fossils from the riverbank. “Even while looking after two red-headed tearaways and three outrageously-behaved dogs, my mum managed to create these spaces of life and vitality. We were able to connect with nature in a way that I truly didn’t understand until I left for university. It’s because of this that I have a deep clamouring for the natural world.”

Before inviting Roisin to collaborate in running Verde Flower Co – a natural flower growing company – Caroline had been a journalist with a real knack for getting to the human heart of a story. “Journalism gave her the opportunity to dial up her love of storytelling,” says Roisin. “She has a gift for telling people’s stories in remarkable and beautiful ways, be it Iranian rose petal harvesters or the women of the East Durham collieries.”

Gravitating towards writing about gardens, Caroline would take Roisin and her sister along to interview head gardeners and growers. “We would bring a sort of unruly chaos, but she approached our childhood with the brilliant vital fierceness of someone who wanted her children to have an exciting life full of adventure. She says that using your voice for those who need you to is more important than anything else,” says Roisin, instilling in her a desire to make a positive impact on the world.

Now Roisin is picking up the mantle, and while her mum has stepped back



from the business to embark on an altogether different adventure – walking the length of the UK – Roisin has decided to pause flower farming and to use her voice, and all she’s learnt from her recent Nuffield Farming Scholarship, to advocate for change in the British flower-growing industry. “The dream is to help get the industry on a better footing and then come back to growing,” she says. “Mum always says you’ve just got to crack on, so that’s what I’m doing.” verdeflowerco.org





“Every time she’d enter the water, she’d say ‘Aren’t we lucky!’ It was like her mantra for life”

Sculptor Kate McGwire fondly recalls her childhood summers on the Suffolk coast, flying kites on the beach, riding horses and swimming with her mother in the sea. “My parents bought Beta Cottage, a holiday home in Walberswick, and it was idyllic,” she says, “a whole gaggle of kids hanging out from breakfast ’til supper.”

Kate’s parents eventually retired to the cottage and, after Kate’s father unexpectedly passed away, her mother

ingrained herself in the community. Every morning at 6.30am she would swim in the sea with a group of women calling themselves the ‘Early Birds’, traipsing back from the beach in their fluffy dressing gowns. “She swam for the camaraderie,” says Kate whose work is inspired by early memories of the Norfolk landscape where she grew up, taking her cues from patterns in nature to create writhing abstract forms in feathers. “Every time she’d enter the water, she’d say ‘Isn’t this marvellous. Aren’t we lucky!’ It was like these were her mantras for life.”

Afternoons were spent in her beach hut, reading the paper while listening to the radio and drinking tea. By evening, you’d find her sitting out on the covered porch, glass of wine in hand, inviting passers-by to join her.

Kate’s relationship with her mother wasn’t always easy; she was critical of her decisions, especially to be a sculptor. “She didn’t understand the art world and thought I should get a proper job,” says Kate. “When dementia consumed



her, she became more positive. Looking after her in those last few years became almost joyful.” After she passed away, Kate was astounded to find folders filled with newspaper articles and catalogues featuring her work.

Kate decided to buy Beta Cottage, and it’s here that she one day also plans to retire. “In her latter years, Mum would fret about how to keep the cottage in the family. I wonder what she’d think now that my choice to be an artist has enabled me to buy her beloved home.”

Alongside work Kate plans to cherry-pick the parts her mum enjoyed the most, daily swims, drinking tea in the beach hut and sharing a bottle of wine with friends under the porch – and to count her blessings.

When not renting Beta Cottage out, Kate holidays there with her family. At Christmas, she and 200 locals enjoyed a freezing dip, overhearing her son repeating his grandma’s mantras: “Isn’t this wonderful! Aren’t we lucky!” katemccgwire.com; [Find Beta Cottage at bestofsuffolk.co.uk](http://FindBetaCottageatbestofsuffolk.co.uk) **S**