

STARDUST MEMORIES

We are not alone.

Fanfare plays as a waiter walks across a grand, old dining hall embellished with a hammer-beam ceiling. He stops at a long table and sets an apple pie in front of a man in a beige coat and red turtleneck. The man glances at the golden crust, then says, in a measured baritone, “If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.” It’s my favorite scene from *Cosmos*, the landmark 1980 television series that hipped millions to the origins of existence. Created for PBS and hosted by the late Carl Sagan, the show contained countless such moments, with Sagan doing what he did best: reducing complex scientific theories to elegant analogies that read like a mashup of Dadaist poetry and the riddle-speak of Willy Wonka. In the case of the pie, the renowned space expert was explaining our celestial provenance. All earthly matter—apples, butter, and flour included—is composed of chemical elements. And all chemical elements derive from hydrogen and helium, which were originally baked in the bellies of the stars. So

unless you yourself ignited the Big Bang, there’s no such thing as creating something from nothing. It’s a tidy little lesson: astrophysics for the rest of us. It’s also, I’m convinced, a subtle dig at those who believe humankind is the center of the universe. We might be clever enough to make tasty desserts, Sagan seemed to be saying, but only because greater, more powerful forces allow it. This message feels apt in the context of today’s culinary culture, which often deifies chefs while forgetting that it’s the ingredients that are truly divine. Just ask the Carl Sagan of the organic movement, Alice Waters. Like the astrophysicist in question, Waters is obsessed with the elemental (“Let things taste of what they are,” she wrote in *The Art of Simple Food*). She, too, understands that humans are just a drop in the cosmic bucket and thus should approach the natural world with reverence. To paraphrase Waters’ food philosophy: Take no ingredient for granted. To which Sagan, were he still around, might add, “After all, you’re cooking with stardust.” CHRIS CLAYTON

Illustration by Jay Riggio

