

ESSAY

COOKING LIKE MY NONNO

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No one eulogized my grandfather at his funeral. Not his son or daughter, not one of his seven grandchildren or nine great grandchildren – we all just sat in silence.

I often consider what I should have said that morning, especially when I'm cooking a dish that reminds me of him. I could have shared the story of how one Saturday morning as he rattled his pots I asked him how to make his meat sauce. I was 16 and he was 84; he lived with us my whole life, but I never cooked with him before that day.

"No recipe," he said in his thick Italian accent as he tucked a dishtowel, lengthwise, into the waistband of his loose-fitting pants and fashioned an apron for himself. Then he pointed to his bald head and said, "It's all up here. You watch me and write it down if you want to make it for your husband someday."

He worked in silence; only the sound of pleasant kitchen noises accompanied us – a groan from the can opener, the thud of spice containers gathered onto the counter, glugs of olive oil poured from the tall, rectangular tin bottle.

He mixed the seasonings, bread crumbs and ground beef into a sticky mound with his wrinkled bare hands and then quickly rolled two pounds of meat into 20 meatballs. I noted his method of rinsing the residue from every can of tomatoes – whole, sauce, paste – he opened and added to his pot. I savored the aromas of garlic, basil and oregano as his concoctions began to cook and laughed at the way he licked the spoon every time he stirred the sauce. I took great pleasure in knowing I'd written it all down so I could repeat it over and over long after his favorite pots stood quiet in the cabinet.

I would've continued the eulogy with one of his own stories about arriving in the U.S. and making a life for himself – a story as flavorful and unforgettable as one of his meals. He made dishes that were robust and hearty, not surprising from a man who shoveled snow well into his 90s. He made polenta and calamari long before either appeared on trendy

restaurant menus. He fried zucchini flowers, baked whole fish and prepared assorted soups and stews. I would've added that these were meals he ate in his peasant-like youth. He grew up, the youngest of nine children, in a small town on the island of Sardinia.

Nonno learned his countless skills, cooking among them, in his years with the Italian navy and on Italian merchant marine ships. In his dark-paneled bedroom, hanging just above his recliner, was a black-and-white picture of himself,

hosting my first Thanksgiving dinner. Mom and Dad came with Nonno from New York. On Friday, my husband went to work and my parents visited with friends while I looked after Nonno. I was probably 25; he would've been 93.

He asked if he could make soup from the turkey carcass. I gathered all the tools he needed – pots, knives, cutting board, celery, carrots, onion – at his request. He chopped and seasoned; I filled the pot and turned on the stove. The soup simmered a couple of hours while Nonno napped and I

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dressed in his naval uniform. My cousin and I always thought Nonno looked like Popeye.

My eulogy would have gone on to remind everyone how Nonno wanted us to eat everything he ate, but there was one thing off limits, his bottle of Nonno juice. It was his brew of vermouth, bitters and some other liquor. I never saw him make a batch, but he always had a bottle of it in the refrigerator. My mother once said it was similar to a Manhattan. One Christmas, when everyone but me was old enough to drink, Nonno brought out his juice after dessert. My parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, sisters and older cousin were there. Nonno poured small portions for everyone; some of them liked it, and some of them didn't. After a round or two, he brought out Sambuca and someone demonstrated how to do flaming shots. There is no more Nonno juice in the refrigerator, but the Sambuca still comes out of the liquor cabinet every Christmas.

The last time Nonno and I cooked together was during a Thanksgiving weekend. I was married, living out of state and

put away my fine china. We ate leftovers for lunch and then completed our soup. He strained the large pieces of carcass and vegetables from the stock and I picked out the small bone fragments he couldn't see. He showed me how to smash up the vegetables with the back of a wooden spoon to "squeeze out all the flavor" and added those juices to the soup. I loaded the dirty pots into the dishwasher and he put our turkey soup in the refrigerator.

I gave him a hug and then he asked me, "What can I do next?"

Tonight I'll eulogize Nonno in a way that honors him more than words could. I'll make spaghetti and meatballs with a red sauce for my family. I'll rinse the residue from the cans of tomatoes and share stories of Nonno with my son. I'll roll a pound of properly seasoned ground beef into meatballs and think about all of the recipes I failed to write down. And I'll lick the wooden spoon every time I stir the sauce, just the way he did, and thank him each time. **S**