

Singed Feathers

My family has been ruled by food for hundreds of years. From my Irish ancestors trying to discover yet another way to cook a potato, to my American immigrant kin trying to figure out the best way to cook whatever was growing on the side of the wagon trails; what to cook and how to cook it has preoccupied us for generations.

My grandmother had 3 sisters, each one more beautiful and beguiling than the next. I have a family photo of the sisters together all staring impishly into the camera lens, as if daring the photographer to attempt to catch their beauty in black and white. They were strong willed, passionate women with a true lust for life, and each and every one of them could cook. Tender vegetables, flavorful aromatic meat and poultry, delicious soups and stews, and marvelously sweet cakes and pies made regular appearances at our family gatherings. Cooking among my mother's family was not just a necessity, but a matter of pride.

Imagine then, my father's surprise upon marrying my mother and finding that she could barely boil water. It was inconceivable that my mother could have grown up in the tutelage of not one, but *four* outstanding cooks, and had never learned how to pull off a meal herself.

There is a famous family story of my mom and dad's first thanksgiving together, which dad's sister (also a great cook) and her very opinionated husband were attending. My mother was determined to prepare a feast that would resemble the huge buffet that her own mother and aunts were sure to put on – a feast so spectacular that my visiting uncle would be so busy chewing he would not have a free moment to criticize. All day she slaved away in the kitchen, pouring over cookbooks and recipes and digging down into the dark recesses of her cooking memory. Finally, it was time to call everyone to the table and allow the family to judge how well she'd done. As my dad beamed with pride and my mother stood anxiously by, my Uncle began to carve the turkey. As he slid his knife through the bird's crisp, golden skin, it was with absolute horror and dismay that he discovered the giblets still inside the bird, wrapped in the original paper packaging. There is another less famous story about a German chocolate cake that was mistaken for meatloaf, but the "turkey incident" - as it has come to be known - was by far the most remembered.

Through the years my mother sharpened her cooking skills and became a fabulous cook, and my father contributed to meals as well by mastering the art of backyard grilling. Dad was a die-hard charcoal man, and had nothing but contempt for those individuals that chose to use a gas grill. We had long since moved away from the rest of the family, but we would often travel the 500 miles to visit mom's beloved older brother Kenny, whom my father also adored. Kenny was another spectacular family cook, who just happened to prefer his barbeque cooked over a gas flame.

My dad's admiration and respect for Uncle Kenny were tested every time we got together and my dear uncle would carry the ribs or steaks or chicken out to his gas grill. Dad would spend the next several hours with beer in hand, eyeing Uncle Kenny cautiously and telling him what he was doing "wrong" and how charcoal was much better than gas. Uncle Kenny – always the gracious host - would take my father's insults with a wan smile, as time and time again he delivered scrumptious morsels of tender beef, pork and chicken goodness, grilled to perfection and slathered in rich, smoky sauce. Dad never said a word as he was gnawing on a rib bone with sauce stuck to his cheeks and juice dripping down his chin. In 1996, after my dear uncle was diagnosed with terminal cancer, my mom and dad went back to Missouri to visit him and have one last barbecue. There, on my beloved uncle's back porch, my dad took over the grill, and with a smile and a few jokes about hell freezing over, cooked Uncle Kenny his last family barbecue on his big gas grill.

When you are from a family of cooks, you tend to take for granted the simple things. A dish that both my mom and Kenny mastered – and that is still a special treat - is home made chicken and dumplings. Chicken and dumplings seemed to be a popular dish where I grew up in Missouri, but when we relocated to Wisconsin, it was a hard dish to find. When I was in my late teens, I had a friend who had grown up in Arkansas, and over a food discussion one night mentioned his family's great chicken and dumpling recipe. We giggled over how you couldn't get real chicken and dumplings "up north" and by the end of the conversation, I was invited over for a home cooked meal.

When I arrived at my friend's house, there was the tantalizing scent of chicken in the air, and my friend was going on and on about how wonderful the meal was going to be. I was in full anticipation of the meal to come, imagining the rich and time consuming dish that my family prepared, which I hadn't had the pleasure of consuming for at least a year. An hour later, I was completely heartbroken and utterly disappointed to find myself staring into a soupy bowl of runny broth with fluffy, pale bisquick "dumplings" bobbing on top. The horror! I could hardly wait to get home to tell my mother about the floating dumplings, which I was certain would bring a sigh of disgust.

Nothing at all like my friend's version of homemade dumplings, the meal that my mom and uncle made was hearty and rich and bursting with chicken flavor. Composed of an entire chicken steeped all day, and thick, heavy dumplings that sank satisfyingly to the bottom of the bowl, this was a meal that filled even the emptiest of stomachs with its gratifying weight. Made with six or more egg yolks, the dumplings were the color of spun gold, and richer than any pasta you might imagine. This was an old recipe, passed down by my grandmother along with her fabulous cream of potato soup and oyster stew. Although both mom and her brother mastered all of these dishes, it was the dumplings that they were each proudest of.

Many of the recipes that my grandmother made and passed along were taken from – or stored in – her cookbook. By the time the book came into my mother's possession it was old and tattered, with pages torn and stained and crinkled. Written in the 20's, the recipes were simple and true, calling for natural ingredients and starting with instructions like,

“Get a good size chicken, butcher, pluck and singe feathers to remove.” It’s no wonder that my mom’s younger brother tried to get her to share the book with him; it was beyond a classic to a true family heirloom.

After my grandmother – and later my beloved uncle – passed away, cooking with my mom took on a new meaning. Separated by thousands of miles, the opportunity to get together and create a feast is rare. When I recently told mom I was coming to visit her first question was, “what do you want to eat?” Never being on to disappoint, I said, “everything.” And no matter what else we have, I know that on the final day of my visit I will be rewarded with a trip to the kitchen with my mom, where we will make our signature meal of home-made southern fried chicken, mashed potatoes, milk gravy, and fresh corn. I can imagine the kitchen now, full of the sound of chicken crackling and frying and the scent of corn and cream and butter; I know my first bite of that juicy flavorful chicken with the crispy, breaded skin will take me right back to my childhood days in the muggy heat of the Missouri sun. Mom and I will gossip while we cook and eat in blissful silence, basking in the joy of our own creation. And there won’t be a singed or plucked feather in site.