

Traditions

My mom held the door open to my grandparents' house for me. I climbed the five steps to the kitchen, steep for my three-year-old legs. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and others from my mom's large Italian family came over to give my mom, dad, and me a hug and welcome us into the warmth of my grandma's kitchen.

Kanya Zillmer 9/29/10 11:22 PM

Comment: An excellent launching point!

Pots and pans were set in specific places on the stove, as if they were soldiers standing at attention awaiting orders. Ingredients were set into piles for different types of fillings. Nutcrackers, glass snowmen, and the advent wreath were moved out of the way from their original places on grandma's large wooden table and, in their place, a fine dusting of flour, spoons, dough presses, a rolling pin, and a high-ball glass. Sitting on the corner of the table were small mounds hidden by dish towels – pasta dough. This was the first time I was big enough to help in the tradition that took place twice a year since before I was born. It was time to make ravioli's for our Christmas dinner.

Every person in the family who was close enough to drive to grandma's house on this Sunday was there and given a specific job; a job that sticks with your name for years to come. Uncle Tony was making one more batch of dough when I climbed up on the chair next to him to watch. He started with a pile of flour that he pushed his fist into to make a crater. In the middle of that, he cracked an egg or two, added some water and seasonings, and then began to whisk them together, slowly adding flour and taking away from the volcano-like structure more and more with each stroke of his fork. Once the pile of separate ingredients became a ball of dough, he rolled it into a little mound, covered it with a dish towel, and placed it among the others on the corner of the table. He looked at me; "Are you

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Comment: Nice!

ready?” he asked me. I simply smiled, my face as bright as the lights on the Christmas tree in the next room, I’m sure.

I hopped off the chair quickly and ran to my mom, tugging at her shirt while she was talking to my aunt. “Mom! Mom! It’s time!” I said quickly and ran back to my claimed spot at the table in between my uncle and cousin Amy; she had been doing this for at least the past three years, a professional in my eyes. My mom helped me roll up the sleeves of my sweatshirt and pulled my curls into a ponytail and out of my face. She straddled behind me on the chair to demonstrate the “press ‘n’ place” technique. It was time!

Uncle Tony sliced off a piece of the dough and rolled it out onto the floured table into a long thin strip, wide enough for the high-ball glass to fit. My other uncle, Davey, was there ready with the glass to cut out the perfect-sized circles for my, Amy’s, and other dough pressers. While all of this was going on, my Aunt Barb and grandma were busy mixing and cooking. The savory smells of butter, garlic, ground beef, and seasonings I was not familiar with rushed to my nose and made my mouth water. Grandma brought two bowls filled with ricotta cheese and other ingredients to the table – not what I was expecting after smelling the delicious mixture sautéing on the stove.

Uncle Tony rolled and pressed out the dough while Davey cut the perfect circles and distributed them to the filler/dough-pressers. We were to place the circles on our dough presses, put a tablespoon worth of filling (in this case the ricotta cheese), and “squeeze firmly” until the ravioli sealed closed. Then we would place them in rows on a floured cookie sheet. My mom took the full cookie sheets to the basement and placed them in the freezer. We would all repeat our jobs until the ricotta was all filling the cheese raviolis. Snow was falling outside of the big sliding glass door in the kitchen. The sun slowly set on the snow in the back-yard while Barb and Gram stirred the sizzling meat and separated it into bowls. When the ricotta was gone, we would begin again when the meat filling cooled and continue

our assembly-line process until the meat was gone. When all of the filling was emptied from the bowls into the dough, the leftover dough would be cut into doughy noodles to become pasta for dinner that night.

After the fillings are neatly enclosed in the dough casings and have been frozen until firm, freezer bags are labeled for each type of raviolis (meat or cheese) and the raviolis are placed with others of similar flavor to be hidden away until Christmas Eve. While watching my mom and aunt place the raviolis into their separate bags, I wondered why they needed to be frozen. “Mom, why do you have to freeze them?”

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Comment: Not necessary

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Comment: Let the dialogue tell this! Otherwise it will be repetitive.

“They have to be frozen so they don’t go bad before we eat them. Also, we don’t want the dough to all stick together!” she replied. It made sense. I accepted this and went over to my grandfather. “Pappy, why do we make so many raviolis for Christmas?” He laughed and put me on his knee.

“Well, we’re Italian. Italian families eat large meals together. When Christmas comes around, many Italian traditions revolve around a big meal. Some families have a fish dinner and others have a ravioli dinner,” he said. I wrinkled my nose at the thought of a big fish dinner and understood by being around my family for three years that Italians eat a lot. I took his simple explanation and continued on my way.

In two weeks, the hard work put into turning dough and fillings into raviolis would be more than worth it when we were able to eat them at Christmas Eve dinner. Surrounded by family, enjoying a meal everyone took part in making, and taking that first bite of the warm ravioli covered in homemade meat sauce or olive oil is what we all looked forward to that Sunday evening while cleaning up the flour from the table, floor, and faces. At three years old, I was finally big enough to take part in this tradition that has grown with the family over the years.

Kanya Zillmer 9/29/10 11:17 PM

Comment: Such great imagery!

Kanya Zillmer 9/29/10 11:30 PM

Comment: Absolutely a great job! Very nicely written, and great description. This was a delight to read, and immediately reminded me of my own experiences making pierogies with my family. Your story was exactly as long as it needed to be, and left no details out. It was enjoyable to read! Nice work.