

Why is food important to you?



As an Italian food is not just food.

It is identity.

In my family, my relatives are known by their cooking prowess, or lack thereof.

Mom: We're going to Aunt Florie's this weekend?

Me: Who?

Mom: You know, she makes the sfogliatelle you love!

OR

Mom: Get dressed, my cousin Patty is coming over.

Me: Who's that?

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Mom: You know, my cousin, the one who doesn't know how to cook sauce.

I had 3 major food influences in my life. My mother, my grandmother and Nickie the Butcher...

My dad may have been Rambo in my eyes, but he never dared to scramble an egg. Neither did Grandpa Joe. Or Grandpa Al. As a child I only had one role model in the kitchen who was male...

When we lived on 24th Avenue in Brooklyn, across the street lived Nickie. He was a leader for the local butcher's union... a chef and part-time caterer... a wise guy... and also for a handful of years my babysitter.

When my brother started school and my mom had to go shopping, she'd drop me across the street with Nickie.

Nickie always carried a cane due to some "leg injury" which never seemed completely real. But the union thought it was. So the checks kept coming. And Nickie enjoyed his freedom at home with me as his regular company.

Nickie was proud to be Italian, and cook Italian. He staunchly defended the roots of Italian cuisine as "true peasant cooking", and the best food you could possibly eat. When you tasted his eggplant rollatini, you had to agree.

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Nickie once told me how his family was so poor when he was young his mom used to fry breadcrumb patties because they couldn't afford meat...

Later on, when we left Brooklyn and moved to Jersey, Nickie still visited our family. Always bringing meat, especially around holidays. He particularly enjoyed showing up with packages priced as "cheap ground beef", only to reveal he ground up high priced rib steaks for us. Or when he'd get us a standing roast for Christmas but "accidentally" label it as discounted chuck.

Nickie was tough with his fists, and tough in the kitchen. And you always ate well when he was around.

My second culinary influence was an all around Renaissance woman. She cooked, she baked, she sewed. And she even sang those tunes for me at her little player organ. Grandma Rose.

Her red crab sauce is still the stuff of legend. Something I couldn't even come close to replicating and thus will not be able to taste again on this side of heaven (I like to think Jesus will have a pot waiting for me. Except since it's heaven I won't have to fight and cut my hands open on those tiny blue claws to get a pea-sized morsel of sweet, luscious crabby meat. No, the meat will levitate out of the shells and directly into my mouth. What a blessed day that will be...)

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Grandma Rose also made “inhale-able” cream puffs I mentioned. Funny thing is, I know she made pate a choux from scratch. Which is the hard part. But I’m pretty sure she used Jello pudding mix for filling. Don’t tell anyone. Because whatever she did, the result was so scrumptious you didn’t breathe when you swallowed her cream puffs whole.

It was that same delicate Grandma Rose touch that made her manicotti irresistible. Shells so thin, so light and filling so creamy and airy. Goopy melt-in-your mouth manicotti. At Christmas dinners Paul and my cousins, Danny and Jimmy, would stake claims on how many manicotti we’d eat – 6... 7... 8... at a single sitting was common.

Of course the final huge influence on my relationship, and ultimately my love, of food is Mom.

In the 80’s when we moved to Jersey, I had a Jewish friend who’s mom regularly made him canned tuna for dinner. My mom was appalled. She felt so bad for this poor, neglected child (did I mention he was pretty wealthy?)

Because to my mom food IS love.

And you don’t say “I love you” with a can of tuna fish. Oh, no.

I’d be hard-pressed to recall a single day of my childhood when mom didn’t make sure I had a delicious breakfast, lunch and

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dinner waiting. Something you take for granted and don't realize the sacrifice it requires until you are an adult.

My mom's Christmas Cookie Parade is probably one of my favorites...

You see, my mom loved Christmas (and all holidays really). Because she loved the big table. The feeding. Nay over-feeding, the family. It's an Italian thing. Five people are coming to dinner, you cook for ten. Someone asks for seconds, an Italian serves you a complete second course.

Each year, days leading up to Christmas, Mom began setting the table for the epic feast.

Each year, the table kept getting bigger...

Were new family members being added?

Was the guest list growing?

Nope. The food list was. Because Christmas dinner made by my Mom was not a celebration of the best of the best, it was a living catalogue of food history.

Any and every dish someone in our family once enjoyed somewhere throughout history must be in attendance.

Me: Mom, why are you making that artichoke pie? Nobody likes it.

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Mom: Your cousin Jimmy loves it. You know how disappointed he will be if I don't make it for him?!?

Me: Mom, maybe this year just do one type potato?

Mom: Well I have to do a white potato and a sweet potato. And we always have candied yams. It wouldn't be Christmas without candied yams. And you and your brother also love sweet potatoes with marshmallows.

And so... Christmas dinner evolved, or devolved, into a Willy Wonka-esque endless banquet. A barrage of scrumptious dish after scrumptious dish. As you were lovingly pressured every step of the way to find more room to continue consuming. Don't mishear me, it WAS delicious!

When all was said and done, your stomach lining was packed wall-to-wall with meatballs, turkey and stuffing, and yes even a leg of lamb. Only then could the parade begin...

Actually it was you who did the parading. Down cookie main street. My mom loved to bake. And not just one cookie. Nearly a dozen different varieties. Each unique. Each baked from scratch.

Romance cookies with brown sugary gooey topping that stuck in your teeth and a crumbly short bread base...

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Pecan cookies that melted in your mouth, dusted with confectioner's sugar that sticks to your finger tips...

Sticky golden-fried struffoli drizzled with honey and sprinkles...

And traditional butter cookies that tasted ordinary upon first bite, but grew wildly addictive with each sweet, buttery crumble in your mouth.

While the guests had to go home and my mom was generous enough to always send them packing with a small suitcase of her cookie treasures, I got to live with private access to the parade.

For the entire month of December, I'd stroll down to our dining room table like a king. I'd browse the aisle of cookies and make myself a platter with a glass of cold milk.

Each time I got close to the bottom of a tray of my favorites, my mom mysteriously whipped up another batch. I don't remember ever asking her or seeing her bake the refills. They would just reappear like magic. I'd wake up and that colorful plastic Christmas tray with Santa would be overflowing once again.

Self-perpetuating Christmas cookies.

That is a beautiful food memory.

So between that trinity of Nickie, Grandma Rose and my Mom, I grew up eating at the table of arguably the best home cooks you

could meet.

Yet, for all the passions and hobbies I tried as a kid from ice hockey and piano, to art and making clocks out of Bon Jovi posters (don't ask), I never showed any interest in cooking.

Sure I had like two recipes I made for my Dad, but he'd eat anything. One was mixing seltzer with orange juice which I called an "Orange Cooler". The other was my cajun bean soup which entailed emptying a can of beans into a pot and dumping half a bottle of fiery spices on top. And then listening to my mom complain since she had to live with the aftermath when Dad came to bed later.

I always knew and loved good food.

But it was not until I visited Florence that my love of cooking actually began...

I had left my job. And we left everything behind. We were slow traveling Italy while I worked on building my first internet business for real estate investors...

I arrived in the motherland when the Euro was crushing the dollar. With no income and on an airtight budget, that meant little to no eating out for two months.

The first stop on this epic journey was a stay Frederica's garden apartment right outside Florence. I still remember walking into

that apartment kitchen and being utterly confused...

The kitchen was smaller than my parents walk-in closet. And the refrigerator? It was comically small. Seriously, the freezer could perhaps fit one extremely flat steakum if you were so inclined.

This meant every day we'd have to go to the market. We'd buy only what we needed for dinner that night.

And the meals we ate?

Well we ate like royalty.

Authentic orecchietti with a light cream sauce and fresh peas...

Fresh marinara with sweet basil and young garlic topped with pungent pecorino made locally in town...

Often topped with pancetta unlike any you have tasted - the resurrected version of bacon in its new glorified body.

And always accompanied by a crunchy, crusted bread dipped in a bright green, spicy olive oil that stings your tongue and lingers as it sticks to the back of your throat. Like pure melted gold.

The ingredients in Italy were of a caliber unlike any we had experienced. They put even high-priced Whole Foods to shame.

Meals so simple.

Cooking so uncomplicated.

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Food so unforgettable.

It changed my life.

This is what lit the fire of food passion in me. To create meals that could literally transport you. Comfort your heart. Elevate your very soul.

In “Ratatouille”, when Linguini serves Ego, the critic, the titular dish, in a single bite Ego is whooshed back to the doorstep of the country home of his childhood.

His tender tears are wiped away by a doting mother.

And his soul is comforted with a bowl of fresh roasted vegetables sautéed in tomato sauce seasoned with a mother’s love...

That is what food means to me.

While my mother longed to preserve the past, to craft dishes that fill the home with the aroma of garlicky nostalgia, and whisk you into the arms of a loved one long gone, or a special time in the past...

My passion looks forward.

When I slide that pork chop into a pan. And oil bubbles. Meat caramelizes to hard sear. My heart yearns to take you somewhere new. An experience you never tasted. To have you join me and my family at our table. And serve you a food memory you will

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never forget.

My passion is not to have you taste and declare,

“Oh, Damian made this wonderful dish that reminds me of an old favorite.”

Oh, no.

The iconoclast in me longs for you to cry out,

“My goodness! I don’t know how Damian did it, but what I ate at his table I have never tasted anywhere in my life. And I will always remember the day I sat at that table and we shared that meal together.”

One of my first real recipes worth repeating is my “7-rub spiced pork tenderloin”.

It was Christmas and I was in the starting lineup. Charlene’s family was visiting. And I wanted to do a plated Christmas dinner, something more elegant than the smorgasbord of deliciousness I grew up on.

I invented this 7-spice rub: brown sugar, garlic powder, chili powder, salt, black pepper, cayenne and cinnamon. In perfect proportion you taste that rub and fight the temptation not to cannibalize your own finger. It’s that good.

In fact I used it more than once to make a tasty spiced french toast for dessert (omitting the garlic and backing off the salt and pepper). And later to re-envision pan seared duck breast.

At the dinner table the pork arrived with exterior turned sugary brown. Inside still slightly pink, glistening and tender. And I made an ooey, gooey pan sauce finished with butter and chopped pecans. I liked that Christmas.

When Char was pregnant with Sarai she had a bad run-in with meat and red sauce. I like tacos. And they are great budget food, which we often were on during those early childbearing years. So I invented my “Taco Verde”.

Taking the concept of regular taco (though originally I started with ground turkey and now use grass-fed ground beef) and exchanging the red sauce for green. Fresh avocado, cilantro, lime, a dash of cumin and the secret ingredient fire-roasted poblano pepper.

There was a short time I ate paleo. I used to make buttermilk biscuits from scratch. And had an idea. Could I take nice, starchy yucca and some coconut flour and make a biscuit? Kinda crazy. Since just about every non-wheat, gluten free bread I have tried tastes like an evil bread-imposter in an obvious disguise. But this one worked. Crumbly biscuit texture. Buttery goodness and all. Amazingly still paleo.

My imagination particularly springs to life when I face a new ingredient. The more unique, the more cared for the ingredient, the greater my call of duty to rise and honor that ingredient.

And oh perhaps my favorite I relish is the opportunity to convert a non-believer who has tasted an ingredient and sworn it off for life. With utter taste and disdain. And persuade them not only to taste, but ultimately to repent. If only at my table (as my buddy Chris's wife did who had sworn off lamb and eagerly took seconds of my red wine braised lamb pasta with tomatoes two ways).

The first time Trumpet Joe, from church in Florida, offered me a wild boar shoulder, I spent weeks envisioning just how I would treat it. He whispered to me how the meat would be sweet and nutty because wild boar spend their days lounging by the lakes munching on acorns.

I braised part of the shoulder as a marsala inspired dish - wild boar and mushroom served over a fried polenta cake. With the other part, I made an orange maple pulled pork. On tasting the marsala dish, Trumpet Joe declared he had never tasted wild boar prepared like that and was blown away.

My biggest regret was when Trumpet Joe confessed that when butchering wild boar they only take the front and hind quarters

and the back-strap. What about the loin? The ribs? The chops? That all got dragged to the water's edge for the gators.

I swore if we ever went hunting I'd find a home for all that sweet meat. Even if I had to do it myself. (A story for another day... because I would make good on that oath).

When I cook a meal it never begins at the stove. Nor in pantry. Or even the kitchen.

Mise en place begins in my mind.

When I know that special ingredient or special guest or both is on the way, the cooking begins.

Mental hands begin the work. Dancing through every order step... chopping, seasoning, braising, plating.

The finished work in all its decadence coalesces like an artist's rendering. And I taste it all before the stove is ever lit. Each flavor combination comes to life while I am driving in my car or laying awake in bed.

When moment arrives to actually step into the kitchen I reach for that knife and the destiny of those ingredients has already been determined. I only need to act out my part in the finished script.

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Ingredients themselves are impetuses for creation. A single flavor can leave a mark on me.

The first time I ever tasted true Italian olive oil. I remember exactly where I was standing. Outside a salumeria in Florence. In the doorway of the shop. On a stand, little bits of bread on toothpicks. And a tray with a pool of slick green olive oil. I tasted. And was changed.

Growing up Italian, olive oil was like water. As a young man, my dad and his friends used it to condition their hair.

But this true olive oil was something else.

There is something about an extraordinary ingredient that speaks to a part of your palette that has never had the gift of hearing. It's like part of you is being born for the first time.

Olive oil spilled onto my tongue, slick, smooth and sweet. The rich smell of the grove reached up through my nose even before the taste. And as it went down it burned slightly in my throat. Olives. Fresh. Powerful. Divine.

And the first time I cooked duck breast. Sourced from a local farm butchery in Maine. Just one breast for five of us. I took it home like a treasure. Scored the skin with precision as they do on every cooking show I study. Skin down first in a cold pan. The magic began. Fatty duck skin transformed into crisp-like, golden

bacon. And then finished on the other side so lightly. Leaving the middle light pink as roast beef.

When the fork reached my lips and I chewed my very first meaty duck bite, my eyes blossomed. I instantly declared, “One day if we have a farm, I must raise ducks.” Year two on Windy Hill, the muscovy ducklings arrived by mail that spring. And I raised my own flock from farm to table.

I don’t know what the future hold for me and food. I do know I am headed somewhere...

A place where we can share own passion for local ingredients, farms and food experiences. And perhaps in my own way I can begin to share my stories. My soul on a plate.

To take what may be ordinary or common and infuse it with passion and vision. To create new. Or to introduce a mouth to an adventure it has never been, and will not soon forget.

I am not a trained chef. Likely never will be. I harbor no delusion of ever winning even a local cooking competition, let alone a Michelin star. (Although I have caught myself day dreaming of winning Master Chef).

Even without the accolades, I believe I can create an experience where I can genuinely say you are about to eat something you cannot eat anywhere in the world. And if I do my part right, you

will remember you ate it at my home.

Food is identity.

So who do i want to be?

True, I want to be someone you never forget.

But there must be more. Because in the end it is not about me.

(If it were only me I'd eat microwaved egg whites in a bowl every day, which in fact I did for almost a decade).

As I reflect, my passion is birthed not out of self, but out of guests. The ones at the table. Whether an out of town friend or family member who has never eaten at my table, or those three gorgeous smiles I get the honor of serving as regular guests...

When I dish up that taco verde or 7-rub pork loin, or I venture to transform a grass fed beef heart into sweet and spicy Asian stir-fry, I do it because the ones I serve matter to me. Dearly. Because they are so special. So precious.

Food is a love language.

It is my love language.

And if I can cook in a way you will always remember...

Then perhaps, in some small way, I can help you never forget how special and loved you are...