

It's Not About Lasagna

What learning how to cook taught me about love.



Madison Butler Apr 14, 2021 · 5 min read



“Not to be dramatic,” I text my fiancé, “But if this lasagna isn’t good I’m going to lose my mind.” There are many things outside of my control right now, so I am focusing on what I can. Theoretically, the lasagna, which dirtied half the dishes in my mother’s kitchen before it was painstakingly assembled and hauled to my grandparents’ for Sunday dinner, is within my control. It still defies expectation, taking an astonishing amount of time to heat before it can be served.

These days the dinner is a living room affair, with plates balanced on knees and laps. Instead of gathering at the sturdy dining room table, we sprawl around the living room thanks to the invisible guest that has for months sapped my grandmother of her strength and mobility. For the second time in two years, the guest is cancer, but this time it refuses to give up its seat at the table.

The lasagna is pretty good, even if it took longer to bake than expected, even though the carrots are too firm because I never saute them enough, even though I forgot to bring extra sauce *just in case*. Relieved, I relay the good news to Anthony. I do not have to go bury myself in the woods and live the rest of my life in a shame hole; grandma even managed a few bites.

Still, it is the worst August on record. Four days later, she passed away at home, as peacefully as one can when their body is under constant attack by its own cells.

In my twenty-sevenish years of life, I've enjoyed an uneasy relationship with food. As a child and teen I was a picky eater, rarely venturing beyond the most basic dishes and a select few vegetables. During my freshman year of college my palate constricted further, but in terms of scale. For a time, and for reasons entirely fabricated by my brain, eating was a luxury I didn't deserve. Besides, cooking was something I was neither good at nor enjoyed.

But I've always liked baking, viewing it as an entirely separate matter from cooking. When I graduated college, my brother was graduating high school and, unemployed and with no better outlet for my stress, I volunteered to do the baking for his graduation party. I don't remember if that was the same summer I helped my grandma make half a dozen oversized tiramisu to feed a small Italian army at one of her church events, but somewhere deep and primal in my brain these memories are connected. It was the first time I consciously understood cooking as an act of deep generosity and care.

Once you notice that sort of thing, it's hard to stop noticing. Until last year, I could probably count the number of times my grandma missed making a Sunday dinner on one hand, but now I understand it. Always the first to volunteer a dish or dessert for occasions that demanded far less, cooking was my grandma's love language. Beyond Sunday dinner there were birthday dinners, pierogies at Christmas, a ham and bean soup with unsubstantiated healing powers. A thousand variations of pasta, served in heaps from a flowered ceramic bowl that could barely contain its bounty. Icebox cakes dressed in tufty meadows of Cool Whip. Mountains of cookies with powdered sugar snowcaps when the occasion demanded.

You did not leave her table hungry and even now, after her passing, you do not leave her home without a plate. In her church she remains a minor celebrity, seemingly (rightfully, in my opinion) beloved by her peers not just for long hours of volunteering at fish fries and festivals but for the kind and generous spirit with which she participated.

I know myself well enough to say she possessed a selflessness that puts most of the rest of us to shame. It took me far too long to make the connection between that selflessness, the sheer amount of time my grandma spent in the kitchen, and her abundant love for those around her. But when you spend years picking over your every flaw, when the critical voice overtakes the voice of reason in your brain, it's hard to enjoy eating. That connection cannot

be made because it simply doesn't make sense. Food loses its meaning no matter the intent with which it's made.

My perception shifted again when I uprooted my entire life and moved to New Jersey to live with my now-fiancé. Suddenly cooking was something I did often instead of every once in a while. And more than that, it was something I did because I cared about the person I was doing it for and with. I wasn't good at it — but it was something I wanted to be good at. I wanted to be able to extend the same generosity and love my grandma extended to everyone else for so long. And if I couldn't do it for myself, I could at least do it for someone else.

The thing is, when you are cooking for someone else you are also cooking for yourself. You have to. Perhaps the most important lesson you learn when you begin cooking is that you have to taste as you go; it's impossible to eyeball flavor and balance. And even though you maybe didn't start out cooking for yourself, you cannot help but notice: it tastes good. And in time you might realize that you — and your body — are just as deserving of the generosity and love that goes into the food as the person you're preparing it for. The flavors begin to stand out from one another. Food is deeper, richer, more enjoyable — always better when shared, but it starts to feel special even when you eat alone.

It was never about the lasagna. I would have been anxious about whatever I decided to cook, as though the conveyable depth of my love for my family hinged on my ability to perfect a meal. It doesn't, of course. You don't have to be a perfect cook to be a generous one. If my grandma taught me one thing it's that the act of cooking is inherently about care. This is foundational to my philosophy in the kitchen; it's taught me to take pride in my skill and to take joy in my food and to extend a little of that care toward myself.

In the end, I needn't have worried. My family understood what I was trying to say.