

The Ravioli of Writing

by Jan Groft, *Central PA Magazine*, January 2006

My twelve-year old surfs the channels eager to catch an episode of *Hell's Kitchen*, and I turn up my nose. True, I was right there beside her through a season of *American Idol*, yelling at the television set over Anwar Robinson's elimination, then defecting to Bo Bice; I even hurried to the phone to reserve tickets when the newspaper announced the *American Idol Live* show coming to Reading. But a reality show that judges contestants on their cooking? How are we, the TV audience, to partake in the sumptuous decision? Not only that, but the show's title rings dangerously close to the truth for me. For me, the kitchen *is* hell.

Surely something went astray in my Italian-American genes rendering me incapable of heating packaged crescent rolls without burning them. Who would believe that a child who awoke to the aroma of freshly baked bread and homemade sauce simmering on the stove could have grown up to offer her own family their choice of delivery menus for dinner? Once an older cousin looked aghast when I admitted serving spaghetti sauce out of a jar.

"Oh, Jan." He said this with a mixture of disappointment and the hope that I was joking. "You don't really, do you?" I might as well have boasted of having broken every one of the Ten Commandments.

My Italian-American family is generously spiced with big-hearted relatives dishing out savory food and topping off empty glasses. My white-haired Aunt Trizzi, Mother's look-alike sister, stood at four-foot-ten almost eyeball-to-eyeball with the spoon handle, stirring pasta in a pot of water voluminous enough to replenish the Monongahela after a drought. Aunt Trizzi cooked full-time for a priest who soon had to loosen the belt under his robes. Her culinary talents could have, in fact, satiated an entire monastery.

My father's brothers had a knack for grilling sausage and peppers on a Coleman stove. Of course, sausage in our family was of the homemade variety. The tangy aroma filled the autumn air, beckoning dozens of aunts, uncles, cousins and friends as we hiked our annual trek through the Port Allegheny Mountains.

I even have a relative listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest-serving bartender in the world. Uncle Ang, now 92 years old, opened his South Side bar tapping his first beer one stroke after midnight the day prohibition was repealed and has been serving up the lager ever since.

And, of course, there's my mother.

"Eat, eat," she always said. "There's more in the kitchen." The daughter of Italian immigrants, she never learned to drive, never worked outside our home. The kitchen was her haven where she cooked as tirelessly for our family of seven as she did for relatives, friends, even entire graduating classes of more than one of her daughters.

I can still see her floured hands rolling out dough at our yellow laminate kitchen table. After cutting zigzag-edged squares and filling them with a ricotta mixture, she would crimp each sack one at a time with a fork, painstakingly creating her masterpiece: fresh ravioli. As a young girl watching, I crimped a few of those sacks myself, but I could never understand why all the effort for something that would disappear in a heartbeat.

Soon bored with the endeavor, I was off to my room. Here I would stretch out on my bed to write in my journal, compose poetry or peck away at the old Underwood, creating a family newsletter—*The Vickiville Gazette*—named after my sister's firstborn daughter. Or I'd re-arrange the pillows and stuffed animals on my bed, then line up framed photos and cologne bottles just so on my dresser, as if anticipating a

visit from the *House Beautiful* photographers.

It is hard to say why I've always given more thought to the pattern of my dinnerware than to what I served on it. Or why my resume lists one of my interests as "other people's cooking." Perhaps I wanted to be something more than my mother was, something different. Maybe my being too busy to cook was my haughty-taughty way of appearing to have more important things to do.

But now Mother is in her nineties, an Assisted Living resident, having recently surrendered her five-gallon jug of cooking oil. A few years ago, my husband and I volunteered to prepare a church dinner for eighty-some people. Given my culinary acumen, the gesture was partly inane, but mostly an effort to involve my mother in an activity that might revitalize her after my father's death. The evening's entrée: one of Mother's specialties, *City Chicken*, featuring cubes of pork and veal skewered on a short stick, with various stages of dipping and breading and frying and baking.

The minute Mother donned her apron in the church kitchen, she could have been mistaken for Chef Ramsey's nemesis, issuing orders on garlic chopping and breading techniques and oven temperatures. Clearly, this stainless steel jungle of double ovens and endless counter space was Mother's Garden of Eden.

That evening, at the conclusion of the meal, our pastor beckoned Mother from the kitchen. She stood slightly disheveled near the edge of the church hall, holding a dishtowel, as he expressed gratitude for one of the most scrumptious meals ever to come out of the church kitchen. The room shook with thunderous applause. As I watched my tiny mother's face suppressing a modest smile, tears of pride welled up inside me. Or maybe they were tears of empathy. Because when it comes to my writing—and even my attempts at decorating—there is more than a pinch of my mother in me. My medium may not be food, but like her, I am driven to mix the right ingredients, to achieve a certain flavor.

By the final episode of *Hell's Kitchen*, I have no more interest in cooking than I did when the show began. But I applaud those contestants because like my mother—and like me—they've used their God-given talents trying to provide a pleasant experience for others. Not always an easy thing to do, as witnessed by the food-filled plate Chef Ramsey slapped against one contestant's chest ... or the folders of rejection notices lining the bottom of my file drawer. Still, there is something burning inside, something we all share. It is a passion to create an experience that will be savored once the flame is extinguished, long after the page is turned. And the hope that someday, someone will remember who we are.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jan Groft is the author of the award-winning book *As We Grieve* and a memoir, *Riding the Dog*