

Kitchen Memories

“Fond Memories Help the Grieving”

A Tribute to My Mother

By G. Raymond McCullough

The year is sometime during 1950's and the day is the 28th of May. It is the day of my birth and the time is 2:20 PM in a medium-sized Midwest town. This is the day my mother gave birth to my life and the many experiences that would follow. I am deeply indebted to her for the life she has given me. My birth and her love inspired many interests for me and lead to what I consider to be a life filled with challenges and joys. If not for her loving guidance over the years I could not say emphatically, “I have enjoyed my life.”

As a young child we had a sandbox that was installed by my father at the end of our very short driveway. It was less than 6 feet from the property line and parallel to the backside of our home. We didn't have much of a backyard unless you want to call 6 feet in depth running the entire back length of our house a backyard. Hence, the sandbox was placed at the end of the driveway. It was ideally positioned, for my mother's sake, because it was just outside the side door of our home where the kitchen was located, we didn't have a back door.

I distinctly remember playing in that sandbox making sand into cakes, mud cakes if you will, while my mother cooked in the kitchen not more than 10 feet away. My mother's attentive presence was always felt as I played in my make believe kitchen making cakes out of sand and water. I suspect I was inspired by the tantalizing smells that emanated from our kitchen. I have little doubt this early experience inspired my passion for cooking to this day.

This brings me to this poignant thought. The sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feels of everyday life open a world not only of the present but of times long past. I often find myself in a trance-like state, reflecting on times left behind. Very often it is some stimulus in the present that propels me toward this state. It may be the smells that linger in the air, the blue sky, a familiar cloud formation, or a distant, vaguely recognizable sound that carries me down memory lane.

Recently, my senses transported me back to a bright, sunny, Sunday morning in my childhood home, on the street that was lined with maple, oaks, elm, and buckeye trees. Notably, the street

was called Forest. Inside this house was a small kitchen, long and narrow. Shaquille O'Neal could probably touch the opposite walls with his outstretched arms. Yes, it was small but my mother prepared meals there that were fit for a king—that would be my father in his mind. Nonetheless, this was a time when I could barely see what lay on the counter tops in my mother's kitchen. I remember being really excited by the smell of the fresh bread, the sound of the slicing and grating of vegetables, the sight of the mouth-watering-juices as they flowed from a cooking roast, the taste of cake batter that I cleverly licked from a bowl while my mother wasn't looking, and the enveloping and soothing warmth of my mother's kitchen as it came to life.

Sunday in my family always seemed to be a magnificent day for feasting on the tantalizing dishes my mother miraculously produced. I remember sitting on the worn red tile floor (of course out of the way) with wide open eyes and half-open mouth as my mother bustled from one position to another, creating the dishes that would delight all the family before the day was over. Watching my mother as she created these masterpieces from diced and grated fruits and vegetables and from meats that were carefully pounded or marinated kept me in a state of awe. I became especially excited when she

rolled dough on the flour covered counter-top. Mists of flour would fly into the air and float down like snowflakes onto my head.

The bright blue sky, the billowing clouds, the silent breeze, and the excited voices of the neighborhood kids outside had no power to entice me from the wonders of my mother's kitchen. I knew my loyalty would be rewarded by being allowed to be her assistant. If luck was with me she would let me run her stand-mixer, which at that time felt as large as a cement mixer. Sometimes, I would be recruited to use the rolling pin to roll out the dough for biscuits or pie crust. Or the task could be small, such as filling a pot with water, but I knew it would lead to bigger things—maybe cutting carrots, dicing onions, or mashing those round hot potatoes into the buttery, creamy dish I adored. One day I would try my hand at tenderizing the meat by beating it with a spiked mallet. I would be allowed to sprinkle all the seasonings from an entire shelf onto the roast that would be the focus of the family's feast.

Eventually, my early interest in my mother's activities led me to take the helm in the kitchen when my mother went to work outside the home. Those early solo adventures were guided by detailed instructions that my mother left behind. The step-by-step

instructions, from the seasoning to the cooking temperature and cooking time had to be followed exactly—any deviation from these standards would be noticed by my mother when she sampled the evening fare after a hard day's work. Sometimes, my efforts received constructive criticism and at other times all out praise, but in both cases I felt proud because my mother always ate everything I cooked. As I became more confident about cooking, I began to substitute seasonings, eliminate steps, or other intricate details my mother had left for me to follow. To my surprise, these variations usually resulted in positive comments from my mother about how a dish tasted especially good.

Those early experiences helped me develop a talent and love for cooking—a talent that I'd pit against any person who thinks they can cook—I've thought about competing on the Gordon Ramsey show MasterChef. When it comes to casserole, meatloaf, roasted/barbequed/ broiled fowl, potato salad, barbequed baby back or beef ribs, creative salad, stir fry, or an old favorite barbequed pig's feet (which I love but will no longer eat) I have yet to meet my match.

I never thought those early Sunday mornings in the kitchen would lead to the ego I have when it comes to cooking.

However, that ego is slightly deflated when I realize there is a woman that can cook better than me. That woman is my mother, who after all was my teacher. My mother's superior cooking ability is crystal clear whenever I go home and convince her to cook one of my favorite childhood meals. Seeing a much older, slower woman move around a much bigger kitchen in her new home still brings me much delight, especially when it's time to eat and it's reaffirmed that I've met my match.

This short story was originally written in September 1992 as a writing project and was titled From Mud Cakes to Barbequed Pig Feet. It was dedicated to my mother Juanita. At that time she was 69 years old. On the 22nd of June 2012, she was 89 years old, I rededicated a slightly revised version to her on her birthday. This is the final version and it is honoring her 96 ½ years of life. She departed this life on December 14, 2019. She lived independently until the final 5 days of her life. This was her hope and it was realized.



This will be one chapter of a book in the work that will be simply titled:

“Ma”

My Experiences of a Great Mother