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"A Grandchild of Italy Cracks the Spaghetti Code"

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Filomena Sciallo Ranallo, a great-aunt of the author, cooks tomato sauce and tagliatelle in Ateleta, Italy. But is her sauce the one her American relatives make? Therein lies a culinary tale.

My Italian is so bad I have a hard time pronouncing gnocchi, but I grew up hearing enough of it to know when I'm being yelled at. And that's definitely what was happening at a table in a small roadside restaurant in Abruzzi.

I had driven through the Italian mountains with an interpreter to find Ateleta, the village where my grandmother Floriana Ranallo Zappa grew up. I had come in search of a recipe. Or more precisely, the evolution of a recipe.

For reasons I couldn't put together until recently, I had been obsessed with tracking a path that began in my grandmother's village and ended with the pot of red sauce that simmers on my stove on Sunday afternoons.

I ended up on the red sauce trail largely because I don't have a hometown. My parents were dutiful players in the great corporate migrations of the 1960s and '70s. My dad worked for the Uniroyal Tire Company. His rise through the ranks of midlevel management required a series of moves, which were always euphemistically presented to the children as "transfers."



Jim and Anne Marie Severson eating spaghetti circa 1954.

The company sent us from Wisconsin to California to Michigan to Texas and then back to Michigan, where I finally got off the family train and went to college.

Through all that moving, the one constant was my mother's spaghetti sauce. As soon as we got the kitchen shelf paper laid and she figured out where the grocery store was, she made the sauce. It meant this was home, and that first plate of spaghetti and meatballs made us all feel as if everything was going to be O.K.

Now, with several more states' worth of my own transfers behind me, the first thing I cook in a new kitchen is a big pot of sauce. When my siblings and I visit each other, spaghetti is on the menu.

I wanted to know where the recipe came from. And in a way, where I came from. So I became a culinary detective.

But back in the Italian village where it all supposedly began, things weren't going so great. I was sitting with the closest relative I could find, Filomena Sciuolo Ranallo, my grandmother's sister-in-law. We were at a table at La Bottega dell'Arte Salata, the small rosticceria my distant cousins run. They were thrilled each time one of the American relatives came to visit, explaining with great pride how Madonna had tried to find her relatives at a nearby village a few years ago and failed. But not you, they told me. You are luckier than Madonna.

I was trying to write down recipes when the old woman grabbed my arm, shaking it hard. Why didn't I speak any Italian? And even worse, why did I think oregano had any place in tomato sauce?

Well, because my mother put oregano in her sauce. But oregano, like the meatballs I add to the pot, was only one of the twists and turns the recipe had taken during nearly a century in America.

In fact, it turns out that there is no single iconic red sauce in my grandmother's village. There are sauces with lamb, an animal the village organizes an entire festival around. There are sauces with only tomato and basil, sauces just for the lasagna and sauces just for grilled meats. Small meatballs might go in a broth, but never in sauce for pasta.

In fact, only two things in the village reminded me of anything I grew up with. The fat pork sausages were cooked and served the same way, and my Italian cousins looked just like my brothers.

To understand why I made my sauce the way I did, I needed to start closer to home, with my mother. She has been making spaghetti sauce for almost 60 years, from a recipe she learned from her mother, who had been making it with American ingredients since the early 1900s.

My grandmother had been shipped to America, literally and largely against her will, to marry an Italian named John Zappa. He ran a dairy farm in a little town called Cumberland in northwest Wisconsin. She was still a teenager, illiterate even in Italian. To the day she died, Grandma Zap spoke only enough English to communicate the most basic things to her bored American grandchildren, of which I was one.

In between, she raised 11 children. My mother, Anne Marie, was the second-youngest.

Among my four siblings, how mom makes her sauce has been a constant source of discussion. We're all decent cooks, but none of us can get it just right. When does she put in the paste? Is a little bit of roasted pepper essential? Do you need to use oregano in the meatballs?

This is a problem my cousins have, too. Sharon Herman still lives in Cumberland, not far from the Zappa family dairy farm. Her mother (my aunt and godmother, the late Philomena DeGidio) was one of the oldest of the Zappa girls and was considered the best sauce maker. My cousin has lived for years under the cloud of never having mastered the master's sauce.

"I could never figure it out," Cousin Sharon told me. "I even took her little hand once and made her measure out all the spices like she did and put them in measuring spoons to try to get the exact amounts. It still didn't taste right."

The master's secret, perhaps, was that she ran a can of carrots, a couple of celery stalks and the onion and garlic through a blender and then put the mixture in the sauce. My mother doesn't do this. The master also put in the tomato paste at the end. My mother prefers to brown the meatballs and ribs first and then deglaze the pan with the paste.

Getting a recipe out of my mother is like trying to get a 4-year-old to explain what happened at day care. She's not one of those annoying and cagey matrons of the kitchen who build their power by dangling the promise of a secret ingredient that will never be revealed. She just cooks by hand, so she's never really able to articulate every step.

She can tell you to make sure the meatballs are well browned. ("Don't put those white meatballs into that sauce!" she'll warn.) And she can give you tips on the all-important step called "fixing the sauce" — tasting it toward the end and adding a little red wine vinegar or maybe, in a pinch, a handful of Parmesan cheese to smooth out the flavor.

But an exact recipe? Not so much. For example, thin-skinned Italian peppers were always around the farmhouse she grew up in, so she likes to use some kind of pepper to give the sauce what she calls

“homemade flavor.” She often just uses pickled peperoncini from a jar, which I do, too. Once, when I was out of them, I called to see if she had a substitute. She suggested green bell peppers.

“But I never put in green peppers,” I told her.

“Well, if you had one you would,” she said. “But don’t go out of your way. It doesn’t make that much difference.”

O.K., Mom. Let’s focus.

“When do you put the chicken thighs in?” I asked another time.

“Oh, honey, I never use chicken thighs.”

“But last time I was home, the sauce had chicken thighs.”

“Huh — that’s funny,” she said. “I guess I must have had some in the freezer.”

These are maddening conversations, but I think they will go on until the day she makes her last pot.

If anything, her sauce, like her mother’s sauce, and the sauces from the home village of Ateleta, are about making do. Well-browned meat is the key, but you use the meat you have.

Once my grandmother made it to America, there was plenty of meat around. So her sauce became an American version of three-meat ragù, a dish not uncommon in parts of Abruzzi. They would butcher their own hogs and fatten up a few of the dairy cows, so the sauce often simmered with a piece of neck bone or tail or even a steak from a shoulder blade.

My mother, who lived through elementary school without a refrigerator, was often dispatched to the cellar to scrape two inches of sealing grease off the top of a crock and return to the kitchen with preserved sausages and pork ribs for the sauce.

Mom happily left the farm and married Jim Severson, whose roots are in Norway. My father will never turn down a piece of lefse, the flat bread of his people, but he can still catalog the distinct tastes of almost every Zappa sister’s sauce.

As he moved my mom around the country, she fell in love with convenience foods and the big, clean supermarkets of the suburbs. She no longer had to can tomatoes or dry basil and parsley on cookie sheets. And all the meat came on those nice, clean plastic trays.

Mom even took to using something food manufacturers call “Italian seasoning.” But she’ll also use a mix of about three parts dried basil to one part dried oregano. My grandmother never used oregano; just lots of parsley and basil. But all the Zappa daughters did.

I was stumped about why the family sauce ended up heavy with oregano and meat. So I called Lidia Bastianich, the New York chef who has written much about the transfer of Italian food to America.

“This is a cuisine of adaptation, of nostalgia, of comfort,” she said. By overemphasizing some of the seasonings Italian immigrants brought from home, they could more easily conjure it up. And sometimes the adaptations were simply practical. Using tomato paste, for example, was a way to make the watery tomatoes in the United States taste more like the thick-fleshed kind that grew in Italy.

My family’s serving style is to pile the pork and beef and meatballs onto a big platter of spaghetti, sometimes with sausage. That mountain of meat might be a homage to my grandmother, who found such abundance when she arrived. Or maybe she was just overwhelmed: on a farm with no refrigerator, not a lot of money and 11 children, she didn’t have time for a separate meat and pasta course.

As hard as my mother tried to get off the farm, I am trying just as hard to get back. Like her, I use spareribs and a nice, fatty piece of beef. I try to buy them from local farmers who raise their animals outdoors on pasture and sell them for prices that make my mother shake her head. I would give anything to have a crock of sausage under a layer of pork fat in the cellar.

I use fresh basil and fresh bread crumbs instead of Progresso in my meatballs, but I still stick to dried basil and oregano in the sauce. My canned tomatoes come from Italy, even though my mother thinks Contadina or Hunt’s is just fine.

It never tastes just like hers, but I keep trying. And maybe that’s the problem. Perhaps I’m too fixated on my fancy-pants ingredients. Or perhaps it’s just a psychological quirk of the kitchen. The one that makes you think nothing ever tastes as good as your mother’s.

Around Thanksgiving, my parents moved into a small condominium and were going to sell the family dining table. Instead, I arranged to have it shipped from Colorado, where they live now. It’s a little too big for my Brooklyn brownstone, and it’s not an antique or even an heirloom. My mother bought it during one of our many transfers simply because she needed a bigger table.

But it is the table I grew up with. I have eaten hundreds of plates of spaghetti on it. I feel the need to keep it, to pass it on to one of my nieces or nephews. I want to say, “This was your grandmother’s table.”

And then I will make them sit down and eat spaghetti, and tell them the story of the red sauce trail.

Recipe: Zappa Family Spaghetti Sauce

Time: 3 hours

- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound pork spareribs, neck bones or pork chops
 - 1 pound beef chuck roast, blade steak or brisket
 - 3 tablespoons olive oil
 - 3/4 cup chopped onions
 - 2 cloves garlic, minced
 - 1 6-ounce can tomato paste
 - 1 teaspoon dried oregano
 - 1 tablespoon dried basil
 - 1 teaspoon dried red pepper flakes
 - 1 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt
 - 1 bay leaf
 - 1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes, preferably Italian
 - 1 28-ounce can tomato sauce
 - 1/2 teaspoon sugar
 - 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, roughly chopped
 - 4 small or 2 large pickled peperoncini
 - Cooked meatballs (see recipe)
 - 1 pound dried spaghetti for serving
 - Grated Parmesan for serving.

1. Sprinkle salt and pepper all over pork and beef. Place large pot over medium-high heat; when hot, add olive oil and brown meat. (Or cook meat in same pot used for meatballs, browning in the leftover fat.) Remove meat to a platter. Turning heat under pot to medium, add onions, and cook 3 minutes, stirring. Add garlic, and cook 2 minutes longer. Add tomato paste, and stir: cook until it absorbs fat in pan. Add oregano, basil, red pepper flakes, kosher salt and bay leaf, stirring to combine.

2. Add cans of tomatoes and tomato sauce, then 4 1/2 cups water. Stir in sugar, parsley and peperoncini. Return meats to pot with their juices. Bring sauce to a gentle boil. Turn heat down to a simmer, partly cover and leave sauce to simmer 2 1/2 hours or more, stirring regularly.

3. About 20 minutes before serving, add meatballs to pot. Boil spaghetti according to package directions. Drain, return spaghetti to pan and add 3 cups sauce. Toss pasta in pan for a minute to coat with sauce, and place on a large platter. Pour 2 more cups sauce over pasta. Place meat and meatballs on pasta, slicing large pieces. Serve with bowls of remaining sauce and Parmesan.

Yield: 6 to 8 servings.

Italian Meatballs

Time: 20 minutes

- 2 pounds ground beef
- 1 cup fresh bread crumbs
- 1/2 cup finely grated Parmesan
- 1 heaping tablespoon chopped fresh basil
- 1 heaping tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon ground cayenne pepper
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 eggs
- 3 tablespoons olive oil

1. In a large bowl, mix all ingredients except olive oil by hand, using a light touch. Take a portion of meat in hand, and roll between palms to form a ball that is firmly packed but not compressed. Repeat, making each meatball about 2 inches in diameter.

2. In a large, heavy pot heat olive oil over medium-high heat. When it shimmers, add meatballs in batches. Do not crowd. Brown well on bottoms before turning, or meatballs will break apart. Continue cooking until browned all over. Remove meatballs to a plate as each batch is finished. Let meatballs cool slightly; cover and refrigerate until needed.

Yield: About 16 meatballs.