

Nora's Family Dinner Project

'Cooking, like life, can be an adventure if we choose to be bold'



WRITER SARAH Sullivan's late mother, Jyl, smiles over a meal she has prepared.

Last year, Nora's Table Restaurant owner Kathy Watson asked people to send in their memories, with recipes, of a treasured family recipe. For the "Family Dinner Project," Watson chose six and places them on the restaurant menu for a night, with the writer and family as guests. For Jan. 28, Watson chose a heartfelt memory by Sarah Sullivan about her mother, who died in 2014. Here is what Sullivan wrote:

My mother Jyl (pictured above) was an innovative and audacious cook way back before it was cool. Every holiday meal began with an extravagant antipasto platter surrounded by odd ceramic creatures, bronze fruit, candles and greenery from the yard. Always some wild and seasonal still-life. Imagine those old paintings of the Italian gods and goddesses in togas lolling around the table full of figs and verdant, ridiculous abundance. I think that's what Mom was going for.

The platters always involved all sorts of cheese (Roquefort was her favorite), prosciutto, whole-grain mustard, seasonal fruit, olives, fennel, artichoke, endive leaves filled with something delicious, pickled herring or boquerones and always The Greenberg Smoked Turkey from Tyler, Texas where Mom was from. Maybe there was some chicken liver pate if she had time to make it, too.

Mom inherited tiny, beautiful demitasse cups from her mother, and often there was a little soup served before a holiday meal. (She said it kept everyone out of the kitchen for a bit longer). I remember the Christmas she announced that the soup du jour was minestrone. I guffawed and protested. That did NOT seem like a special holiday soup, but it is a favorite of mine to this day. She put so much thought into making it wonderful. She set aside the parmesan rinds for weeks to add to the broth. And although

she usually cooked without a recipe, I admire that when she did make something new, she followed the directions exactly and only made it her own later on.

I remember a lobster bisque, a corn chowder, a Greek Avgolemono, a butternut squash soup and a simple cheese tortellini in chicken broth with parsley.

Mom took some credit for my adventurous eating and often told the story of cooking and serving me my first real food: Curried Cream of Zucchini Soup. She said I was insatiable. I ate TONS.

A family favorite was lamb shank made in her heavy old cast iron Dutch oven. She made a big deal out of digging the marrow out of the bones.

She loved simple recipes and focused on letting her ingredients shine on their own. She was constantly blasting music, singing and dancing while cooking. She especially loved old Southern gospel tunes and many of the songs in her repertoire centered on farming and food.

Peppers were popular, and she always cut them into thin shoestring strips and roasted or sautéed them simply with olive oil, salt, pepper and maybe some rosemary or thyme. And there was always a big salad. The go-to dressing was from her friend Lois, called "Bibb Lettuce Salad Dressing (Lois)". (I don't know whether it was Lois or my mother who typed the recipe up on an actual typewriter! But you can see it was well used.)

My mom was an excel-

lent tennis player, and eventually she and Lois actually played tennis together just before I was born, the very same day. I love to picture that, me in my Mama's big belly bouncing around the tennis court.

Desserts usually were not too sweet. Lemon or savory tarts reigned over chocolate or cake. Maybe there was some pistachio ice cream with fresh berries. My favorite was a very-ripe persimmon, frozen and then thawed just so. We ate it like sorbet right from the fruit with a spoon.

We lost my mother suddenly in May of 2014 unexpectedly. Poetically, she had an enlarged heart. She died in her sleep of heart arrhythmia at 68. I'm so thankful she didn't suffer. As I made my way back to New York for her wake I wondered what might be left in her refrigerator. Of course there was a big

wide and 10 feet long. We celebrated her life and all of the meals she blessed us with in her home there with her friends, all of whom said that their relationships with her also revolved around food.

Other important moments: Often when my siblings to visit as adults our Mom had beef brisket waiting. This was one of the two recipes she passed down from her mother (the other was an awesome, proper, southern fried chicken). She usually had beans (white or baked brown ones with bacon) or polenta to accompany the brisket.

The very best thing I inherited from my Mom was her amazing collection of cookbooks. I love how she wrote all kinds of notes and declarations right in the books i.e. MORE BASIL in the pesto recipe from The Silver Palate. The books are splattered with years of use. Some of the bindings are split. And best of all, they are jammed full of notes and treasures.

Just the other day when I opened the Southern Junior League Cookbook out flew a self-portrait by me, probably drawn when I was 4 or 5. It's splattered with some sort of sauce. The little portrait marks page 298, Pepper Jelly, something my Ma loved. She always served it with fried chicken livers.

I've dedicated my professional and personal life to the preservation and promotion of local agriculture and food. I've often wondered if this was prompted by so many meals thoughtfully crafted by my mother. The times when I have felt most connected to my family and friends all include a meal around a table. I hope

to continue upholding what I learned at home from my mother Jyl: food is medicinal. It brings us around the table to make peace and joy. The ingredients and intention matter. Cooking, like life, can be an adventure if we choose to be bold.

Sarah Sullivan is executive director of Gorge Grown Food Network, based in Hood River.

The Menu

- Minestrone soup
  - Raddiccio salad with Lois' dressing
  - Braised lamb shanks with parsnips
  - Pine nut tart
- Chef Watson noted that the cost for this dinner is \$30, rather than the usual \$25, because of the cost of lamb shanks.

Family Dinner Project: three remaining meals

Family Dinner Project runs for three more meals at Nora's Table Restaurant.

Jan 28: "My Mom, her Wake, and the Giant Sub Sandwich" by Sarah Sullivan. Since Sarah's mom died unexpectedly last May, Sarah has spent hours poring over her cookbooks, remembering delicious family meals, and a cook who lived by the maxim, "enjoy every sandwich."

Feb. 18: "Scraping Together Thursday Dinner in Natchez, Mississippi" by Linda Floyd. There was always just enough on the table in Linda's Mississippi childhood, but her richest memory is of the poorest night of the week.

March 4: "Yours, Mine and Ours: A Blended Family Dinner in Trout Lake" by Kira Fogarty.

Make reservations at 541-387-4000 or by e-mail: kathy@norastable.com

Price per person: \$25 (\$30 on Jan. 28)



Photos courtesy of Sarah Sullivan

PEPPER JELLY recipe, and Sarah Sullivan's self-portrait

batch of Lois' dressing. All sorts of cheese. Anchovy and tomato paste. Pasta with pesto. Lots of leftovers from new and old recipes and a life of daily cooking.

My Mom loved this Warren Zevon quote: "Enjoy every sandwich." We couldn't bring ourselves to cook for her wake, but we did order and share the most enormous sub sandwich you can imagine from her favorite local Italian deli. It must have been half a foot

Watch eagles on Saturday



Photo by Stephen Datnoff

ON JAN. 24 Get a close look at raptors such as this one.

Catch a glimpse of the American bald eagle during the Corps' fifth annual Dam Eagle Watch on Jan. 24 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at The Dalles Dam Visitor Center in The Dalles.

As bald eagles migrate south each winter in search of food, the Columbia River provides an excellent food source for our winter guests. Westrick Park, near the dam and across from the visitor center, seems to be a favorite winter vacation spot. It is quiet and secluded December through early March.

That's why the Corps partners with the U.S Forest Service and the Rowena Wildlife Clinic to provide educational programming about birds of prey and live raptor viewing at the visitor center. A variety of fun activities will be available for all ages. Visit this link to check out the schedule of events for the theater: nwp.usace.armymil/.

In addition to interpretive lectures, presentations and films in the theater, spotting scopes and a free and the site is accessible to visitors with disabilities, visitors are encouraged to bring their own scopes, binoculars and cameras.

If the event is canceled due to inclement weather, it will be rescheduled for Saturday, Jan. 31 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Please check our Facebook page and website for updates.



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