



Snow spurs a community's generosity

Armed with shovels manned by human power, small gas-driven tractor-type machines, and a huge yellow plow, the snow finally gave way to the blade. And there was plenty of it.

As I stood by the window and watched the clean white flakes gathering and deepening across lawn, sidewalk, and street, a different kind of beauty took hold, marked only by deer and cat tracks.

It was a scene that had unfolded for days at a time much like the ones I had seen years before when I would have joined the shovel brigade to clear a path from house to animal sheds to feed and water the stock, carry in kindling for the wood box, then beat a hasty retreat from the cold and blowing snow to the warmth given out by the wood- or coal-burning stoves.

That was fun, we thought from a child's viewpoint, because Dad led the way doing the heavy work and Mom, left behind in the house, would be preparing good-smelling victuals. We younger ones had it best both ways.

If my older sister and younger brother worked on the front steps from porch towards the county road for our tromp later towards school, I may have stayed behind and turned the crank on the milk separator once the milking had been done. Each in our own way we willingly did our chores as part of the family circle.

When fun time came, we were out with snowballs tossing, rolling big balls to stack in series of three to top with an old hat above the smallest one and put rocks for eyes and smiling mouth. Later there would be sledding, coming in to warm ourselves by the fire and drink hot chocolate while our mittens lost their icy crystals.

The scenes of my being a child in winter changed in a twinkling and now my mind saw the same snow scene, but George and I were the parents and the children were our own three sons.

We no longer had much stock to care for, no cows to milk or hay to pitch, no wood to carry since heat in the house came from an oil-burning stove.

The trip to school, though, remained much the same — students walking the distance each direction. The difference between the two was that in my childhood the sidewalks and streets were mostly cleared by folks shoveling outside their own houses and places of business and the school-bound walked where they found clear places, many times down the streets where only a few cars came by to make a track in which to walk. Now our three sons did likewise but with subtle changes in the use of machines and more cars to help clear the way. Also, there was more time for building snowmen, igloos, sledding, and learning to ski.

The present scene outside my window had to come back into focus on the kind neighbors, friends, and other unknown workers with any tools at hand from handheld shovel to home-owned small walking plow to the big mechanized yellow one clearing or stacking big mounds of snow into bigger cluster hills where space allowed just a few yards away from my window. Dirt from the street scooped up with the snow darkened the mounds as well. With the machinery at hand, it all took such a little while and traffic was opened to all.

It all seemed for my benefit though since my driveway and sidewalks were included on this street in town, no longer the huge expanse of county on the hill. I now saw men and women alike working the snow but the children were riding to school in big yellow buses, with cars aplenty, and I wondered how many of the drivers/riders knew how far they had come from our early days of tromping the long way to school wrapped in heavy coat, cap, scarf, mittens and galoshes with books and lunchpails in arms after the morning chores were done.

Now as an old woman, I stood by the window in a furnace-heated room and watched this part of the scene that I hoped would never change — humankind for other humans, known or not, just because they carried the spirit of humanity. How grateful I always feel for this scene that seems not to have changed in my lifetime.

May there always be those who are physically able who will see to the needs of others who are unable. My gratitude!

A battle of lasagnas

By **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Casseroles have long been a favorite for family meals and gatherings, because one-pan dishes are usually easy to make, a dream to portion and can feed a crowd.

Lasagna is a particular favorite for many because who doesn't love the magical marriage of cheese, pasta and tomatoes? Add that it can be composed ahead of time, taking some of the stress out of weeknight cooking, and you've got the perfect comfort food. It's especially life-affirming in winter, when we crave rich and hearty dishes jam-packed with carbs.

Like just about everyone else impacted by COVID-19, I haven't had many chances to cook for people outside my family lately. Then last weekend, on a visit to Washington D.C., my daughter brought the boyfriend we hadn't yet met to dinner.

I saw this as my chance to try what the internet says is the best lasagna ever. In 2001, John Chandler of Dallas submitted a version of his mother's lasagna to the food-focused online social networking service Allrecipes.com. In a bold move, he named it the "World's Best Lasagna," and the rest is history.

In the years since, the recipe has been rated by nearly 20,000 home cooks and has the most reviews of any recipe on the site, according to Esmee Williams, the site's consumer & brand strategy vice president. Last year, at the height of the pandemic, it was Allrecipes' third most-viewed recipe behind only Good Ol' Fashioned Pancakes and Easy Meatloaf.

Thanks to its solid five-star status, the recipe has also been "pinned" tens of thousands of times — despite its 20 ingredients and 2 1/2 hour cook time.

"Clearly this recipe has the flavors and features cooks are looking for — especially when feeding a crowd," Williams said by email.

The recipe, she added, exudes a "feeling of authenticity" while using readily accessible ingredients. It also appeals to cooks who like to tweak recipes — using turkey instead of beef or adding red wine instead of water. And a great title "communicates confidence," Williams said.

Which brings me back to the boyfriend. What better way to make a good first impression than with a dish that's enjoyed cult status for more than a decade? Game on!

Italian variations

While Chandler's recipe takes hours to prepare, with a host of ingredients, many American lasagnas do not. For that, we can probably thank the popularity of dried lasagna noodles and the recipes printed on the boxes.

Raise your hand if you've ever thrown some no-boil lasagna noodles into a pan with a jar of spaghetti sauce, ricotta and shredded mozzarella. It might not be the real deal, but it's a reasonable facsimile, right?

Yet the standard-bearer that originated in Emilia-Romagna in northern Italy in the 19th century was never meant to be a quick, everyday meal. It was a dish for feasts and other special occasions made with long-simmered meat sauces, velvety bechamel and delicate, fresh pasta rolled by hand.

"It's a cultural thing," explained food historian and cookbook author Francine Segan in an email. "In Italy, the custom is to prepare a special dish like lasagne with care and time for Sunday dinner and special occasions. It takes hours."

In the U.S., home cooks tend to value free time more and



Gretchen McKay/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

We put the World's Best Lasagna up against Classic Green Lasagne alla Bolognese.

want things done quickly, "so we take short cuts."

The dish is older than you might think: What Italians know as lasagne (plural for the noodles) is derived from the Greek word laganon — flat sheets of dough cut into thin strips. As early as the 4th century B.C., Etruscan frescoes in the Tomb of Reliefs in Lazio near Rome depicted the basic tools and ingredients to roll and form pasta. Ms. Segan noted, as well as banquets showing diners enjoying an early version.

The first written recipe for a lasagna-like dish appeared in the 1st-century cookbook "De Re Coquinaria" by the ancient Roman gastronome and writer Apicius, says Ms. Segan. It wasn't until the Middle Ages that a recipe approximating modern lasagna — boiled flattened dough sprinkled with cheese and spices — appeared in the 14th-century cookbook "Liber de Coquina."

Every Italian region has its own traditional recipe — and they don't necessarily include tomatoes (which didn't arrive in Italy until the 1500s). Lasagne al brodo, baked lasagna in broth, is a typical dish of Molise made with a chicken and veal stock, while Lasagne all'Ascolana, from Ascoli province in the Marche region, features fresh egg lasagna sheets layered with a sauce of ground beef and minced chicken giblets cooked in wine and sliced white truffles.

In southern Italy, lasagna is generally made with dried sheets of pasta layered with rich meat ragu, ricotta and mozzarella. In the north, especially in Bologna, the most popular version includes fresh egg pasta colored green with spinach and layered with ragu, bechamel and Parmigiano-Reggiano.

In 2003, the Italian Academy of Cuisine added the recipe for Green Lasagna alla Bolognese to its archives, even though Neapolitan lasagna — which includes fried meatballs, ricotta, mozzarella and hard-boiled eggs — has the most historical documentation, according to the magazine La Cucina Italiana.

Best ingredients

You're much more likely to find the famed Italian casserole offered by the pan, family-style, for takeaway meals and banquets. That's because lasagna is relatively expensive to make and quite labor-intensive. "And to be honest, there's more interesting food items out there," says Frank Vitale, the chef and owner of Cucina Vitale on Pittsburgh's South Side.

He offers three versions on his takeout menu with 24-48 hours notice: cheese, vegetable

and meat, with prices ranging from \$59.95 for a 10-by-12-inch pan of cheese lasagna that serves six to \$129.95 for a large pan of meat lasagna that serves 20. All are made with fresh pasta sheets and herbed ricotta mixed with grated Romano and mozzarella cheeses. The bolognese for his meat lasagna is slow-simmered for nearly four hours using beef, veal and pork in addition to pancetta and short ribs.

"What makes a good lasagna is like anything else — use the best ingredients," he says.

Fiore Moletz, who owns Della Terra in Zelienople, Pennsylvania, is another who offers lasagna family-style as a takeaway, and it's also occasionally on the menu on weekends during cold weather. He agrees that the dish is only as good as its components.

"It's so simple it has to be done with the best ingredients and techniques," Moletz says.

For him, that means 7-12 layers of fresh pasta topped with a mix of creamy bechamel and bolognese that's been cooked very slowly over low heat with prosciutto ends instead of pancetta. He also tucks fresh basil into the pasta somewhere between the fourth and fifth layers.

"The way you build flavors is super important," he says.

Whatever recipe you choose — we offer both the World's Best Lasagna and a Classic Lasagne alla Bolognese to compare and contrast — be sure to follow these simple rules from the experts:

- Thinner is better when it comes to noodles, whether you're making it from scratch or choosing a boxed variety. You also probably want to avoid no-boil noodles, as it can make your lasagna heavier and drier if there's not enough liquid in the sauce.

- Use the best ingredients you can afford — premium cream, real Parmesan-Reggiano, Italian plum tomatoes and quality meats.

- Cook the sauce until it's thick, or your lasagna will be watery.

- Choose a casserole dish that's deep enough for easy layering, and make sure the final layer of pasta is completely covered by sauce and topped with cheese.

- Don't overcook! Fresh pasta is quite soft and will get mushy if baked too long. Even if you use boiled lasagna noodles, you're really just rewarming all the ingredients once the pan goes into the oven.

- Let the lasagna sit for at least 15 minutes before portioning it, or it will disintegrate into a sloppy mess.

- Above all, have fun while

you're creating your masterpiece. It's lasagna, after all. "Take your time and enjoy the process," says Segan.

WORLD'S BEST LASAGNA

You need to be a meat lover to truly enjoy this lasagna. You also need to have a few hours, as the sauce needs to simmer on the stove for 90 minutes before it's layered with the noodles and cheese.

I made the sauce — which is on the sweet side — a day ahead to speed the process at dinner time. My family of carnivores, including my daughter's boyfriend, gave the lasagna a resounding thumbs up. It's heavy and filling.

- 1 pound sweet Italian sausage**
- 3/4 pound lean ground beef**
- 1/2 cup minced onion**
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed**
- 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes**
- 2 (6-ounce) cans tomato paste**
- 2 (6.5-ounce) cans canned tomato sauce**
- 1/2 cup water**
- 2 tablespoons white sugar**
- 1 1/2 teaspoons dried basil leaves**
- 1/2 teaspoon fennel seeds**
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning**
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt, divided, or to taste**
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper**
- 4 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley**
- 12 lasagna noodles**
- 16 ounces ricotta cheese**
- 1 egg**
- 3/4 pound mozzarella cheese, sliced**
- 3/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese**

Prepare sauce: In a Dutch oven, cook sausage, ground beef, onion and garlic over medium heat until well browned. Stir in crushed tomatoes, tomato paste, tomato sauce and water. Season with sugar, basil, fennel seeds, Italian seasoning, 1 teaspoon salt, pepper and 2 tablespoons parsley. Simmer, covered, for about 1 1/2 hours, stirring occasionally.

Bring a large pot of lightly salted water to a boil. Cook lasagna noodles in boiling water for 8-10 minutes. Drain noodles and rinse with cold water. In a mixing bowl, combine ricotta cheese with egg, remaining parsley and 1/2 teaspoon salt. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Assemble lasagna: Spread 1 1/2 cups of meat sauce in the bottom of a 9- by 13-inch baking dish. Arrange 6 noodles lengthwise over meat sauce. Spread with one half of the ricotta cheese mixture. Top with a third of mozzarella cheese slices. Spoon 1 1/2 cups meat sauce over mozzarella and sprinkle with 1/4 cup Parmesan cheese. Repeat layers and top with remaining mozzarella and Parmesan cheese. Cover with foil. To prevent sticking, either spray foil with cooking spray, or make sure the foil does not touch the cheese.

Bake in preheated oven for 25 minutes. Remove foil and bake an additional 25 minutes. Cool for 15 minutes before serving.

Serves 12.
— Allrecipes.com