



Food Issues

One passed-down recipe just might hold the key to familial bliss. | BY ALECIA STEVENS

This is about love, power and death. And macaroni and cheese. It is about food.

Food is never just about nutrition. It is emotional. It magnetizes your neuroses and unconscious patterns.

It calls forth the best and the worst, our senses of entitlement and competition and grandiosity. It is worthy of a therapist. And, yet, it also induces intimacy. How many of us have been lured to love over a glass of wine and a plateful of pasta? How many women have enticed a lover in the kitchen with roasted chicken and garlic mashed potatoes for dinner with the intention of meeting them in the bedroom for dessert? How many men bring chocolates and champagne to their beloved?

I recently discovered that my father, 81, is dying of lymphoma of the bone marrow, and I have a burgeoning sympathy with the complex intermingling of food and psyche. Cooking became his hobby when he retired at 65. For the past 15 years, when I head to my parents' home in Northfield, Minnesota it has been about the food. It has been the calling card for my children, Alexander and Isabelle.

"Is Grandpa making macaroni and cheese?" Izzy would ask as we drove south on the highway.

"Probably. He always does when we come," I would reply.


My father has a couple sensitive points around food, which might be called neurotic by a good Freudian. It had to be served hot. It had to be served at a specific time. And there had to be enough of it. To these points, he heated our coffee mugs in the microwave and our plates in the oven. I can't tell you how many times I have burned myself picking up my plate or touching my lips to my coffee cup. I prefer the continental style — lukewarm food — so this was never a match made in heaven. It simply meant I had more time to drink

wine while my food cooled to a temperature that would not send me to the trauma unit with third-degree burns.

In terms of the timing of a meal, he was unambiguous. As a farmer, born and bred, supper was at 5:30. We didn't have dinner; we had supper. (If there was dinner, it was on Sunday at noon.) On a special occasion, we could eat at 6 or 6:30. But that was only when several of us were coming to visit on the weekend, perhaps. We were chastised on many occasions for arriving at 5:35 after a long day of work. Not only did we need to be prepared to eat sharply at 5:30, it was also clearly his preference that there were no appetizers. (This habit of eating before supper was surely introduced by the lazy upper classes and would spoil one's appetite. If my father went to the trouble of cooking supper, he wanted us to eat it, goddammit.)

His specialty was macaroni and cheese, following his own mother, Myrtle Krebs's recipe, which wasn't a recipe at all but just a way of making the delectable dish that she figured out at some point in the 1940s on an Iowa farm. It is transcendent. It is not runny. It is not sloppy. It is the ideal combination of pasta, chunks of cheese, and saltine-

cracker topping. I have never had better. There is no other dish on the planet that my own two grown children prefer over their grandpa's macaroni and cheese.

But its days are numbered unless we learn to make it. So Isabelle has taken it on as a personal mission to hang with her grandpa to get this recipe down — just the right crush on the saltines, the right size chunks of cheddar and Colby cheeses, the right amount of milk and butter and the right amount of love poured into feeding one's wife, children and grandchildren. She will be the carrier of the torch and the stories. Because that's what food is — a caldron of a complex stew of nutrition, emotion, neuroses, preferences, lust, and love. 

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the family connection Howard and Neidra Krebs with daughter, Alecia, January 1954.

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