

THE LEGACY OF THE SAUCE

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I believe in pasta sauce:

I believe in its aroma and its flavor and its power to unite.

I learned the recipe from my Italian mother-in-law – that would be my second husband’s mother, Angela. I married her son after my first husband died of cancer.

“Chop the garlic, at least four cloves. Heat up the olive oil. Don’t forget the onion.” Her gravelly smoker’s voice echoes in my head. Angela didn’t like my being with her son. She would come into my kitchen, lean her stout body against the counter, and transform the mundane space into a bustle of energy, smells, clattering, and sizzling. In the process, my children became her grandchildren, and her sauce became the family standard for all things good.

“Pour in one forty-eight ounce can of tomatoes. Make sure they’re crushed, not chopped. They can be seasoned with Italian basil or parsley. That part doesn’t matter.” She taught me her sauce recipe in

the last urgent months before her own death from pancreatic cancer. Is it better to know you are going to die and start the long good-byes or to be taken by surprise, leaving others to pick up the pieces? My mother-in-law’s answer was her sauce.

She couldn’t stand that she was making my children go through another loss in their young lives. Still, there was no point in hiding it. The three of them had already watched their father die of cancer. They had been there before. “What’s going to happen after you die, Grandma?” my youngest son was not afraid to ask.

She brought the sauce to a boil, then reduced it to a simmer. “The first thing I’ll do,” she said, “is go to meet your father.”

“Don’t add the salt, sugar, or pepper until the end. It’s okay to add a little oregano, dried or fresh, either is fine. But, you have to be relaxed and happy while cooking or

you’ll get a metallic aftertaste.”

I recorded Angela’s sauce recipe, along with others for fried eggplant, meatballs, and chicken Parmesan. They all rely on simple ingredients, a good olive oil, and an elusive harmony of stirring and simmering.

Every time I present my sauce to my husband, he says “pretty good, but not yet.”

I know what he means. I think that if I can somehow summon the nuance of flavor, the perfect amount of oregano, I will capture something ephemeral and lost and I’ll taste it between my lips. Some may think that is impossible, but you have to believe in the sauce and, as my mother-in-law would say, not be stingy with the olive oil.