



Spirit & Place

STORIES



It's My Mom's Fault

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SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN PROUD

I'm a foodie. So is my husband. In fact, before we were introduced, my friend said, "He's great, such a nice guy and he loves food, just like you." My reaction surprised me. I suddenly felt insecure. Was my attraction to food that transparent? Maybe so, but that's all right. If nothing else, food arguably led me to my soul mate.

My love for food started as soon as I could stand on a chair, alongside my mom in the kitchen. If she wore an apron, I donned one, too. And when she stole a taste, I immediately helped myself. I spent hours with my mom, looking over her shoulder, helping her turn the pages in the cookbook, cracking the eggs, kneading the dough—anything I could, to take part in the process.

She made most things from scratch and, looking back, I'm not sure how she did it as a part-time working mom. Pie crust never came from a box, spaghetti sauce didn't come from a jar, and we always had homemade soup simmering on the stove on Sunday afternoons. I watched it all come together, yet I'm still mystified about what to do with a ham bone.

My mom's interest in cooking sparked my culinary curiosity, and now I'm committed to engaging my children the same way. While we love going out for breakfast, making homemade buttermilk pancakes on our own griddle is just as fun. I'm carrying forward the tradition of making alphabet-shaped pancakes for my son. I learned that trick from my dad, who prepared my monogrammed hotcakes when I was young. A guaranteed hit, I promise.

Food's also how I connect with my girlfriends. While no one can nail down the exact date we started our cooking club, we know it's been at least seven years. That means we've shared nearly 84 meals—and possibly twice that many bottles of wine. Each month our host picks the menu and prepares the entrée, and the other five ladies tackle the remaining selections to share with the group. We've evolved personally and gastronomically. Five marriages and seven babies later, we have a "most improved" member who now knows cream of tartar isn't found next to the milk.

Keeping a pulse on Indy's local food economy is a favorite pastime for my husband and me. We love to try new, occasionally esoteric, places. With another two weeknights and an unlimited babysitting budget, we could really do some damage. We gravitate towards local restaurants, using food blogs and word of mouth for inspiration.

We love a great meal, but we also like a good story. We always enjoy chatting with the owner of our favorite Thai restaurant. She inevitably gives us obscure ingredients from her kitchen so we can replicate the recipe in ours. Equally charming is the guy who took a risk and opened a Moroccan restaurant in a former mainstay diner downtown. We ate at both recently, and the experience nurtured our tummies and our souls—and we helped sustain local businesses. That's what we like.

As a working mother of two young children, I don't get to indulge in my food hobby as much as I'd like. I begrudge the nights when sandwiches or macaroni and cheese are on our menu, but that's OK. What's important is the fun we have while measuring and mixing, being together and the conversation around our kitchen table. I'm just grateful we have food to eat and that I'm spending time with my three favorite people.

Looking back, I can thank my mom for my preoccupation with food—and for helping me appreciate how food can magically create and strengthen personal and communal ties.

When breast cancer stole her from us 12 years ago at only 51, it took us a while to get through her things. Among other treasures, I got her string of pearls and her high school graduation photo, but what I cherish most are her old recipe cards. Even though they're stained with grease and sticky with sugar, they're in her writing. And, if only for a few fleeting moments, when I make those recipes, I'm back in that kitchen alongside my mom.

I made my mom's legendary baklava recipe a few Christmases ago. I nailed it. She would have been proud.