

2-20-09 Great Food in Difficult Times

Everyone should have an unmarried aunt when they are growing up. They have the time, the patience and the bank account to offer gifts, acts of kindness, words of wisdom and be a role model differing from your parents' which was probably stemmed from necessity. I benefited from two never-married aunts, one on each side. My mother's sister, Helen, was a great bargain hunter, finding suits at Filene's Basement for me and all of my seven siblings. She also offered an artistic sensibility with her beautifully wrapped gifts. My father's sister, Virginia, introduced me to Architectural Digest as an ordinary, expected coffee table item and cooking that she felt was a reference point of purity and excellence compared to my mother's simple offerings borne of the necessity to feed many on a tight budget. What my Aunt Virginia didn't know and I never had the heart to tell her, was that she wasn't a very good cook and my mother was.

Oh, Virginia would attempt to disguise her disdain with a compliment by saying, "I know your mother has to stretch the food by adding milk but eggs taste better when you only add water." Well, even to a kid, this didn't make sense. Water is free but my mother had to pay for the milk added to our scrambled eggs, even if it might be reconstituted powder milk! Virginia also told us the same thing about cocoa. We never told her that her watery eggs and watery cocoa were famous as the worst ever. We let her think that she knew best. And you know what? She gave a gift with comments. She planted an idea with her words. My mother "had to stretch the food". My mother "had to stretch the budget". My mother did that and more and we loved it anyway because her food tasted great!

When you have eaten good tasting food prepared on a budget, chances are good that you have also been shown how to eat a healthy diet. Turning to plant sources of protein as less expensive than animal sources, not only helps the cholesterol levels, thus preventing heart disease but also helps the whole planet by supporting agriculture rather than the time consuming and expensive support of the animals near the top of the proverbial food chain. In an attempt to eat better for less, I decided to revisit some foods I used to eat when I had less.

As a young mother of several young children, I was determined to find ways to get around the roadblocks I faced daily proclaiming such edicts as, "Kate does not and will not eat onions." The solution to that was pretty easy: disguise the onions and don't be caught in the act of disguising while I pulverized them in a blender. It worked every time; that is, until I was caught in the act of disguising and my oldest, Marty, taking me by surprise, asked me what I was making. He probably hoped to hear that I was making a frappe because that was about all most mothers did with blenders back in the day and food processors for the ordinary kitchen did not exist. Instead, he was told that I was mixing the spices for the meatballs so that they would be nice and smooth.

Being a responsible big brother, he passed on the word to the younger siblings that mother was making the meatballs nice and smooth. Having passed that surprise inspection, my courage was fortified to continue and so I added a can of drained kidney beans and whirled away until they were smooth.

Out of the blender and into a bowl, the "spices", the whirled kidney beans and actual Italian spices were added to the ground meat, along with some oatmeal, a couple

eggs and the mixture was formed into meatballs. After cooking, they were added to the simmering tomato sauce, which, of course, had more blended “spices”. While the spices added flavor, the kidney beans added protein, fiber and a smooth texture. Later that day, all the hungry children exclaimed, “These are the best meatballs we’ve ever had!” I smiled outwardly and thanked them for the compliment. Inwardly, I smiled with relief that I had not been found out and concluded, “If it is something good for them, they don’t need every detail and ingredient. I am feeding my family good food and who knows? Maybe I am fostering a palette, too, one that later on will detect ingredients such as onions and kidney beans. I won’t worry about that because by then, they will have learned that they like these things, at least in certain measure and certain foods.”

For me, necessity was certainly the mother of invention. It challenged me to be creative when attempting to meet my goals of feeding my family well without much money. The influence of aunts, and mothers combined with necessity can result in creative cooking providing satisfying and nutritious foods. Isn’t that what we all want? Isn’t that what we all need? To sit around the dinner table with family, knowing that we are eating well, that it is homemade and, of course, that it tastes good.

I hope your life includes many influences when it comes to cooking and tasting foods. When options seem limited, that is when we can draw upon their influences and memories and give a nod of thanks to a people no longer with us but who never left us, either.

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