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Food as Family History

BY JENNIFER MORRISEY

I recently attended a narrative stage discussion on ethnic foods in the Finger Lakes, organized by the NYSCA Upstate Program Development Initiative: A Partnership with the New York Folklore Society. The event, “You are What You Eat,” held at the Auburn Theater, was really enjoyable, and I found the whole experience informative, so I thought I would share my observations and takeaways.

I realize immigration and integration are contentious issues lately, but the fact remains that immigrants shaped our region. From the building of the Erie Canal, to the Utica greens served at restaurants, you don’t have to look hard to find the contribution that immigrants made to the society and culture of our area, and continue to do. I was intensely interested in hearing firsthand stories, and sharing my own family’s immigration story and the ethnic food traditions that have lived on. The Finger Lakes is, much like the rest of the nation, a melting pot, and knowing our family’s unique place in the melting pot is a gift to be celebrated and preserved.

In the time leading up to this event, I thought a lot about my own family history, and I even doubted my “eligibility” to participate in this conversation. I suspected instantly my story would be different from the other participants. Our family has been quick to “Americanize.” My great-grandmother barely spoke English, yet here I am a mere three generations later, with only a few Polish words at my disposal, and a couple of Polish dishes that were always served at holidays and special events. Surely, I knew the participants would come with handwritten recipes, long-running traditions, and stories of family activities, that would make my story look like that of a fourth generation Pole, gripping at whatever shreds of culture and heritage I could scrap together for the sake of preservation.

But let’s face it, that *is* my story, and if we are being entirely honest, it is probably

Polish “Haluski”

- 1 (16-ounce) package egg noodles
- 1/2 cup salted butter
- 1 yellow onion, chopped
- 1 large head cabbage, shredded
- 1/2 lb. kielbasa sausage, quartered, then chopped
- Salt and ground black pepper, to taste

1. Bring a large pot of lightly salted water to a boil. Cook egg noodles in the boiling water, stirring occasionally until cooked through but firm to the bite, about 5 minutes. Drain.
2. Melt butter in a skillet over low heat; cook and stir onion until the onion is softened and butter is golden brown, about 5 to 10 minutes. Add cabbage and kielbasa and toss to coat. Place a lid on the skillet; cook the cabbage kielbasa mixture, stirring occasionally, until cabbage is tender, about 30 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.
3. Remove lid and continue to cook until cabbage begins to brown on the edges, just slightly, 5 to 10 more minutes.
4. Mix noodles and cabbage mixture together in a serving bowl.

a more common story than I have realized. I understood that if I am to share my story with 100 percent honesty, I am the woman who is looking to better understand previous generations of my family and the history of where I come from, with little to go on.

The other participants were Rafael Diaz, a native of Puerto Rico and owner of the restaurant El Morro in Geneva, and Carolyn Elice of Auburn. Elice, an active member of the recently established Cayuga Italian American Organization, had fascinating stories and brought an amazing assortment of foods. Carolyn told stories of making pasta (by hand!) with a pasta board and learning this skill from her mother-in-law. Rafael talked about coming to our area from Puerto Rico to work at a food processor and distributor headquartered in Wayne County, and how he quickly began taking orders for the homemade items he made from scratch for his lunch, and built a business recreating traditional Latino foods.

My story is a little more convoluted. My great-grandfather came to America from Poland in 1910; my great-grandmother followed shortly after, arriving in 1912. They settled in East Rochester, where they grew their family. By 1924, they had seven children. While my great-grandmother was comfortable in her Old World ways and continued to only speak in Polish and cook on a wood stove, my grandmother and her siblings were eager to embrace all things American. Little got passed down in the form of family history for the time period before 1910. In the instability that has been 2016, I found myself yearning for a little security and possibly distraction, and I blissfully dived head first into genealogy to try to piece together the story of a family that so quickly integrated into America, without looking back. While sifting through old documents and hounding family members to look for old pictures is right up my alley, I realize not everyone feels a connection to family history in that medium. Luckily, our family has passed a handful of traditional

recipes down through the generations. Our favorite comfort foods are Polish cabbage rolls, called golumpki, a pan-fried cabbage and egg noodle dish that I can never remember the name of (turns out it is haluski), and potato pancakes, which I rarely make. After attending this event, it occurred to me that food is memory and comfort. It's personal. Food is identity. While we don't have many of the exact details of my ancestors' lives, we can connect through food. Food is family history.

I think there is a lot of emphasis on sharing a prepared dish, but what struck me, even more importantly, was sharing the preparation of the dish. When we share the time spent making the food, we are re-connecting to our past while strengthening current family bonds. Perhaps the single most eye-opening realization for me during the event was that there is no official handing over of the family recipes. In my family and the other participant's recollections,

the passing down of culinary knowledge was much more subtle. We all gathered our recipes and technique simply by observing the process; it was quiet afternoons in grandma's kitchen, lending a helping hand to a parent when traditional family meals and recipes are handed down to children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.


As time goes by and families grow and change, so do the foods they serve, but their essence stays the same. The way I prepare golumpki may change, and, yes, I cut up kielbasa and add it to haluski, so it is more of a skillet meal than a side dish. The dish may change from generation to generation, but the tradition lives on, and the intent to keep them alive and every bit as current as they ever were, when they were made generations ago, is the same.

I was asked if I would write down our family recipes. As a food blogger who has made it my hobby sharing recipes, especially recipes of regional importance, this


is something that has occurred to me. But then there is this other part of me that is hesitant. I had a hard time articulating why a "food blogger" would not want to document her own family recipes, probably because I didn't understand the hesitation myself—that is until I thought about it more. My hesitation to write down these recipes is selfish. When I am making golumpki, I am not thinking about the exact amount of any particular ingredient that goes into the dish. I am thinking "this is the way my mother makes it, and her mother made it." My hope is that future generations will not get caught up in the technical aspects of the recipe, but will instead repeat the motions and the ingredients from their hearts, and not from a piece of paper, and be fully present in the experience. ▼

Jennifer Morrissey is a wife, mother, blogger, and occasional cow chaser. She created and maintains the website Home in the Finger Lakes <www.homeinthefingerlakes.com> where she writes about simple, country living, easy recipes, local history, and life on a family farm in the Finger Lakes.


YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT




Ethnic Food Traditions in the Finger Lakes



Rafael Diaz



Carolynn Elice



Jennifer Morrissey



January 22, 2017 • 2:00 – 5:00 pm
 AUBURN PUBLIC THEATER • 8 EXCHANGE STREET • AUBURN

Narrative stage | Traditional food

Rafael Diaz: Puerto Rican heritage
 Carolynn Elice: Italian heritage
 Jennifer Morrissey: Polish heritage
 Discussion with folklorist Christina Zinni, PhD

Presentation
 Folklorist Hannah Davis

This event is organized in coordination with the Auburn Public Theater as a part of the NYSCLA Upstate Program Development Initiative: A Partnership with the New York Folklore Society.
 New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

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