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The Importance of Sharing Family Recipes

Introduction

At the beginning of the last century, children often grew up near their extended family and developed close relationships with them. Farming families worked, cooked, and ate together. Though they did so out of necessity there was a benefit. Those cultural norms gave the elders an easy way to pass on traditions and wisdom, while building memories and close relationships with the younger members of the family.

In *There Is Always Room for One More at Our Dinner Table : Volga German Stories and Recipes*, Rebecca Nab Young shares stories of the farming families who immigrated to the central plains of the United States from northern Europe in the 1800s. These settlers brought their food practices with them. Family recipes were passed along through the communities and their customs have become a large part of the culture in North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Colorado (Young). There is a strong historical and cultural identity among their descendants.

There have been important cultural shifts since the 1800s. In *A Cultural Connection to the Past: The Importance of Passing Down Family Recipes*, Tobias Roberts reports that in 1800, 94 percent of Americans lived in the country. By 2018 only 20 percent of the population lived in a rural area, and less farmed (Roberts).

Our society is also more mobile than it used to be. Technology advances have enabled communication to move faster, moving the boundaries between work and time off. And since the

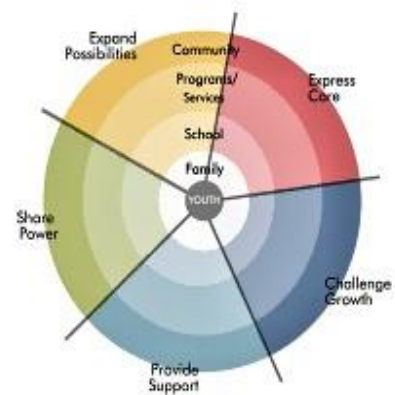
advent of the pandemic, we have experienced significant moves away from the traditional communal practices involving working, cooking, visiting, and eating.

In the forward of *The Best American Food Writing 2020*, Sylvia Killingsworth quotes Michael Pollan in *The Defense of Food*, “What would happen if we were to start thinking about food as less of a thing and more of a relationship?” She says, “He was arguing for a broader, more ecological-- and more cultural view of food. Food is functional, yes, but it is inextricable from what makes us human” (Killingsworth). Sharing food is more than sharing a thing. Sharing our family recipes can be a vehicle to strengthen relationships, create healthy identities, and share our history.

Uses in Strengthening Relationships

With the concern of COVID-19, and social distancing still in practice, people yearn for more personal connections. Parents and students *are* busy, but many realize families need healthy connections and need to connect over more than the telephone. Cooking and eating meals on a regular basis can help develop those connections and strengthen family relationships.

In *Relationships First, Creating Relationships that Help Young People Thrive*, Roehlkepartain, Pekel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales report that children who best navigate maturity are those with strong yet flexible relationship bonds. One of the best ways to develop these strong relationships is spending regular time together. Research suggests that young people need close relationships from many sources as they mature.



Sullivan, & Scales report that children who best navigate maturity are those with strong yet flexible relationship bonds. Image from *Relationships First, Creating Relationships that Help Young People Thrive*. Roehlkepartain, 2017, et, al.

While no one relationship can meet all their needs, close family relationships remain central to a child's health (Roehlkepartain).

In *Why the Family Meal is Important*, Stanford Children's Hospital researchers report that sharing a family meal is important for everyone, but it is especially important in helping young people develop beneficial role-models, close relationships, well-being, and a sense of identity (*Stanford Children's Hospital*). Sharing family recipes meals gives older family members an engaging way to build relationships with the younger generation.

In *Food and Its Meaning for Asylum Seeking Children and Young People in Foster Care*, Kohli, Connolly, and Warman report that evidence from their report suggests "food is related to many aspects of finding sanctuary and negotiating belonging" for people coming into new communities (Kohli). The researchers found that allowing new members to assist with a meal can give them an opportunity to contribute and make connections. Sharing the traditional family dinner can help newcomers to appreciate the food, the family dynamic, and to ease the transition for everyone.

Uses in Developing Identity

Tobias Roberts says culture has always been expressed in food and agriculture guides the ways in which communities share the culture of food and recipes (Roberts). Thrifty and creative cooks have always used regional crops and created nutritious, appealing, and sometimes unique dishes. "In this sense, food was an essential cultural element that bound people together, enforcing a shared sense of identity, and strengthened the sense of community and belonging" (Roberts).

Passing on family recipes also creates a sense of identity as new traditions are created. Preparing, cooking, and eating a feast of family recipes together creates a sense of shared community life. Grandmother or Papa teaching the grandchildren to make the family recipes passes on acquired skills and taste memories. In *Cooking Together: Sharing Culture Through*

Food, Paula Rock says learning new recipes can be a gateway to understanding and appreciating an unfamiliar culture (Rock).

For example, when my husband and I were newly engaged, he took me home to meet his Grandma Katie during the Christmas holidays. I was nervous about fitting in. Katie told me family stories as we followed her recipes and made Christmas dinner together. The food we created that night had been passed on through her family since the late 1800s. Having a beloved grandmother share her history, memories, and funny stories put me at ease and made me feel welcomed.

We continued to make those family recipes with our children while they were growing up, teaching them the family history and cooking techniques that Grandma Katie taught us. We still make these recipes with our grandchildren, passing on the family stories and heritage.

Baroke

This main-dish meal, pictured at the right, is a family favorite. It can be found in many communities of German-Russian heritage. You may find this dish called Beirocks, Bierochs, Runza, or Pierogi.

There are variations, but the basic recipe includes fried cabbage, onions, and hamburger wrapped in homemade yeast bread. Grandma Katie added mashed-potatoes to her bread dough and sausage to the meat mixture.

Baroke incorporates a lot of steps, so it is a perfect recipe for a family to make together. If a group of people divide the tasks they will go quickly.

Makes 12 baroke

Time:

Dough: 2-3 hours

Filling: 1 hour

Baking: 15-20 minutes.



Freshly baked baroke. Picture by Sylvia Long

Ingredients

Filling

- 1 pound of hamburger
- 1 pound of sausage
- 1 onion
- 1 head of red cabbage
- ½ head of green cabbage
- 1 Tablespoon of garlic powder
- 1 Tablespoon of salt

Potato-Yeast Dough

- 12 cups white flour (or as much as needed)
- 5 cups warm water (110 degrees F / 45 degrees C)
- 3 (.25 ounce) packages active dry yeast
- 2 cups of prepared instant mashed potatoes
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- ¼ cup of vegetable cooking oil
- 4 Tablespoons of melted butter to brush on top of the baroke

Directions for the Baroke Filling

1. Fry the hamburger and sausage together in a large skillet until it is browned.
2. Strain the meat and set it aside.
3. Chop the onion and the cabbage. Put the cabbage, onion, sausage, garlic powder and cooked meat together into a large pot with a heavy bottom.
4. Cook the mixture on medium heat, stirring until the cabbage and onion are steamed through with the meat (pictured at right).
5. Season it to taste.



Baroke filling of red and green cabbage, onions, hamburger, and sausage. Picture by Sylvia Long

Directions for the Dough

1. Mix warm water, yeast, and 1 teaspoon sugar in a large mixing bowl. Add 7 cups of white bread flour and stir to combine. Cover with a dishtowel and let set for 30 minutes, or until the yeast starter has proofed (is foaming).
2. Mix in oil, salt, cooled mashed potatoes and remaining sugar. Stir in small amounts of flour until you cannot add more (should be about 2-4 cups). The dough should hold together and be easily handled.
3. Sprinkle flour on a flat surface and begin kneading the bread. Sprinkle flour on the bread as you turn and knead it, until it begins to pull away from the flat surface. It is ready when the bread is elastic but not sticky. This process may take an additional 1-2 cups of

flour.

4. Grease the bowl and turn your dough into it. Cover it with a dishtowel and let rise in a warm place until it has doubled (30 minutes to one hour).
5. Punch the dough down and divide it into thirds. Roll it out until it is ¼" thick. Cut the dough into 6-8" squares for the filling. Continue to roll out the dough until you have 12 squares of dough.

Directions for Assembling and Baking

1. Lay out two baking sheets. Spray them with cooking spray.
2. Spoon 1/3 cup of filling into the middle of each square of dough.
3. Take opposite corners of dough and pinch them together, as in the illustration shows to the right. Pinch the remaining edges together, making a 'dough package'.
4. Place the 'dough package' edges side down on the baking sheet.
5. Brush the tops of the baroke with melted butter.
6. Bake at 350 degrees F (175 degrees C) for 15-20 minutes. Serve hot.



Pinch together the corners of the yeast dough, then firmly pinch together the long edges, sealing them.
Picture by Sylvia Long

Notes: Leftover filling is great eaten alone. Cool any leftover baroke on wire racks before storing them so the bottoms don't get soggy. Baroke freeze and reheat beautifully.

Varenyck

Varenyck (shown prepared in the picture to the right) is homemade noodle dumplings that are filled with fruit, cream cheese, or vegetables (usually potatoes), then boiled. This dish is said to have originated from Russia and is also called vareniki. We usually fill them with the fruit filling you put in pies.

The first time I experienced these Grandma Katie and my husband's mom were making them for dinner. I was delighted they had the tradition of making dessert for dinner!

Makes 6 pastries

Time: about 1 hour

Ingredients

- 1 stick of butter
- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 2 cans of premium pie filling (Cherry, Apple, and Strawberry Rhubarb are our favorites!)



Varenyck (vareniki) is homemade noodle dumplings that are filled with fruit. We fill them with cherries and serve them with melted butter. Image from Little Broken

2 cups of flour
3-4 medium eggs

Directions

Creating the dough

1. Pour pie filling into a strainer and let the excess liquid drain as you are assembling the noodle dough.
2. Mix flour and salt in a mixing bowl.
3. Make a well in the middle of the flour.
4. Crack the eggs, one at a time into the well, mixing each with a fork before cracking the next one.
5. When all of the eggs are incorporated, roll it until you have a ball of noodle dough that is elastic, but not sticky. If it is, sprinkle flour over it, incorporating it, until the stickiness is gone.

Rolling out the dough and forming the varenyck

1. Roll the dough out about 1/4th inch thick. Cut the dough into six-inch squares.
2. Spoon the drained fruit into the middle of each square (1/3 cup per square).
3. Pinch the corners of the dough together, then pinch the remaining sides, sealing all of the edges tightly.

Cooking the Varenyck

1. Set the oven to the lowest setting to warm it.
2. Carefully slide the varenyck, one at a time, into the boiling water. Cook for 8-10 minutes.
3. Take the finished varenyck out with a slotted spoon and set them in a covered bowl in the warm oven until all the varenyck are done.
4. Melt the stick of butter and pour it into a bowl.
5. Serve the varenyck with warm melted butter poured on them.

Notes: These make fabulous leftovers, warmed in the microwave or a skillet.

Potato Dumpling Soup

Potato dumpling soup was a staple at Grandma Katie's in the winter. Potatoes, eggs, flour, and milk were plentiful on farms. This soup was inexpensive to make, so many families had it for dinner during hard times. The fragrance of this soup is deeply evocative of the Christmas I first met Katie and is a favorite comfort food on wintery nights.

Makes 10 servings

Time: 1 hour

Ingredients

4-6 medium potatoes, peeled and cubed into 3-inch pieces
4 large eggs, slightly beaten
1 large onion cut into small pieces
2 cups all-purpose flour
2 cups of milk
1 cup of instant mashed potatoes (optional, for thickening).
3-5 Tablespoons of butter
3 - 4 teaspoons of dried parsley
1/2 teaspoon of pepper
Salt to taste

Directions

1. Rinse, peel, and cube the potatoes.
2. Put the potatoes into cool water until you cook them.
3. Chop the onion and sauté it in butter, slowly on low heat.
4. Fill the pot 2/3rds full of hot water and set it to boil.
5. When the water boils carefully pour the potatoes into the water and set the timer for 8 minutes.
6. Put the flour in a large mixing bowl and make a well in the middle of the flour .
7. Crack one egg at a time into the middle of the flour, beating each in before adding another.
8. When all the eggs are added the flour should be incorporated, and the dough should not be sticky. If it's sticky sprinkle a little flour into the dough, rolling carefully, until the stickiness disappears.
9. Boil the potatoes for 8 minutes, then start dropping spoon size balls of the noodle dough into the boiling water.
10. Cook until all of the noodles are floating, then add the milk and butter. Stir and serve the soup hot.

Notes: If you feel the soup is thin, you can thicken it. Take 2 cups of the soup broth and put it into a large serving bowl. Slowly pour in instant mashed potato flakes, while you whisk it briskly, until the broth is very thick but still liquid. Whisk the thickened broth back into the hot soup. Potato Dumpling soup is good served hot with a pat of butter on top.

These recipes have become our children's comfort foods and their friend's favorite meals. They are considered our family's specialties in the community and are often requested at celebrations. The practice of preparing, cooking, and eating them together has created a family ritual that embodies our shared culture and memories.

Uses in Remembering History

Everyone has a meal that floods them with memories whenever they smell or taste it. Some may talk about learning how to make the meal like momma did, but how many take the time to learn how to cook it? How many go to the time and trouble to parse out exactly how much "just enough flour" is?

Taking the time to teach or share a family recipe takes a sense of history, purpose, time, and planning. In this harried society it can seem like that effort is more than it might be worth. But Cheryl Tan tells us, in *Family Recipes: Our Ties to the Past, if we Preserve Them*, that preserving each treasured recipe is a worthwhile endeavor (Tan).

When a family recounts the story of grandma putting *one teaspoon of sugar* and *one cup of baking powder* into the applesauce cake, we laugh together, making a communal memory, and it is a chance to share an amusing piece of family wisdom about the importance of slowing down. When we recreate our aunt's famous dessert, we've saved another piece of history.

Taking the time to collect and commemorate treasured recipes can also restore a sense of hope after a family goes through a difficult time. In *Commemoration through Cookbooks: A Recipe for Remembering Place and People After Disaster*, Zavar and Hann say that cooking meals can provide comfort after enduring difficulty. The familiar activity allows a breath to remember cooking practices, stories, and tastes of more peaceful times (Zavar).

These food artifacts pay tribute to heritage for an individual or group, and "preserve memories and links to the past while aiding in individual and community recovery" (Zavar).

Recipes and foods passed on to commemorate our memories are not just something to eat. They are celebrations of what we've recovered and are building (Zavar). These foods become the bridges we build for ourselves and others into the past and future.

Conclusion

Having strong relationships, meaningful memories, and a sense of camaraderie and belonging are ingredients we all aspire to incorporate into our own and our loved ones lives. Research has demonstrated that regular family meals are an important component of developing role-models, passing on values, investing in communal sharing, a sense of history, and developing emotional well-being.

Sharing family recipes can be a way for us to share more than simply food. The choice to cook cherished recipes at a family celebration can be an opportunity for us to reach out into our community and strengthen relationships. Taking the time to learn to create an old dish can help us understand and assimilate our culture, creating a healthy sense of identity. Collecting the history of a dish, the backstory for a food practice, ingredients, or the funny story that goes with the curious recipe helps us pass on history, techniques, traditions, and wisdom. We can use our family recipes as a path to strengthen relationships, create healthy identities, and share our history. When time is taken to pass on family recipes, an investment is made into the future well-being of the next generation.

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