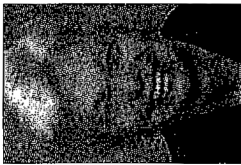


When we honor our traditions, we nourish our souls

3-4-09

Our family and friends gathered last week in Detroit to say goodbye and to celebrate the life of one of my most avid readers, my mom. You may have seen the obituary in the Reflector for Blanche Kolasa. Both healthy food and cultural traditions played a big role in our family. I hope you will indulge me in a little reflection.

Mom had a Bachelor of Science degree in home economics and ensured that our meals met the Food Guide Pyramid of the day, called the Basic 7 Food Groups. Although our parents encouraged us to be patriotic Americans, mom celebrated our Polish heritage with traditional foods and songs throughout the year.



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The priest who said the funeral Mass said this was a homecoming for mom, and it was for the children as well as we came from Tucson, Atlanta, Durham and Greenville. The grandchildren flew in from Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Cary, Carrboro, Athens, Ga., and Statesboro, Ga.

My brother George and I arrived ahead of the rest, and shortly after the arrangements were completed, we made a beeline to the Wawel Restaurant at the Polish Cultural Center. It would be like a Pitt County kid run-

ning to Parker's or the Dixie Queen for their first meal after being away.

It's true you can now buy fresh kielbasa at Fresh Market and Mrs. T's pierogi in the freezer section of most stores, but they just don't taste authentic. So, on the cold and sleety Thursday night, George told the wait staff, "No need for a menu, I come here for the pierogi and potato pancakes."

The waitress looked a bit surprised and said, "You want two entrees?"

Yes, he was in need of comfort food. I made a mental note that I needed to teach George's family how to make them. Mom's were best, and I can make them almost as good as she did.

I looked at the specials for Lent and settled on Lake Perch. Of course, it

comes only fried, but no one there knew I was a nutritionist, so I indulged.

We had meatless Fridays growing up, although it was more often potato and cheese pierogi or blintzes. Mom refused to cook Detroit River fish since the odor would remain for a week.

This funeral trip was quite different than when dad passed away 16 years ago. At that time, we gathered at our family home and mom's church friends, neighbors and relatives took command of the kitchen and made sure we were fed and comforted with many traditional and contemporary

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dishes. But the family home is gone, as are many of those women who knew how to prepare traditional funeral feasts. So this time we stayed at a hotel and ate in restaurants, creating new family traditions.

Like many in the United States, our family food habits have changed. There are many recipes in the family cookbook that are never prepared for lack of knowledge, skill or preference. Years ago, I wrote a chapter called "I won't cook kielbasa if you won't cook turnip greens" for a nutrition anthropology text. I described how individuals change their eating patterns throughout their lives, especially as they include persons of other traditions into their lives. The title was inspired by my graduate school roommates holding their noses while I breathed deeply the first time I cooked my grandmother's garlicky smelling fresh kielbasa. I reacted in kind the first time they prepared and seasoned greens.

I am writing this as we drive along the Pennsylvania turnpike, and I don't think my husband of Irish-American tradition is savoring the smells wafting from the trunk of the car. I had made a trip into Hamtramck, where the butcher and the baker still greet you in Polish. The cooler is packed with foods we can't buy in Pitt County: Detroit city chicken (cubes of seasoned pork and veal skewered on a wooden stick); kiszka (liver and buckwheat blood sausage); meat, potato, farmers' cheese and kraut-filled pierogi (dumplings). There's also creamed herring, seven-layer cake (a torte with white dense layers alternat-

ing with a special chocolate icing), crusciki (angel wings), and jam-filled cookies, cherry cordial and honey wine. My husband will eat some, but not all, of what I consider to be delicacies.

My book chapter also describes how we learn new foods as we relocate to other areas of our country or ingredients become available. Mom never cared for Mexican food, but after she moved to Tucson she accepted the enchiladas prepared by her comfortkeeper of Hispanic origin. Mom later told me she didn't really like them, but they were the closest thing she could get to a cheese blintz. Some habits don't change.

While most of the residents at Sterling House of Greenville, where mom has lived about a year, enjoyed sweet tea as their beverage of choice, a tall glass of cold milk was mother's. Thank goodness for Panera's bear claws or I might have had to bake. Mom loved rich breakfast pastries, so the good Southern biscuit was never an acceptable choice.

Did I mention mom had a sweet tooth? I think that trait rises above cultural backgrounds. I was comparing the entries in my mom's family cookbook with that of my best friend who hails from Fallston, N.C. The dessert section was the largest section in both books.

In other columns, I have written about honoring our traditions while nourishing our souls. Times like this reinforce that food is more than just something to eat.

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