

The Way You Eat Spaghetti

I still remember it hanging on my grandma's fridge: a clipping from an old newspaper comic section. It was the notorious Herman, with his large nose and bulging gut, holding an entire pot of spaghetti noodles upside down over someone's dinner plate. The caption read: "Pull out as much as you want." Every time my mom saw it, the corners of her eyes would crinkle and I would hear her periodically chuckling to herself for the next half hour.

Dad was the Herman in my family, and his dad before him.

My two older brothers and I stumbled into the entranceway of our green and white farmhouse after we finished our chores in the barn each evening. Whenever Mom made spaghetti, Dad would serve it.

He pulled the lid off the black pot and dipped into it with the noodle ladle. "How much do you want Katie-Lynn?" He asked, already spilling the ladle's guts all over my plate.

"That's a little too much," I said.

He pulled off a few noodles. "Good?"

I shrugged as he continued to serve everyone else. The noodle ends were spilling off the edge of my plate and onto the table, so I gathered them up one by one.

I saw Mom, across from me, pursing her lips to keep from laughing.

She had told us many times about how, when she was dating Dad, Grandpa would dump spaghetti noodles on everyone's plates in the most untidy way possible and slap the tomato sauce on top.

Mom, on the other hand, was the type who would spend hours perfecting the presentation and creaminess of a cheesecake or a tangy rich lemon posset.

I separated my noodles into halves and sprinkled Kraft's parmesan cheese over them.

Dad dumped some noodles on my oldest brother's plate. "Did you see what Martin was proposing today?"

My brain zoned out as soon as a political leader was mentioned, which was every meal with my dad.

I hoped he would forget to give me tomato sauce in his preoccupation with world events. The warm noodles with the grated parmesan granules was, alone, a ten-year-old's heaven. Dad came back around with the sauce, his dark eyes flashing with disagreement over Martin's next political step. He slapped tomato sauce onto one of my noodle piles.

Mom's shoulder's shook. He didn't seem to notice how he turned the meal into ambiguity.

My dad and grandpa were onto something though. The history of spaghetti has always been ambiguous. Was it the Chinese who let Marco Polo into the secret of noodles? Was it Marco Polo who brought the idea back to Venice in 1298? What about before that? David Alexander explores the evolution of pasta in *The Geography of Italian Pasta*. Whether it was the mass amount of wheat produced in Sicily during the time of Nero in A.D. 62 and the need for preservation through dried dough or whether it was the unification of Italy under Giuseppe Garibaldi through the use of the wheat in one section of Italy and tomatoes in another section, pasta has held a role in culture across the globe.

Now, when I'm in the middle of frying mushrooms and cooking ground beef for a quiet spaghetti dinner on a Sunday night with my introverted roommate, three red-faced boys show up at the door behind my curly-haired, extraverted roommate. She slides into the kitchen, curls flying. "We're home, Kate!"

Their faces are spotted with mud from their 17.5 km run through mud and obstacles at Tough Mudder. "We are quite hungry!"

I wink at my quiet roommate and dump another box of noodles into the steaming silver pot, pull three sausages out of the freezer, and stick another loaf of garlic bread in the oven.

I learn right away that the tallest skinniest boy makes a lot of lame puns. The dark-featured boy talks the slowest of the three and has a knack for nerdy, irrelevant facts. The broad-shouldered boy is a living academic textbook.

I stir Catelli's tomato and basil sauce into the browned ground beef while the boys find piano stools or office chairs to bring to the kitchen table.

Everyone serves themselves and the tallest, skinniest boy is half-way done his food by the time I have properly sprinkled parmesan on my plate. I roll the flexible noodles around and around my fork, the tomato sauce and fried mushroom pieces intertwined. It tastes like I'm ten again. The warm noodles settle in my stomach like peace. The sauce is plain, with the exception of the spicy Italian sausage.

The boys start on second servings and I continue to wrap the spaghetti politely around my fork and dab at my mouth with a napkin.

I remember how my mom gently pats my dad on the arm when he's pre-occupied with his thoughts and starts eating too fast. Maybe her laughter was really more about the man she married than the way he served food. He undressed spaghetti right before our eyes and showed us that he is a 'what you see is what you get' kind of guy.

I look around the table. Neat piles of noodles. Messy piles of noodles. Clean faces.
Sauce-covered lips.

Six personalities defined with a pile of noodles and a pan of sauce.