



# Kid's TABLE



## The Ritual of the Holiday Meal: A memory that binds

By Rosemarie Perla

*Saturday movie night with popcorn, Lighting candles each Sabbath night, going to cut down a Christmas tree each December...*

What are the memories that you can recall from childhood? Some might include family rituals: those events that mark a time, place, space and memory. Consistently repeated year after year, rituals have a purpose: celebrations, holidays, or a time for just plain fun. With shifts and changes in our 21st century world, rituals help our children find and keep a sense of security and comfort. Children love rituals. They are rich and vivid for children because of three important ingredients: consistency - which promotes learning; contact with significant others - which promotes connections; and contributing - which promotes self-esteem.

My strongest ritual memory is one of my family's Christmas Eve meal. Even though my grandmother died three years ago, our family limps along in keeping this ritual alive. Our dishes cooked from memory are not as good as hers, however, stopping it would be another loss...and so we go on as best we can. This signature night provides each year a ritual that delights the children. There is connection in seeing their relatives and consistency in how we include them in helping to prepare for the event.

One Italian food cookbook author wrote that so much sociology could be read from cuisine. If this is true, the Neapolitan side of my family and their Christmas Eve feast is a study in how chaos transforms into divine creations that form connections that bind. Christmas Eve night is a frenetic, chaotic time of exotic smells combined with the cacophony of adult and children's voices.

My late grandmother would bend over the spent iron stove in my Aunt's basement. Year after year, she poured ingredients into pots, tasting, and serving up a feast of exotic and timeless dishes: baccala salad, fried baccala, stuffed calamari, eel, eggplant parmigiana, stuffed peppers, shrimp and scallops, pasta with calamari, pasta aioli, and stuffed artichokes. If there was room on the table, she made Christmas Eve pasta with olives, pine nuts and tomatoes (recipe follows). The children might turn their noses up to some of the fish dishes, but each of them walks away with full plates.

On this signature night, my grandmother served this cucina italiana that her mother had served and her mother before her. Each year she served these dishes as the year before, and folded into each one was my grandmother's unflinching love. My French friend and fellow food enthusiast, Christine, remarked to me once, "the love energy that we put into food is the most important ingredient of all." I believe that.

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Like a magic cleansing, these foods calm and renew us to start again. On this night, we huddle around this ancient tradition of fish and pasta, as around a campfire in the dark wood. Regardless of the losses that year, the pains, the mistakes, the celebrations and births, we are all on equal footing as family members who look forward to these ritualistic dishes that somehow erase the knocks of life for that night.

This Christmas Eve ritual lights up my old soul with the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches connections and memories of a known antiquity. My children used to help me in the kitchen preparing to bring our contribution to the feast. Now as young adults they recall past Christmas Eves as they join in a rite that is part of our shared history.

Food writer Marlena De Blasi describes how the Neapolitans liken the tomato "to their own hearts, its seeds to their security and its potency to their own sensuality." These Christmas Eve dishes form one of the seeds of my own and my children's security. They were a gift of tradition served each year by an Italian-American woman whose own ballast has always been the love of La Famiglia, no matter what. Her cooking created a blanket of tastes, textures and smells. By combining ingredients like garlic, raisins, pine nuts, capers, lemon, olives, and parsley - she produced an atmosphere that enveloped us in well-being.

What rituals shape your family's security and sense of connection? What traditions speak to your soul and connect you with the larger family of humanity? Perhaps this thought is a jump from enjoying your family's favorite holiday dish! But, these traditions and ritual of our holidays that have survived generations, ocean crossings, losses and regenerations are to be reckoned with and finally given the respect they deserve as an important foundation of family and community life. Look to some of your own family holiday traditions to begin developing your own rituals with your children. In these rituals, we can teach our children about the fabric formed from connection, contribution and consistency offering a comfort which can lead to a stronger sense of themselves in the world.

Finding rituals that connect us to a greater sense of meaning in the world doesn't have to be complicated. In my family, and among my friends, sharing a feast of foods on the holidays, or other days and nights of coming together around a table, is one of our connective acts of love. These traditional foods and rituals, remind us that we can take time above the drone of life to enjoy one another and the dishes infused with love and memory of those who came before us.

## R E C I P E

### *Philomena's Christmas Eve Pasta*

**2-1 lb. cans of whole Italian tomatoes in puree or, 1-1 lb can of crushed tomatoes or whole tomatoes and 1-1 lb can of tomato puree**

**2 large cloves of garlic, chopped**

**2 tablespoon olive oil**

**1 can anchovies\***

**1 cup raisins**

**1/2 cup pine nuts, roasted until light brown in a small skillet**

**1 can medium pitted olives, sliced**

**1 pound Cappelini pasta (Angel Hair)**

*\* Don't allow this ingredient to intimidate you. The anchovies break up into the oil and all that's left is a delicious (and important to the integrity of this pasta) subtle taste. I have served this to those who say they do not like anchovies and they have loved it.*

*Add olive oil to a large skillet or pot. Pour oil from the can of anchovies into the pot. Chop anchovies into small, 1/4-inch slices. Add slices to pot and turn heat on medium. Cook about 5 minutes. Anchovies should start to melt. Add chopped garlic. Cook three minutes longer.*

*Prepare tomatoes by pouring cans of tomatoes into a bowl and squishing them with your hands, breaking up the clumps of tomato into small pieces (If you buy Italian crushed tomatoes you can skip this step). Add the tomatoes to the pot. Cook for ten minutes, stirring occasionally.*

*Add the roasted pine nuts and raisins. You can add pepper here for taste, if you wish. Cook 20 minutes longer.*

*Add sliced olives. Cook sauce for 5 minutes longer. (Do not overcook sauce with olives added, as they will discolor the sauce.)*

*Cook pasta in 4 quarts of salted boiling water. Cook following the pasta box directions...usually 7 minutes or until al dente. Drain pasta.*

*Place 1/3 of sauce into a large, wide pasta serving dish (or you can use individual serving plates). Add pasta and slowly turn the pasta with a pasta server fork to integrate sauce into pasta. Keep adding sauce and turning until all the Capellini absorbs the sauce- so it may take a few minutes to mix sauce and pasta together.*

**Buon Appetitio!**

***Some who have eaten this pasta call it "soul food." I serve it now on any occasion, year-round.***

