

CTREVIEW



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Paprenjak

for my grandmother, Anna Vuković

It would be around midnight when we'd pull into the driveway. We were greeted by my grandmother's round silhouette, framed by the screen door and illuminated from behind. I never failed to be the first out of the car, dashing up the stairs to give her a quick hug before bursting inside, my weary parents lagging behind. Already, I could smell them. They were the same every year, but I needed to see them. Standing on my tiptoes, I reached up to the high kitchen table, lifted the tinfoil lid, and peered inside the dark plate cave at the treasures stacked inside. I was never disappointed.

When the hugging and crying were finished, my grandmother led my parents into the kitchen and seated them at the table. Like all Croatian grandmothers, she insisted that we eat. She lifted me up onto the chair and peeled back the remaining tinfoil; my eyes widened and my parents laughed. "She has your sweet tooth, Philip," my grandmother would say. And later, she would tell me how much I was like her son.

My favorites were her apricot miniature love letters. She simmered the apricot filling from dried apricots and sugar. The next day, she would fold the filling into soft, flaky dough pillows, roll abundantly in sugar, and cut with a zigzag cookie cutter. My mother recalled, "They'd about melt in your mouth." But my mother's favorites were *sezis*, a traditional Croatian cookie made from buttery dough dipped in egg whites and coated in chopped walnuts, with strawberry preserves sandwiched inside.

Grandma Vuković always had batches of cookies already made before we arrived. She stored them in the cold garage in a big square breadbox to keep them fresh. When I thought that there couldn't be any more cookies left, Grandma would bring out another plate. With all the relatives coming and going, they would inevitably disappear. Amazingly, enough leftovers remained for her to convince us to take some for the road. We obliged her without protest. They were usually gone by the time we reached home, consumed during the long drive back from Ohio to Minnesota.

I was fortunate enough to be allowed to watch her cook, although she usually kept us all out of the kitchen and refused any help. I remember peeking around the corner and watching her plump body sway back and forth against the countertop as she rolled the dough for homemade noodles, the

squeaking rolling pin and her sharp exhales forming a rhythmic melody as she worked. The kneading looked like the most fun, and I yearned to try it. I would watch in awe as her strong, pudgy fingers worked the dough into submission, squeezing out the last air bubbles and flour lumps until the consistency was smooth. Once, she saw me and invited me in. She showed me how to knead the dough so that it would roll out nicely. I remember her firm, able hands clasp around my spindly little fingers when I poked through the dough. "Softer," she said.

The noodles were mixed into tomato or chicken soup, which was usually served with other dishes for dinner or as a stand-alone for lunch. Sometimes, she substituted *knedles* for noodles. *Knedles* are made by dropping large blobs of plain dough into boiling water. I loved fishing through the soup for the *knedles* after they were cooked, marveling at their irregular shapes and sizes. Cooking and eating were adventures in my grandmother's kitchen. While my parents discouraged me from playing with my food, my grandmother smiled when I stacked the *knedles* on the edge of the large soup bowl like displaced islands from a red sea. I think she liked seeing so much joy come from one bowl of soup.

My grandmother came to America in the early 1900s when Croatia was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and her cooking reflected this union of Germanic and Slavic cultures, a blend of spices and sweetness.

For breakfast, she would make Croatian *palačinkas*. Thicker than French crepes, these pancakes were slicked in butter and lined with jam. I loved her strawberry jam, full of sugar and calories, not like my mother's low-sugar preserves. My mother asked her for the recipe, but my grandmother never measured ingredients. She estimated, she tasted, she tested. It never failed to come out just right. My mother, always exacting, needed the measurements down to the last grain of salt and prodded my grandmother to convert her estimates into quantitative amounts. Furthermore, my mother's measured version also called for substitutions. Her recipe substituted margarine for butter, wheat flour for white, Eggbeaters for eggs, and Smucker's low-sugar spread for real jam.

My grandmother learned to cook from her mother, who ran a boarding house for men in Dayton, Ohio. She cooked for all of them, including her

children, using Old World recipes. My grandmother would tell us about her life, sometimes in gruesome detail. I heard about her sister and her taking turns with the chicken paprikash. An old stump recalled the memory of their bodies long after their heads were gone. A bowl of soup, into which she steeped the vegetables, was "flavorful."

My grandmother's most unforgettable one that I could make in my Manhattan closet, but for one obstacle: I don't like the aromatic potency. *Kraut Fleckla* is made by sautéing shoe leather, but tastes delicious. I remember my father and wondering how anyone could eat it, and my father made me taste it, and I learned to eat it before making a judgment. On a grandmother's handwritten recipe card, it said: "eat it before the meal, as the flies are terrible."

My grandmother came to America as a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a blend of Germanic and Slavic cultures, a blend of staple dishes was *gurken salat*, a traditional dish of sliced cucumbers and vinegar, oil, salt, and sugar. Cucumbers had bathed in salt for an hour, and I was to be amazed at how much water she squeezed out with her bare hands. "Why do you squeeze it out?" I was asking. My grandmother answered, "It has to be soaked in." It had never occurred to me that it was by vinegar and oil. That simple salad was a tradition. My grandmother estimated that what is taken away must be replaced. She said, "It disrupts the mixture. You have to feed it." I learned to eat it before making a judgment.

My father loved her *sarmas*. My mother loved cabbage in the summer, soak them in vinegar, and jars until winter. Two months of fermentation.

children, using Old World recipes and cooking styles she learned in Croatia. My grandmother would tell us about how she learned these traditional arts, sometimes in gruesome detail. I had nightmares after she told us a story about her sister and her taking turns cutting off the chickens' heads to make chicken paprikash. An old stump served as the chopping table. She vividly recalled the memory of their bodies continuing to run around the backyard long after their heads were gone. After that, I could never eat her chicken soup, into which she steeped the whole chicken neck in the broth to make it "flavorful."

My grandmother's most unforgettable dish, *Kraut Fleckla*, is an easy one that I could make in my Manhattan kitchen, which fits squarely into a closet, but for one obstacle: I don't think my neighbors would appreciate its aromatic potency. *Kraut Fleckla* is made from a sliced head of cabbage, which is then fried in lard for several hours. It has a distinctive smell, like burning shoe leather, but tastes delicious. I remember it wafting out from the kitchen and wondering how anyone could eat something that smelled so bad. My father made me taste it, and I learned that you have to use many senses before making a judgment. On a green page of stenographer's notebook, my grandmother's handwritten recipe ends with the caution: "This is a winter meal, as the flies are terrible."

My grandmother came to America in the early 1900s, when Croatia was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and her cooking reflected this union of Germanic and Slavic cultures, a blend of spices and sweetness. One of her staple dishes was *gurken salat*, a traditional German recipe, made of thinly sliced cucumbers and vinegar, oil, salt, pepper, and chopped onion. After the cucumbers had bathed in salt for an hour, they were pressed by hand. I used to be amazed at how much water she could squeeze out of the cucumbers with her bare hands. "Why do you squeeze out all the water?" I remember asking. My grandmother answered, "To make room for the vinegar and oil to soak in." It had never occurred to me that the water was really being replaced by vinegar and oil. That simple salad taught me the principle of proportion. My grandmother estimated things perfectly, because she understood that what is taken away must be replaced; too little or too much of anything disrupts the mixture. You have to feel, not measure, the balance.

My father loved her *sarmas*. My grandmother would buy perfect heads of cabbage in the summer, soak them in salt brine, and cure them in sterilized jars until winter. Two months of fermentation later, she would take out each

leaf as if it were a piece of fine cloth and stuff it with a mixture of meat and rice. Each little cabbage pocket was so flavorful, as if it had been roasted for days. I never realized then how much love she put into her cooking or how early she would wake up to prepare meals for us. Sometimes, a soft grating or clanking pan would wake me, but I usually fell back into sleep. In my dreams, I imagined Santa coming down her chimney with his bag of gifts brushing against the brick or his sleigh skis landing on the roof with a soft clank.

Her most impressive meal was Christmas dinner, simply because her choice dishes culminated into a symphony of seemingly incompatible flavors. Turkey, roasted to perfection, was served alongside creamed carrots, *gurken salat*, buttery mashed potatoes, cauliflower with cheese sauce, and celery sticks filled with pineapple cream cheese. She always managed to squeeze in a plate of cookies before we attempted the arduous task of ascending the stairs.

Dinner in the kitchen was impossible with so many relatives, so we migrated to the basement and ate together at the long island on stools. This was especially advantageous for me, because it allowed me to sneak into grandpa's workshop, where interesting gadgets and gizmos lurked. I was drawn to grandma's washboard. I ran my fingers down it, and I loved the way they jumped over the grooves and vibrated if I did it quickly enough and the way it made sound. She only did laundry by hand, and her washboard was worn from years of use. It was only in her later years that she acquiesced to a washing machine at my dad's insistence, when she became too frail to venture downstairs.

After my grandmother died at age ninety-six, the desire to explore my roots intensified. So much culture and memory died with her, despite my attempts to make *palatinka* and *gurken salat*. A six-week summer language immersion program in Croatia revived smells and tastes from my childhood. My friend Ivana brought me to her home in Zagreb; her mother cooked for us and spoke to me in Croatian. She made traditional *tevapčiti*, a version of spiced sausage, and fresh vegetables on the grill. Everything I ate there was pure, untainted. When I told her family that it was such a luxury to eat meat that is free of hormones and preservatives, her father commented, "This meat? The pig was just walking around this morning. That's how fresh." I smiled and tried not to picture it.

A tour around the capital city provided the link I'd been looking for between Croatian culture and the food I loved. At the end of the tour, we

were given *paprenjak*, a traditional Croatian paper with a straw bow, and on the story of *paprenjak*:

Pepper biscuit, traditionally Croatian history: its ingredients: pepper, a rather self-contradictory biscuit its characteristic sweetness is the flavour of Croatia's history. In most recent time, foreign influence for this land, which combines the best in ideal proportions. The pepper. Now when we are both qualities of this traditional rich flavor.

Embodied in this biscuit was the understanding of my grandmother's principles, and the rich sweetness and spice of cooking and life.

were given *paprenjak*, a traditional Croatian biscuit. It was packaged in brown paper with a straw bow, and on the back of the wrapper was a story. Here is the story of *paprenjak*:

Pepper biscuit, traditionally made in Croatia, is not unlike Croatian history: its ingredients include honey, walnuts, and pepper, a rather self-contradictory combination, which gives the biscuit its characteristic sweet-peppery flavor. And this, indeed, is the flavour of Croatia's history. Throughout history, until the most recent time, foreign invaders and aggressors have reached for this land, which combines Central Europe and the Mediterranean in ideal proportions. They were after the honey, leaving us the pepper. Now when we are finally on our own, we can enjoy both qualities of this traditional biscuit and all the nuances and rich flavor.

Embodied in this biscuit was the secret I'd been searching for. I finally understood my grandmother's principles of balance, her mastery of proportion, and the rich sweetness and spice with which she blessed us in both cooking and life.