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English 1550

Memory in a Burn

Upon walking into my Nana and Papa's house on the morning of Christmas Eve, I notice my grandmother standing in the kitchen ready and waiting to begin the preparation of that evening's dinner. I spot a few stacks of newspaper piled beside the stove, as well as some pots and pans ready for use. Because we will be frying fish, called smelts, along with friti, which is similar to a sugar donut, we use the newspapers to protect the surrounding walls of the stove from any splashing grease. As we tape up the paper around the stove, I peer out the window and into the backyard.

Outside, I catch glimpse of the cold winter day with many clouds above us. Snow falls to the ground slowly, and then a little faster. The snow usually will not stick to the ground on this day in northeastern Ohio, but I still watch the falling snow with hopes of a white Christmas. As we stand inside the warm kitchen, the colored lights of the Christmas tree in the family room comfort us as we begin to cook. The smell of orange peels and cinnamon fills the house with an alluring aroma. My Nana boils them in a pot of water on the stove in order to help cover the smell of the cooking oil.

Following the same pattern of work year after year might sound a little redundant, but I call it tradition. My family is Italian, so every year at Christmas time we follow certain traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. These are all events that I look forward to happening and enjoy participating in each year. We eat seven different kinds of fish for our Christmas Eve dinner. Now, some of these fish are the same types every year, such as smelts and calamari, while others change based on the new recipes that my dad decides he wants to try. My dad always likes to mix the new recipes with our traditional foods.

Everyone has a job. Just about every member in my family has been taught something to do each year for the tradition to continue. My parents and older brother spend time cooking at my house, while my younger brother and I help out at my Nana and Papa's house. This tradition is all very important to my family, so we always make sure that everything gets completed to the best of our abilities. Sometimes, all of the work is stressful, but it remains a significant aspect with my family. This tradition holds an important place in my life, and I find this time to be irreplaceable. I am never at home on the morning of Christmas Eve. My place is at my grandparent's house, helping my Nana prepare some of the foods. We work from early morning until the afternoon so that we finish each task for the evening.

When I was younger, every event on Christmas Eve took place solely at my Nana and Papa's house. I didn't know much about what went on with cooking the food, just that everyone was always together. Everyone in my family used to go over my grandparents' house for dinner. We would all gather in their dining room and sit around the table, which was always very full. As my cousins, brothers, and I grew up, that room started to get very crowded.

Because my Nana and Papa were getting older and everyone was growing up, we decided to move the holiday dinner celebration to my house. We have a larger dining room that we all fit in comfortably, so it was a welcomed change. Most of the food preparation has also moved to my house because it was just too much for my grandmother to do by herself. My mom, along with the help of my older brother and dad, now does a great deal of work in our own kitchen to get ready for the Christmas Eve dinner. To this day, though, a full morning's worth of work is still spent with me at my grandparents' house. Because I spend so much time in my Nana's kitchen on this day, I do not know much about what actually goes on at my house. I leave in the morning with my mom in the kitchen and then return home to find food made and the table set.

Back at my grandparents' house, we need to prepare the fish and the dough before we can actually start making the food for our Christmas dinner. We cover the dough with plastic bags so that it rises and becomes easier for us to use when the time comes. The fish, which is usually about three inches

in length, all need to be cleaned before we fry them. In order to save time, we usually do all of this work on the day prior.

On the night before Christmas Eve, I go over my grandparents' house where we use the kitchen that they have in the basement to clean the fish. Like many older homes of Italian families, they have two kitchens. One is located on the main floor, and the other is below. When we clean the fish, we use scissors to cut it from tip to tail. My grandmother showed me how to do this a few years ago and now it is something easily done. We remove the spine of the fish and also the other unwanted portions of it. I have to make sure that all of the fins of the fish are also removed.

When I first started learning how to clean the fish, I was not thrilled. I did not want to rip open a smelly fish, but I did it anyway. This was a part of our tradition, and I felt that it was necessary for me to learn. I now have no problem whatsoever in doing it. I can clean the fish without a second thought, finishing them up fast. After all of the fish are cleaned, we leave them sit open in order to dry. The fact that I do so much with the fish is a little bit ironic, though, due to the fact that I do not particularly like to eat fish. I do, however, try each of the seven on Christmas Eve anyway.

Generations ago, the cleaning of the smelts did not happen to this extent. The older generations would just fry the whole fish and eat them bones and all. My Nana started cleaning the fish in this way shortly after marrying my grandpa. He would never eat the smelts when they were whole, so my grandma added the fish cleaning to our tradition. Traditions change over the years, but every edition holds just as much value as the rest.

In order to prepare this fish, I first have to make the batter for it. This batter is made with a few scoops of flour, an egg or two, and black pepper. Nothing is ever actually measured out; you just have to know what it is supposed to look like. Every year that I make this batter, I have to check with my Nana to ensure that she approves of the consistency.

“Add a little more flour,” she tells me. “It needs to be a little thicker.”

I do this and then ask her, “How's that look?”

She then tells me, "It looks good. Let's get started!"

We then take the fish and dip it into the batter. I have to make sure that both sides are coated but do not have too much of the batter on them. If they are not completely covered, the oil will splash out when they are placed into the pan. I was always taught to fry the fish evenly in the pan until each side was a golden color and then to remove the fish and place them on a rack to cool.

"Be careful," Nana says as I begin to fry the fish. "The oil is very hot and if it splashes out you will get burned." She tells me this with concern for my safety. This is something always said and well known to me, but I still managed to get burned last Christmas Eve.

I was frying the fish just as I always do, but the oil can be a little sporadic sometimes. I placed the fish into the oil and heard a loud pop. The burning hot oil hit both of my wrists, which forced me to drop the kitchen utensils. My grandma stopped what she was doing and rushed over to find out what had happened.

"Are you okay?" she asked with concern.

"It's not that bad." I assured her.

I had small oil burns going down both of my arms. They looked like a bunch of small little dots sprayed out across my wrists. These burns only hurt for about a second, and then I was off to finishing the task at hand. They were not serious burns at all, but my grandma still worried as I finished working.

When all of the fish have been fried and placed on the rack to cool, we start working with the friti dough. By this time, the dough is nice and easy to work with. We remove the plastic bags that are covering the trays of dough and begin working. My little brother and younger cousins, who are of middle school ages, help with this part of the preparation. They like helping to make these donuts, so over the past years my grandma and I have been showing them how to form the dough. Before they begin, either my Nana or I will remind them of the friti making process by showing them how to make one as an example.

When I was little, my grandma taught me how to shape the dough as soon as I was old enough to understand. I was so excited to learn how to make the friti because I always loved helping her in the kitchen. Just as I was excited then, I look forward to the passing on of the tradition now through my own teaching to the younger members of my family.

When we make the friti, I take a knife that is used to cut the dough into small donut sized sections. These new clumps of dough are then placed onto a tray for the younger members of my family to work with. They shape the clumps into the friti by making one single hole in each of them and then forming them into a donut shape.

My grandma and I then take these shaped pieces of dough and begin to fry them. We put new oil into a larger sauce pot that is then heated on the stove. My brother and cousins have not yet been able to help with this part, however, because my grandma does not want to risk them getting burned.

“Be careful,” she tells me again.

“I will, Nana, don’t worry,” I reply.

I use a long fork to put the dough into the oil and also to remove the finished donut. My cousins then take the ones that are cool enough and completely cover them in sugar. This sweet white powder always finds a way to get everywhere during this process, but at least it can be expected. After all of the friti have been fried, we line them up in a basket and cover them with paper towels to keep them fresh for the evening’s dinner.

The preparation of food that takes place at my grandparents’ house always finishes with just enough time to spare for the evening. We pack up all of the food that we prepared, and I take most of it, as well as my brother and cousins, home with me. All of us usually have some flour or sugar spilled on our clothes by the end of the day, but it does not matter. This time spent in my Nana’s kitchen is always enjoyable. Upon finishing everything for the evening, a feeling of satisfaction always surrounds each of us.

Every member of my family, including my uncle's family, as well as my grandparents, then gets ready for church, and we go to the Christmas Eve Mass together. After church, everyone then comes back to my house where we will eat the traditional foods that we have been getting ready all day. While we may not be an extremely large Italian family, we still never have a quiet moment. Everyone talks at the same time and we are all involved in multiple conversations at once. Sitting around the same table together is always a memorable time with my family. There is never a dull moment, and it can sometimes get a little bit crazy. Conversations being held at one end of the room always end up having to be repeated rather loudly to those sitting on the opposite end of the room so that no one is left out.

Following with the same events over and over might seem repetitive to some. With my family, though, it is our tradition. I do not usually like to eat fish on any occasion, but Christmas would not be the same to me without these consistencies. I distinguish tradition as a way of measuring the importance that something holds to single person or to a group of people such as a family. Tradition and certain events need to be taught and carried down through a family from one generation to the next. I look forward to the Christmas season every year. Every part of my family's tradition holds a great significance that cannot be replaced.

The burn marks that I received on my arms last Christmas Eve were short lived, for they only showed for the remainder of the winter season. After a few months passed by, they had completely faded away. I was actually saddened to watch them go, for they were small memories that I carried with me from that day spent in my grandma's kitchen.

