ESSAY

Gnocchi

by Amalia Pistilli



Collage by Amalia Pistilli

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My mother stands at the blue and yellow Formica table in our dining room; in a bowl rests a dough she made with boiled potatoes puréed through a ricer and mixed with flour and egg; she dusts the table top with more flour, takes the dough out of the bowl and begins to slap and knead it until she is satisfied of the right consistency — it needs to be elastic and solid but not too hard or crumbly — and now she pinches small pieces out of the ball of dough and flattens them out, rolling each into a long, thin sausage; she then cuts these into half-finger-sized pieces and finally, with a deft movement of her thumb — without using a fork or grater back as they recommend in the recipe books — she shapes each piece into a concave ear and places ear after ear on a tray dusted with flour that she covers with a tea towel.

My mother wipes her hands on her apron and goes next door into the kitchen. This is an Italian apartment built in the 1960s, when the trend for large, eat-in kitchens or open-space kitchen-living has not begun yet, and so our kitchen is a small room with just the stove, the fridge, some blue and yellow cupboards, a white ceramic sink and a deeper sink with a wooden washboard my mother still uses for laundry, even though my father bought her the first semi-automatic washing machine to arrive on the Italian market.

The kitchen is fragrant with the pungent yet sweet scent of the freshly-made tomato sauce resting in a large pot on the stove. My mother checks the other large pot that contains water just coming to a rolling boil; she throws a handful of coarse sea salt into the water and returns to the dining room to pick up the gnocchi tray and take it into the kitchen. She lifts the pot lid and *poof!* into the hot waves goes a handful of gnocchi and then another and then another, until they are all sinking into the boiling water, and when they come up to the surface like drowning men in desperate search for a wreck to hold on to, my mother saves them by scooping them up with a slotted spoon and throws them into a large, ribbed white ceramic bowl — only to drown them again a minute later with ladlefuls of the tomato sauce.

And my mother drowns the gnocchi in tomato sauce, and follows this with a martyrdom of fire as she pours ladle after ladle of the contents of the bowl into an oven tray, covers each layer with slices of mozzarella and a few basil leaves and tops it all with an abundance of grated parmesan and sends them off into the oven. They emerge half an hour later fragrant and piping hot with that slightly charred crusty top — the part we Neapolitans love the most in our oven-baked dishes.

She used to make me gnocchi every time I asked.

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She would say *"Che vuoi mangiare domani?"* (What would you like to eat tomorrow?) and I invariably replied "Gnocchi!"

I just loved them so much!

And I also loved to watch her make them: It was a fascinating, complicated ritual, even more so because she would never allow me to help out with anything.

I had no friends in my life at the time I could discuss this with, so it never seemed strange to me that my mother did not ask me to make my own bed, did not ask me to tidy up my toys, did not ask me to do the washing up or, when I was finally allowed to go out by myself, did not ask me to buy groceries or run any errands for her, which I had to beg her for, since going out didn't seem that exciting to me unless I had a quest.

I did not know that the training in domestic chores was in fact the norm in most other families: part of a child's growing up, or rather, in our Catholic, macho culture, part of a daughter's growing up — an inculcation of her future duties as wife and mother.

I did not know this.

Nor did I suspect I was being treated in an odd way when my mother tried to shelter me from anything that resembled household chores. She always used to say to me *"Sei una principessa, non devi fare niente, mai niente"* ("You are a princess, you must not move a finger, never"), and when I was young, this pleased me, of course. I did not see it as a plot to render me a social invalid, to disable me from acquiring any practical skills, to keep me forever shackled to her as the only source of nourishment and domestic upkeep. I knew by then, of course — had known since her night time delirious episode and subsequent hospitalization when I was 13 — that my mother was mad. But as long as she did not start ranting and raving about the "machines" that were making her do things or about the various plots my father's family had in store to poison her or to exile her away from me, my father and I, for different reasons, were complicit in our denial of her dire mental state. And so I let her keep up her delusions of fairy-tale-like grandeur according to which she was a Cinderella of sorts, an unacknowledged and forever unrecognized princess; and through me she would find her victory, her reinstatement in the glory of no more housework and long idle days spent dreaming. I was her princess on the pea, and she would check my mattress constantly so that I would not be discomforted in any way.

Later, in my teens, as I tried to escape her furious and pervasive hold on me, I started to lash out at her, screaming that she never taught me anything, anything, that I'd had to learn it all by myself.

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I moved out of my parents' home at the age of 20 — a radical act in 1980 and for a culture where most men or women would never stray too far from their families of origin even after marrying. Many years later, I was living in London and doing a BA in Anthropology, and one day, reading the Italian daily La Repubblica in my university library, I came across a survey of Italian habits: 66% of married or single Italians living on their own still had their dwellings within one kilometer of their original families; and the quality most prized by Italian men in a woman, above and beyond beauty and sex appeal, was her ability to cook. Some things never change.

So in 1980, just a few months short of my 21st birthday, I was the veritable princess my mother wanted me to be, a princess without any fair handmaidens who had to learn everything from scratch: banal things like how to make the bed; do laundry; fold the washed linen and towels; dust, sweep and mop the floor; do the washing-up; and most of all, how to take action in the kitchen if I did not want to starve or go back and eat at my mother's table every day — thus invalidating the cry for freedom and independence that had propelled me out of the maternal womb.

And the princess discovered that she loved to cook.

When I moved out, at first I shared a large apartment with three other people, a married couple and a single woman, all a bit older than me. There were three bedrooms, and a shared kitchen, living room, dining room, and bathroom. Anna, the married woman, took me under her wing and taught me to make the classic Neapolitan recipes I was ignorant about, most of which my mother did not cook either: She was 12 when she had lost her own mother and so had not received this customary instruction.

And I discovered another amazing fact as I made my own progress in the kitchen, learning to assemble baked rigatoni and *sartù di riso* (a baked rice dish), *gattò di patate* (a savoury potato pie) and *parmigiana di melenzane, braciolette* (meat roulades) and *polipo affogato* (octopus stew): My mother was not that great a cook, after all.

I was better than her and getting better all the time. And I realized why: It wasn't just that I had a better teacher, or that I was more skilled. It was because I enjoyed doing it.

My mother did not love to cook.

My mother did not love to make love (a fact she never failed to remind my father of).

My mother did not love to eat — either at home or at a restaurant.

My mother did not love to travel.

My mother did not love to go out.

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My mother did not really love anything — except me.

And because she loved me so much, she made gnocchi for me every time I asked.

I never went back to live with my parents, but I continued to go there frequently for lunch, and my mother continued to make gnocchi for most of these occasions — to the annoyance of my father, who did not love me quite that much, who did not see it as a festive occasion that I came for lunch, and who liked many other dishes my mother did not make for him quite so frequently. As the years went by, and my mother's madness deteriorated, all her habits became more erratic, less careful. She started to bathe less and less often; she did not clean the house much; she hardly ever cooked for herself anymore.

She started to eat like a woman who has never made a dinner from scratch: a tragic irony in a city that loves its pasta dishes as much as it loves the conic shape of Vesuvio towering in the distance, that loves its seafood cuisine as much as it loves a baking hot beach in the summer. To make *pasta e lenticchie* (pasta with lentils) she opened a can of lentils and overcooked the tubetti almost to a mush (a sin greater than the original one all over Italy and especially in my hometown). She bought roast chicken off the butcher's electric spit instead of stuffing a raw one with lemon slices and garlic cloves and rosemary sprigs before putting it in the oven.

In her last years, she could hardly be bothered to eat even pre-cooked meals and fed herself concoctions of panettone slices dipped in cold milk for dinner or would warm up a can of ready-made soup for lunch. She mostly ate the soft, square bread Italians despise and only use occasionally for party canapé but never at the table. She was toothless but refused to see a dentist or have her old dentures repaired, so these bland and soggy foods were a sign of her mental and also of her physical decay. She may have been diabetic, and certainly had a myriad of digestive troubles, but her stay in the psychiatric clinic of a decade earlier had fixed doctors forever in her mind as the spawn of Satan — so she never had her health checked in the years between my father's death in 1987 and her own in 2006. And yet, every time I visited from my increasingly farther away locations — first across the Channel and then across the Atlantic — she would always comply with my request for gnocchi.

But as her health and mental state and general housewife abilities became more erratic, so did her gnocchi-making.

The dough became drier, harder, more crumbly, less springy, so the cooked gnocchi would taste too much of flour; the tomato sauce came pre-made out of a jar; the mozzarella was not the salty, delicious buffalo milk kind steeped in its own milky serum and daily-fresh from

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the cheeseworks, but the shrink-wrapped, drier, more rubbery cow's milk supermarket variety. There was no longer any trace of fresh basil leaves left in the mix. And sometimes she would forget the gnocchi in the oven, and the top would be too charred even by Neapolitan standards; while at other times she would only leave the dish in there for a few minutes at a low heat, and as a result the flavors did not have time to mingle, and there would be a pool of watery sauce in the bottom of the dish. Or she would even, sacrilegiously, use the powdery, chemical-tasting canned Parmesan "cheese" as if she were living in a remote village in Yorkshire where this was the only "Italian" supply you can find, instead of being born and bred in a place where every food shop carries entire rounds of aged Parmigiano Reggiano.

Until these gnocchi I had so yearned for all my life ceased to be my Holy Grail of dishes and became a disgusting concoction I came to dread — as I did all her other cooking by then — I stopped asking for them any longer. And yet, she kept making them for me.

I know as all this was happening that I was constantly, furiously angry at my mother; angry at her for the madness she couldn't help, angry at her for her unwillingness — albeit an unwillingness not freely chosen but filtered through her delirium — to continue playing the role of housewife that had been forced upon her by the social mores of her times.

I, who had been a militant feminist in the 1970s, wanted for myself all the liberation I could manage; I wanted the choice to cook or not to cook and to cook as a pleasure rather than a chore, to cook like in those books where the glories of Italian food are always mythologized, those books that tell you idyllic tales of armies of women in the kitchen who live as if the Greek and Roman *gynaeceum* and later the extended family had never gone out of fashion through the invention of the nuclear family. Armies of mothers, wives, sisters, aunts and cousins who are supposed to all love each other and share joyously in the cooking and, as some Hollywood version of Italianness would have it, even sing a folk song or two in the process with fabulous soprano and contralto tones.

These armies of women share in the preparation of sumptuous meals for husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles and cousins who await in the dining room, sitting at the table over a round of *canasta* or *scopone*, their shirt sleeves rolled up. There are also numerous children in this archetypal scene of Italianness, and the children scuttle between kitchen and dining room, stealing little *assaggi* from the pots and the serving plates and delivering them to the men while eating some of them en route like cherubic messengers between the idle gods and the laboring humans.

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I, this ideological feminist, this "liberated" woman who could never find enough freedom from her mother's hold even by putting Channels and Oceans between us, was like one of these children: keeping my mother enslaved to her role, keeping up my demands for a "normal" mother who would cook in the daytime and sleep at night instead of roaming the streets of Naples, and later only the rooms of her apartment, in one of her delirious rants.

I never truly understood — though I did write about these things in one of my university papers — how my mother's letting herself go, letting her cooking go, letting the household go, letting it all go to waste, might have been a rebellion of sorts: the only unformed, silent rebellion she was capable of, against the housewife role she had been destined to but obscurely felt she wasn't born for.

Perhaps. Or perhaps she was just mad, and that's all. All there is to it.

She is dead now, the gnocchi recipe gone with her.

I love to cook and always aim to please my dinner guests. I cook in abundance all manner of pasta dishes, but I have never, ever wanted to attempt making gnocchi for anybody.

Gli gnocchi appartengono per sempre soltanto a te, mamma. E io non li mangerò mai più. Gnocchi belong forever to you, and you alone, mother. And I will never eat them again.

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