

First person

Mom's best recipe: Rebellion

Growing up on culinary disasters fosters a daughter's love of cooking

By Beth Kanter

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

My brother takes a few controlled breaths, closes his eyes and begins to talk about an unpleasant childhood memory. My mother's hamburgers.

Although she (thankfully) hasn't served them in more than a decade, the image still makes me a bit queasy. So much so that I almost feel bad asking my brother to talk about the subject, but the bully big sister in me pressures him to go on.

"It's still very upsetting for me, Beth," he tells me, sounding a bit like an 8-year-old who just lost the big game rather than the 26-year-old attorney he has become. "First of all they had that light gray color, and then there was the shape. They were like hockey pucks. I remember crying once, begging Mommy to make flat hamburgers."

This is the point where I would like to tell you he is exaggerating. But he is not. Those burgers were overcooked, unseasoned mounds that left amorphous stains on the aluminum foil they were cooked on. Often they were served with a frozen vegetable mix medley, featuring lima beans, the recipient of

the least appealing bean award for 20 years running.

Recently I picked up the phone and asked my mother about this meal, half expecting her to protest that we were really gourmet-fed children who now suffer from false memory syndrome. Instead she just laughed.

"They were little turds," she declared. Then she giggled into the phone for a few minutes more.

In case you haven't figured it out, my mother is a bad cook. Often she is the first to admit it. She doesn't like to cook and when she does the results would likely make Julia Child drop into the fetal position. My mom is a warm person and a good mother, but when it comes to the kitchen she is no Martha Stewart.

What became of me in this gastrointestinal turmoil? I grew up, moved out and taught myself not only how to cook but also how to love it. I claimed the kitchen as a creative personal space and learned to embrace it. But most important, I followed the daughter path most traveled and did the exact opposite of my mother. I chose to keep my kitchen clean with sponges, mops and ammonia-based liquids, whereas my mother's first line of cleaning defense for the room is not using any of the appliances or tools she

keeps in it. I flip through cookbooks and search the Internet for holiday recipes while my mother places a very large order at the local kosher Chinese restaurant before Rosh Hashanah—a more than 10-year-old tradition at her house. I picked out a set of professional non-stick pots and pans, and my mother purchased them and brought them to my house wrapped with a pretty bow.

My mom recently told me that one of the reasons she doesn't like to cook is that her mother spent so much time preparing meals. She didn't want to be one of those mothers who spent all of her free time by the stove.

Perhaps it was also a way of rebelling against societal expectations. A child of the '50s, she was undoubtedly besieged by images of apron-clad women smiling because they had discovered the perfect dish rack. By serving a meatloaf my brother's friends labeled "cat food," in some small way she was challenging the norm. Granted, it wasn't like she was torching her bra on the burners, but I like to think of it a tiny act of nonviolent insurgence. Another byproduct: It got my dad to take up baking. Unlike my mom, he loved creating chocolate layer cakes for our birthdays, baking quiches for company and

rolling out pizza dough on Sunday nights.

Going public with the tales of burned meat and powdered spuds is somewhat freeing. It's like letting out an overcooked secret and realizing my family has not been shamed by the community for its dysfunctional ways, both in and out of the kitchen. I now also know that we were not alone.

I have heard tales of mothers who boiled hamburgers, started fires by overbaking chicken and served herring and frozen egg-rolls—together.

I have one friend who actually had to be taught to boil water when he moved out of his parents' house. I guess some of us embrace the forbidden realm while others keep away because we know its power can be used for ill. But what we all share are some really good stories to entertain those who were raised by mothers who used phrases like "from scratch."

My mother asked if she could think about it overnight and give me her favorite recipe to run with this article. She called me back a few days later and suggested I just print an empty box. Serving size: a lifetime.

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