

Mom's deserve a relaxing picnic

Have you ever tried smoked oysters? Probably not.

Apparently, someone has been buying them all these years because the grocery store always has them in a small can right next to the anchovies.

Unless, of course, it is the exact same can that's been sitting there all along.

My affection for smoked oysters began as a small child.

Somehow they always made it into my mom's picnic basket.

As a kid, I just assumed that everyone had smoked oysters in their picnic baskets.

Mom grew up in a meat and potatoes kind of family.

My dad introduced her to a world of exotic foods.

She always mentions shrimp as one of the other particularly delightful surprise bonuses of their 50-plus love affair.

With Mom's Day still on my mind, I'm advocating picnics instead of presents.

Here's my philosophy of picnicking:

- Food always tastes better outdoors, whether you serve it on the back patio at mom's house or at a park.

- Bring a cooler if you must, but put the nonperishables in an appealing basket.

- Baskets add to the mystique.

- Pack something unexpected, like a jar of marinated artichokes instead of pickles.

- Or a can of smoked oysters.

- Make food everyone loves but make it differently, like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches cut into cookie-cutter hearts.

- Quiche is a big winner for picnics because it can be served hot, cold, or in between.

- Pack something salty because the kids may be working up a sweat, passing around

CATHY KRAFVE

Checklist Charlie



the Frisbee you also just happened to pack.

- No fruit salad because it tends to leak.

Instead, toss in a few apples or pears, a paring knife, and a small cutting board.

Then, let one of the kids slice fruit and sharp cheddar cheese together and pass them around.

Remember to pack the deviled eggs in the cooler, not the basket.

- Not that anyone but me would be confused about this.

- For desert, pack something like a pound cake or lemon shortbread cookies. As tempting as it is at home, chocolate tends to melt.

- Invite people you love.

Then, add someone new to your list just for fun.

Later this month, I will deliver a full picnic basket to a reception for the bride and groom to take away with them because no one ever eats at their own reception.

I wonder if they will like the smoked oysters!

Maybe I should add a note explaining that you eat smoked oysters on crackers and it takes almost a whole childhood to get used to them.

Cathy Primer Krafve, aka Checklist Charlie, takes every opportunity to eat outside in beautiful East Texas with her family. Comments are welcome at CaeKrafve2@aol.com. You are invited to read more at http://checklistcharlie.blogspot.com.

Last year, one of my oldest and dearest friends, Antoinette Jackson, wrote about when we were both growing up in the city of Chicago.

Naturally, she remembered some things differently than I did.

When I mentioned it to her, Antoinette invited me to tell about childhood friendship from my point of view.

Always the pushy one, she urged, "You can do it. You always got better grades in English than me. This would give you a chance to be a published columnist."

Since Antoinette was studying journalism in California while I was busy rearing three children in Illinois, I many not be the literary genius she is, but here goes anyway.

The year was 1945 and World War II had just ended.

My maternal grandparents bought a two-story brick duplex on the corner of 62nd and Spaulding on Chicago's South Side.

Grandma Nana and Grandpa Jay McMahon lived on the first floor.

My mother and I lived upstairs together with my uncle, his wife and daughter.

Mom worked full-time on corporate air travel plan accounts for United Airlines, so having my grandmother below to look after me was a special blessing.

In September, I transferred into John F. Eberhart Grammar School to start first grade.

Most of the kids already knew each other from Kindergarten, so I was somewhat of an outsider.

Making matters worse, I was a bit shy and somewhat reserved.

One day, an outgoing little Italian girl with her hair tied back in a big bow saw me standing by myself out on the playground.

She walked up to me and said, "You wanna play together?"

I hesitated, held my head down, kicked the gravel with my right foot and shyly answered, "Okay."

That began a friendship between Antoinette and me that would span thousands of miles and six decades.

Back in the late 1940's, the Chicago public school system gave Wednesday afternoons off to Catholic kids to attend Catechism classes.

Groups of girls and boys chatted while walking arm-in-arm, skipping, or running the mile to St. Nicholas of Tolentine Catholic School.

For three years, we sat in the classrooms the Catholic school children had occupied an hour before as the sisters prepared us for our first communion and confirmation.

My Grandpa Jay was a Chicago policeman in the Chicago Lawn District of the city.

Since he worked the night shift, he would often be available to pick up Antoinette, her cousin



Betty, our friend Carol Paluszek and me after class in his maroon Packard 4-door.

Grandpa Jay, being the dear, sweet man that he was, always managed a quick stop at Glidewell's Pharmacy.

There he treated us to some penny candy from the oak-and-glass showcases or an ice cream cone served from behind the soda fountain.

When we grew older, Antoinette and I learned how to ride two-wheel bicycles.

When we proved that we could be careful crossing the traffic on 63rd Street, our mothers allowed us to ride our bikes to each other's homes.

With my newfound freedom, my horizons had broadened, and I became a frequent after-school visitor at the Chiarenza home.

As I parked my bike and rang their doorbell at the side door of the house, their dog Sandy would run up to the door barking ferociously.

Raising the kitchen window to talk through the screen, Antoinette would call out for me to come in.

To this day, I can remember the wonderful aromas as I climbed up the steps to the kitchen.

There, at the sink or stove Mrs. Chiarenza, was getting an early start on the evening's dinner.

"Hello, Patricia. Will you be able to stay for dinner tonight? There's enough. You can call home and ask if it's all right."

Grandma Nana or my mother would always say yes, so it was pretty much a rhetorical question.

Leaving Mrs. Chiarenza to cook, Antoinette and I played board games like Monopoly in her room or rode our bikes down to the end of the block where we played with her cousins Betty and Marietta until dinnertime.

Back at her house, I helped Anto set the table, while Nonna Providenza looked on.

(Mrs. Simmons, our teacher, called her Anto, because she didn't like to write her full name on the chalkboard and we kids picked that up.)

Their family always started their meals in with a traditional dish of pasta.

Most often it was prepared with a vegetable that had been

cooked with garlic and olive oil.

Next to Mr. Chiarenza's decanter of home made wine, was a hunk of Italian cheese and a cheese grater waiting to be passed around.

Her grandmother and her little brother Johnny usually cleared the pasta plates.

Just as I was ready to get up and help with the dishes, Mama Chiarenza would dish the meat and vegetable courses from the stove.

"But I thought the meal was over. My little tummy is full," I would announce.

That was totally unacceptable to Papa Chiarenza.

"Whatsa matter? You no lika the pork chops (or beef roast, or the other meat course). Mangia, mangia," he would insist as Nonna Providenza passed a large platter of meat in front of me.

In time I became like another member of the Chiarenza family.

Since my pal and I were born nine days apart, she on Feb. 21 and I on Feb. 12, Mrs. Chiarenza often joked about how Antoinette and I must have been switched in the nursery when we were babies.

My demeanor was calm like hers, while Antoinette, full of energy, was always bouncing off the walls.

My mother agreed that a mistake had been made at the hospital since she and Antoinette had such similar personalities.

After our graduation in January 1953, my friend and I both attended Lindbloom High School.

After two years, Antoinette, now called "Toni," deserted me by transferring to Jones Commercial in downtown Chicago for her junior and senior years.

By then I had met a handsome senior named Kelvyn Lach.

When we married in 1960, Antoinette was one of my bridesmaids.

In September of 1960, Antoinette's whole family moved to Garden Grove, Calif.

In 1967, Kel and our three children also moved to Southern California. Now, living just miles apart, our friendship was renewed and nurtured.

In December 1995 Antoinette's mother left this earth for her heavenly home.

In December 1996 my mother

joined her and we both grieved the loss of our dear mothers.

It's hard to believe that more than 62 years have passed since the cute little Italian girl with her dark hair tied back in a bow asked me if I wanted to play with her and her friends, then took me home where I became like another member of her family.

There's no doubt that we'll be friends until that day when we rejoin our Moms at our Lord's heavenly banquet table.

But until then, I'll continue to prepare Mary Chiarenza's Italian recipes the way she taught me.

And when dinner is ready to be served, I'll call out to my family, "mangia, mangia" just like Matthew Chiarenza once did.

Mussels a la Patricia Lach

I'll never forget the day I walked into Mama Chiarenza's kitchen and headed toward the spicy tomato aromas coming from the pot on the stove.

"What's cooking?" I asked, hoping for an invitation to stay for dinner.

"Babalucci in sooco," Mama answered. "Translated into English, it's snails in tomato sauce. Want some?"

"I have lot's of homework to do. I'd better get home," I declined, hopefully in a tactful manner.

Since then, for a kid who could not eat escargot and after traveling to South Carolina, Belgium, and England, I have fallen in love with mussels.

You can use mussels from the Atlantic Coast, or New Zealand (green lipped).

Purge them by soaking them in cold water and sea salt and then into clear cold water.

Peel off their furry beards.

Using a medium-to-large pot, add enough unsalted butter sufficient to coat the bottom.

Add several white shallots or a plain white onion, and several celery stalks, both diced finely.

Sauté on low heat until tender. Add four diced finely garlic cloves and a small amount of white wine.

Add the mussels to the pot and cover tightly. Cook on a low heat for about five minutes. Shake the pot after several minutes to redistribute the mussels.

Have your large soup bowls warmed in a preheated low oven.

Discard unopened mussels. They are not safe to eat.

Serve the mussels into the warmed bowls and top with a light sprinkling of fresh parsley along with a small banquette to dip into the sauce.

As an accompaniment, serve the mussels Belgium style with frits (French fries) dipped into mayonnaise, along with a salad.

Or use crusty bread, but don't forget your favorite white wine or an ice cold beer ... C'est Magnifique.

Patricia Lach, guest columnist

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