Chocolate Milk Please!?

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I hadn’t realized that my family functioned around food until this past Labor Day weekend when I brought my boyfriend home to meet my mom’s family for the first time. This revelation came during one of our customary family breakfasts (complete with an arsenal of Panera bagels, egg soufflés, bear claws, and coffee) that capped off a weekend full of brunches, happy hours, appetizer afternoons, and buffet dinners. As we were all eating I asked him what he thought of the weekend, and he paused, then announced, “Great, but you guys eat A LOT of food.”

Essentially I grew up with my mom’s family. My family and I would make the six-hour drive up to Aurora, Illinois, at least three times every summer. There would also be year-round visits during Labor Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving or Christmas, and New Years respectively. Not to mention the countless weekend non-holiday visits. My mom and her three sisters mostly grew up in Glen Ellyn, IL, where my grandpa, a retired-marine badass, taught biology and coached varsity football at the public high school. The majority of my family has remained in Illinois, resulting in our road trip habits. Over time, my mom’s family became my support and my security. Because of them I don’t have two parents; I have seven. I don’t have one brother; I have four brothers and three sisters.

When I was six years old, my cousins and I decided that we wanted to play the game Kitchen. You know the one that every kid plays where you pretend you have your own kitchen? Yeah, it’s the best game ever! So we took over our grandparent’s kitchen and helped ourselves to real food and real kitchen utensils while taking “dinner orders” by standing on the counter and leaning through the serving hatch into the dining room. We had a full staff that consisted of a dessert chef, a salad chef, and a cereal chef. I dubbed myself the Spaghetti chef and proceeded to fill a metal saucepan with water, raw spaghetti, and M&M’s; then I placed the pan inside the microwave, punched in 3:00 minutes (my favorite number), and pushed ‘Cook Time’ just like my mom had taught me at home when we would make vegetables. You probably won’t be surprised that after I pushed the start button the saucepan burst into flames, we all started screaming and running around, the adults were alerted to put out the fire, and we were forbidden to ever play Kitchen again.

Most kids learn through experience, by doing things with their hands or watching things being done. My cousins and I were no exception; we simply had a tendency for our learning to be a little more dangerous, like the time we experimented with how far we could throw french fries using an open car window as our target. It probably didn’t help that our grandpa taught us how to smoke cigars while we were still in diapers. However food was – and still is – a way we learned when we were young. In this case I learned that metal DOES NOT EVER go in a microwave. The wonderful thing about this kind of learning is that even though I have made mistakes, I have learned from them and my family has continued to love me for who I am despite those mistakes. Without this kind of unconditional support I would not be the person I grew up to be. A solid foundation is the most important thing you can give to a child, and I like to think that my foundation was built out of diamond-encrusted steel by magical Keebler elves.
About a year later, in May of 1999 my Uncle Jay died. He was only thirty-eight years old and left behind my Aunt Libby and their four children who, at the time, were all under the age of nine. He died of a rare Strep infection. After he became sick, the hospital turned him away two times telling him it was only a severe cold. He passed away within 48 hours. His funeral took place a couple of days later at a local funeral home in Aurora. My mother told me that at one point the visitation line was wrapped completely around the building. Through the blur of the funeral process my aunts, uncles, and cousins were in standstill. I don’t remember much from those few days; however my memory did grasp on to one thing, food, and there was tons of it. Stepping into my aunt’s kitchen was like stepping into a minefield of comfort food. It was like the divine housewife fairy had come down upon the house and filled it with thousands upon thousands of dishes of home cooked goodness.

For my family and for many families throughout the world, food is a way of healing from tragedy. It’s that pint of ice cream after a particularly rough break up, that lasagna your mom makes for your neighbors when their mom is diagnosed with breast cancer, or that late night bowl of cereal that you eat out of a cake mixing bowl after you fail that really big Chemistry test (don’t try and deny it, we’ve all done it). Eating or baking together can pull people through the most difficult parts of life, perhaps it’s the accompanying feeling of solidarity, or maybe its simply a distraction. Whatever it may be, it works.

Years followed and my cousins and I grew up. So much so that the adults even began to give the cousins a dinner night during our annual Johnson family vacation to northern Wisconsin. Meaning that my cousins and I were in charge of creating an edible meal for everyone to eat. I won’t lie and say that all of our dinners as a family have been wild successes. My grandma used to make infamous ham-cheese-and-mustard sandwiches weeks in advanced then put them in the oven the first night of vacation. These dreaded sandwiches were part of the reason I was a vegetarian for two vacations straight (sad but true). Fortunately my grandma retired the dreaded sandwiches and now lets everyone else cook for her instead! I’m not saying we’re any better at consistently making good food, because everyone has bad meal nights. During our first cousin dinner three years ago we scorched our store-bought pizza so badly that the whole crust was burnt through. But everyone still ate it, and laughed about it for the rest of the week. This past summer we made Enchiladas for our dinner and spent a good 5 hours together making them. The reason that cooking dinner took so long was probably because of the spontaneous addition of guacamole, and the spontaneous addition of eating the guacamole. That and laughing as Ashley kept burning portions of her finger prints off every time she tried to roll a steaming fried tortilla. On the up side, now she will be untraceable to the FBI. I am thankful for my family’s outlook on life because of times like this. It is ok if something doesn’t go as planned, and the best thing to do is roll with the punches. Nothing healthy comes from taking life too seriously.

As I have gotten older I have realized that making fun of poor grandma’s experimental ham sandwiches, burning pizza, and making Enchiladas for five hours are all things that have brought us closer as a family. Try to think back to the last time you ever cooked or baked with someone. Can you remember? Hopefully you can, because I’m sure you learned a lot about that other person as a result, probably a lot more than you wanted to. One year around the holidays
my brother, Will, decided that he wanted to make a dessert by himself called ‘Mango Crisp’. He also decided that reading the recipe was for nincompoops and threw in ingredients as he saw fit. What actually came out of our oven cannot be described with words. However, we still ate it, and it actually wasn’t half bad. Another example would be my cousin Maggie. Most kids love chocolate milk right? So does Mags, and every time we would go out to eat she would always order the same thing, “Chocolate milk please.” Chocolate milk was the routine for breakfast and lunch (for dinner we all went through a Shirley Temple/Roy Rodgers drink phase). And every year her tastes have remained the same. Now she is twenty years old, and when we went out to lunch a couple weeks ago, you better believe she ordered chocolate milk.

Now the youngest member of our family is 14 years old and the oldest is 91. Time has gone by even faster than I thought was possible. My Aunt Libby remarried; and we’ve added a few more people to the family. However one thing has remained the same: we still make enough food to feed a small country. And come better or come worse I’m guessing that’s the way things will stay. Not all food does you good, but good food never does you wrong. Everyone has his or her own set of problems, and my family taught me to love people despite their faults; love the good, accept the bad. Oh yeah, and they also taught me to never forget to buy extra salsa, chips, ice, soda water, and always always always extra wine.