

REMEMBRANCE OF TREATS PAST

WHEN THE MEMORY LIVES ON BUT THE RECIPE IS LOST **SARAH ROSE**

GLADYS'S SWEET ROLLS HAD FREEZER BURN. They crumbled in your hand and were overly sweet, like the airport variety. Three years past their sell-by date, our breakfast had been on life support in an overstocked deep freeze in a basement in Duluth, Minnesota. Trying to eat one, I grimaced helplessly at my mother. She stuck out her tongue as she buried hers under a napkin.

"We will never taste *schnecken* again," I said quietly so our gracious hostess, my elderly cousin Gladys, would not hear.

"It's been 15 years," Mom sighed mournfully. That was how long her Aunt Lil had been dead. Lil's *schnecken* ("snails") were perfect little spirals of feathery yeast cake, with a caramelized vein of cinnamon, sugar, pecans, and raisins. The crust was crisp, the crumb was moist. A cross between brioche and *rugelach*, *schnecken* were home-baked genius. Cousin Gladys's sweet rolls were store-bought and pedestrian.

Food is a vehicle for memory; it is our first encounter with metaphor. A favorite food, a special dish, can bring back a rush of details about people long gone. Meditations on a madeleine cookie can re-create an entire lost world. My great-aunt Lil died at age 98, and, though we could see it coming, it had never occurred to us to write down her *schnecken* recipe. In the many years since, it has become a double blow—Aunt Lil is dead, and we have lost the keys home.

FOOD AND FAMILY

"I really believe that food connects people," says Jennifer Abadi, author of the cookbook *A Fistful of Lentils* (Harvard Common Press, 2002). Abadi had the good sense to make "cooking dates" with her Syrian grandmother Fritzie to learn how to make her favorite dishes. The resulting cookbook is not only a treasure for Abadi and her family but also a

testimony to the cultural heritage of America's Syrian Jewish immigrants. Abadi now teaches classes on how to work with loved ones to preserve family recipes.

"It was a wonderful thing to do not just for the book, but because my grandmother is no longer with us and I have that time with her to remember," Abadi explains.

Not all of my Aunt Lil's food is lost. Her bagels, for instance, were famous throughout the Iron Range. (The recipe starts with 15 cups of flour and ends with the sentence "This takes most of a day to complete.") Her roasts and meat dishes are easy to replicate, and worth the effort. "I step into Aunt Lil's house, take one whiff of dinner, and I gain five pounds and get constipated," my father would say.

We used to joke, none too nicely, that driving to Duluth was like trading with a third-world country. We brought up raw materials—cuts of elusive, good-quality kosher meat available in a big city like Chicago—and we left with cheap manufactured goods: frozen bagels, blintzes, *schnecken*, and *kreplach*.

In the years since Lil died, my mother and I have reproduced every wonderful memory food but *schnecken*. Her bagels had always crowded out the lesser stars, the step-siblings. Bagels were small and chewy, boiled and baked; they put up a fight and were unlike anything ever served in a New York deli. Hers are right; New York's are wrong. With bagels on the breakfast table—and they always were—*schnecken* were the also-rans. It had never occurred to us that someday we would miss *schnecken* as if some light had gone out in the universe.

PRESERVING RECIPES

A recipe can get lost in a thousand ways. Most often, says Abadi, someone doesn't

want to give it up. A signature dish can be a point of pride, and people lose power or social standing when they divulge its recipe.

Abadi had to fight her grandmother for information on the showstopper middle eastern dish *Kibbeh Nabilseeayah*, little torpedo-shaped of spiced meat and pastry. For her *Kibbeh* lesson, Abadi was in the kitchen, ready with her notes and measuring spoons, waiting for her grandmother, but Fritzie kept dragging her feet. "No, I don't want to. Nobody makes it anymore," she protested.

Finally, Fritzie admitted she had never actually made *Kibbeh*. It had always been her mother's specialty—Abadi's great grandmother—and she was too intimidated to even try. "It was at that moment that I saw her as a daughter, not just as my grandmother, or a mother, or a wife," Abadi recalls.

They rescued the recipe. Although Fritzie had never made the dish, she and her granddaughter tried making it together, working from memory. Sneaking a bite of the final product, Fritzie was transported back to her mother, who had perfect skill at shaping the pastries.

"Jennifer, I can't believe it: you too have the magic hands!" she exclaimed.

REVIVING THE DEAD

My mother rescued *schnecken* from oblivion. She unearthed the recipe in the unlikelyst of places: Gladys's house. With Lil gone, when we visit my mother's family, we stay with Gladys. She has 3,000 cookbooks, all of which contain a variation on the theme of "Take a can of mushroom soup, open a jar of pimentos." She has a peculiar fetish for food science. In her view, the invention of nondairy dairy products—margarine and Cool Whip—ranks with the polio vaccine.

Gladys has Midwestern manners and insists on feeding people. During a recent



fainting spell, she offered cookies to the EMTs who were strapping her to a gurney. I would rather eat my canoe paddle than Gladys's food. And I would never look to her for a recipe. But my mother, who knows the lineages, was inspired like a good archaeologist. Lil was the oldest of the 40 first cousins born in America; Gladys, while not the youngest, is the last one standing.

"Gladys, do you have any of your mother's recipes?" my mother asked our 98-year-old cousin.

Gladys considered for a moment and then trundled out of the room. She returned with a clothbound notebook; the yellow cover had red railroad cars across it. In a forest of dross, Gladys had unearthed a treasure. Once upon a time she had copied out her mother's best recipes. Gladys's mother and Aunt Lil's mother were sisters. Their mothers had learned to cook in the same kitchen, and the recipe was the same. My little brown snails of butter and caramel and raisins had been found. After the trip, Mom and I made them in Chicago. The first bite of our schnecken was as good as any we had ever had: rich, light, and *sui generis*.

Aunt Lil had been brought back from the dead. And so had her mother. And someday, so shall I. ■

Pecan Schnecken

Makes 2 dozen

1 cup sour cream
 1 package dry yeast
 1/4 cup luke-warm water
 1 cup butter
 1/3 cup sugar
 1 teaspoon salt
 3 eggs, beaten
 3 1/2 cups flour
 1/4 cup melted butter

For raisin filling:
 1/2 cup raisins
 1/2 cup chopped pecans
 1/2 cup sugar
 1 1/2 teaspoons cinnamon

For brown sugar syrup:
 1/2 cup butter
 1 cup brown sugar
 3 tablespoons water

TO MAKE DOUGH:

Allow sour cream to stand at room temperature for 1 hour.

Dissolve yeast in warm water.

Cream butter and sugar until fluffy, then stir in sour cream, salt, dissolved yeast, and eggs.

Mix in 1 cup of the flour at a time,

beating well after each addition. Cover tightly and place in refrigerator overnight.

TO MAKE RAISIN FILLING:

Soak raisins in hot water for 15 minutes and drain well. Combine with sugar, pecans, and cinnamon, and mix well.

TO MAKE BROWN SUGAR SYRUP:

Place butter, brown sugar, and water in a saucepan. Bring to a boil and cook for 3 minutes, until blended.

TO MAKE SCHNECKEN:

Remove dough from the refrigerator, and let it stand in a warm place, free from drafts, for two hours.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Divide dough in half. Place one half on a lightly floured board and roll it into a rectangle 1/4" thick and 18" long. Spread half of the melted butter and half of the raisin filling in the middle, then roll the long end as for a jelly roll. Slice the roll into 12 pieces, 1/2" wide; repeat these steps for the second roll.

Butter 24 muffin tins. Pour 1 teaspoon of the brown sugar syrup into each tin and place a slice of the rolled dough, cut side down, on top of the syrup. Cover and set in a warm place to rise until doubled in bulk.

Bake 12 to 18 minutes, or until evenly browned.