

Upfront

If cooking is not my favorite thing, it's a close second or third. I love every aspect of it. The obsession operates well beyond the bounds of the kitchen: Thinking about what I want to make; shopping for ingredients; changing my plan depending on the surprises that inspire me at the store; unpacking and storing stuff when I get home; deciding upon the perfect pot, pan and process; creating a mental time line for each dish; slicing, dicing and chopping...all culminating in the ACTUAL thing – the “cooking,” which is a relatively easy step in the sequence, its success or failure an affirmation or rejection of the decisions leading to it. Then, there's the eating part. Ecstasy (often, in my case, far too fleeting). Reward for work well done.

I speak through food. It accesses a lexicon that eludes my spoken voice. I convey caring and emotion in bite-sized bits, unable to do so as effectively with words. At least, I hope it works that way.

Holidays, then, are conspicuous opportunities to declare affection with a baked good or braise. A cookie's crumble catching on your kid's sweater, trace evidence of your heart's sweet truth. In my family, we're in the phase where each of three generations seeks to employ a form of culinary communication. But there is only so much a person can eat.

Reluctantly, my mother has ceded some hosting duties to me over the years. In turn, my girls have methodically, little by little, year by year, seized increasing control of our menus and meal prep. Initially, I was resistant: “Too many cooks in the kitchen...” and all that. For me, cooking is undemocratic. Like interior design, someone in the family must make the decisions. Egalitarian collaboration is a naïve ideal. The kitchen is an autocrat's natural domain. The dining room allows for broader participation, though it's limited to sharing the spoils after the battle has been won.

A few days ago, my daughters suggested, via our ongoing group text, Christmas dinner at my house. (I'm tempted to type “our” where you read “my,” as each of them still has her intact bedroom on the fourth floor, though the existence of their apartments dictates the proper pronoun choice.) As to my home as our special-meal venue: Great idea. They (my kids) informed Grammy, who would consent to an unnecessary amputation if either of the girls asked. Exclamation points filled our screens as Grammy (my mom) confirmed her delight. With a subsequent caveat, of course: “I'll bring the...”

I must be getting old. Or mellow. Or resigned to natural evolution. Or all three. Rather than suggesting a multi-course banquet befitting of my personal tastes, I volunteered to make one thing. “You guys do all of the sides and desserts.” It worked at Thanksgiving – this segmentation - it seems we have a tenable division of labor figured out. “I'll make a seafood stew,” a nod to the Italian-American experience. Consistent with her predilection for candor, Sofia said, “Sure, but maybe not seafood stew...”

So, I'll produce the perfect rib roast, even though Gabby's a vegan. Actually, mushroom risotto, as a nod to inclusivity, might be a more prudent choice. Likely truth: Both. And the girls will bring more than half a dozen of their best ideas to the table, literally. Used pots will fill the sink and disappear and fill it again, as predictable as the tides. Spots of edible dirt will pepper the floor. My mother and father will both, independent of one another despite a very narrow window of opportunity, chastise me for eating too fast. We'll all complain that we're uncomfortably full.

This is what love looks, smells, feels and tastes like. This is how we say the things we'd rather not. Mangia! Buon appetito! I'll see you in the 2022.

Scott A. Lauretti



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