

Family Food Traditions

Rebuilding a Culture



By Christina Shepherd McGuire // Photographs by Kisa Koenig

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As a toddler, I vaguely remember sitting diaper-clad in the middle of a field of string beans. The midday Pennsylvanian sun shone down on me as my parents spent their weekend sticky from humidity and furiously picking. I sat among plants twice my height, sampling the ends of beans and then spitting them on the ground. As the story goes, my father and a work colleague decided to grow a saleable green bean crop that summer. But my mom wasn't exactly on board. The last thing she wanted to do was spend her weekends tending a field of beans, small child in tow. Still, dad learned from Papap (his father) that cultivating the land could reap great results. Needless to say, we ate a lot of beans that summer ...

As I grew older, every seasonal celebration gave my mother's Italian family an excuse to eat. During such gatherings, the hosts rarely left the kitchen, and overflowing bowls of homemade pasta would magically appear. I remember making pasta for these gatherings with my grandfather. First, we'd shape a volcano of flour on the table with a hole in the middle. Then I'd dump in the eggs. Together, we'd mix the flour and eggs until it was too hard for me to knead the dough (at that point I usually bailed to go play). Once I returned, we fed sheets of floured goodness through the steel pasta maker over and over until it produced paper-thin fettuccine. Moments later, it disappeared into the pot.

I still recall the smells, sights, and magic of cooking with my grandfather and gardening with my parents. These traditions, adopted from both sides of the family, created a unique set of customs deeply rooted in family heritage.