

Labor of Love

By Jyoti Singh (1st Place)

Yet another day
One more in the many that I've lost count of
Has it really been a year
Since life had come to a stop
Or so it seemed

The simmering pot screams for attention
And I give it another stir
As I absentmindedly watch over the spices
Being roasted to bring out their best
Much like life's challenges...

The tantalizing aroma spreads out its wings
And gathers to the table our scattered family
As would a mother hen
Food has become their escape
And cooking my refuge

The smiles and praise are generous
Breaking the monotony of our day
And as I scoop a spoonful
I remember another hand serving us
In her special loving way...

Her delicate homemade cottage cheese
In a rich red gravy
Of tomatoes carefully picked
The perfect blend of garlic and ginger
And spices perfectly mixed

Her long delicate fingers
plucking out the parsley
To add the just right flair
The generous dash of cream

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Like her love pure and deep

Every bite an offering of comfort and indulgence

Like the woman creating this bliss

Never a frown or a sigh

As she endlessly toils

Every meal a labor of her love

The happy chatter draws me back to the present

“This is the best Butter Paneer ever!”, they pronounce

With a nostalgic smile I reach for the phone

To give credit where it’s due

“Mom,” I say, ‘there still isn’t anyone who makes it like you do!’”

Gram's Fried Green Tomato Pizzas
By Sharon Kaye (Guerrazzi) (2nd Place)

My Gram's eyes always smiled when the day held a treat
that only she knew was to come.
My time would be filled with a chore or a book
while she glided around in the sun.

As she mumbled and pulled at a weed that she'd toss
or randomly pluck from a vine
an imperfectly ready fruit that she'd found
that would perfectly match the one that was mine.

Together we sliced and we dredged and prepared
in steps that we played like a game.
The bread crumbs came last and covered our treat
as a cast iron skillet sat atop the stove's flame.

One by one they were placed in hot oil for a bath
that would sizzle and scent the whole room
with an aroma so sweet it would give us a hint
of the taste we'd enjoy very soon!

With a wink from her eye I could tell she was ready
to flip and brown them some more.
But to my surprise when the task was complete
she added one step to our chore.

In my hand she had placed small squares of fresh cheese
and at first my mind wasn't clear.
Fried tomatoes never asked for such things to be added
yet for some reason it was here!

Those browned rounds in the pan that seemed ready to go
were each topped all the same with this treat.
As it melted and oozed down the sides we both knew
what we made was now complete.

On that day long ago Fried Green Tomatoes became new.
They're now 'special pizza' that's a fave in my book
because Gram added just a little bit more
to our favorite side dish to cook.

**Memories sealed up
By Sharon Ivanauskas (3rd Place)**

I feel the damp steam as I walk into the room.

I see the colored, tattered tea towels laid out, covering the delicate pierogis.

My sweet, soulful. Memory laden, busy Nanna stops.

A smile spreads across her face, and my steps glide forward,

into the warmth of her arms.

The mushrooms we once picked together in the woods,

the dough she mixed and kneaded and rolled out,

are sealed together with love every year.

The water bubbles, ready to envelope the gently formed gifts.

I envision us eating the pierogi, soft, warm, pungent.

The damp steam encases me, as I think of us all sitting together.

I smile at my Nanna, so proud of her work, her as a woman, my Nanna.

So many memories sealed into each of the pierogis.

Food is Family

By Rescuepoetix™ (4th Place)

Growing up in a large Puerto Rican family
Meant parties for every occasion
Big gatherings of generations
That reached back to the motherland

standard foods for every day
Aguacate ... Tostones... Arroz ... Carne

During celebrations, visiting family, you could
Count on special things
When abuelita brought out the huge caldero
To make a massive pot of yellow rice

Easter meant *Ensalada de Bacalao*
Spring goodness of root vegetables, onions, eggs and salted codfish
Hot or cold ... worth every comfort food spoonful

Other occasions – baptisms, Noche Buena, New Year's Eve
Brought the truly great things:
arroz con dulce, pernil, arroz con gandules, flan
and my favorite

Pasteles

Making *pasteles* was a family affair
Long into the night a production line of aromas
And textures; a marathon of papel and twine

stacked stations of unrelated things
Became the steps to a family experience
Hours and Hours after the slow roasted pork fell apart,
Boiled, seasoned mashed vegetables to make the masa

Annatto seeds turned to *achiotina*
For its rich, telling color
olives green
fingertips blackened and orange by the labor of love

those once unique bits turned into a structured stack of dozens
and dozens of freezer ready goodness

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because you couldn't just make one or two

No: this effort meant commitment, dedication, drive
until at least one of the big, passed down, dented, well-worn
pots is scraped to the very bottom

signaling the chance to sample the family food effort
and how close la familia truly is while cutting twine
no matter how hot - stinging fingertips
no pause until flipped out onto a plate
to dig into with laughter and the appetite for connection

El sándwich de Papa

By Martha Rodriguez (5th Place)

Domingo por la mañana
Walk to the bakery my father would
El olor de pan llego
Pan-crusty yet suave
Warm to the touch
Tostado, lightly brown corners
Lettuce tomato, cebollas, oil and vinegar he prepared slowly, meticulously
Jamón sliced - laying with its natural curves on bread
Seguido por sliced pastrimi with fine tasty spices
Queso, Fuerte, sharp,
Tomatoes Rojos- Vivos at center with a sprinkle of pepper, salt, olive oil and vinegar
Sus dedos mojadas from the many jugos
A thick layer of Ketchup on the bread serving as the glue which bound the Pan together
His smile una reflexión du orgullo
Su familia su vestido más importante
Cocinar his Agape Love
Permanece un misterio his recipe
Papa you took the magia with you
Hasta que nos veamos de nuevos para comer tu sándwich

Homemade Soup

By Patricia Urban Korsak (6th Place)

Cooking was not her area of expertise
And she knew that.
She didn't hand down any secret family recipes.
But she knew how to feed a family of seven.
And she had a lot of handwritten recipe cards.

Living through the great depression,
She'd learned that soup could go far.
Add Dad's homemade bread
And you had a great meal.
Add a sandwich and the kids were full.

Homemade soup started with broth and a bone.
We'd fight over the marrow
And spread it on buttered bread,
A memory that makes my sister cringe.

Throw in some homegrown veggies
And have the kids prep them.
Peel, dice, slice, watch it cook.
A memory of that homemade soup smell.

Go across the street to auntie's general store
And see what greens she has this week.
Maybe buy some penny candy.
A memory of small treats.

Auntie's farm belongs to someone else now.
Mom's home belongs to someone else now.
The house that Dad built died with him,
And I don't mean just the house.

They are all are gone,
But the memories remain
And the longing will fade someday.
I'll have to let you know when.

For now, I can watch my grandson
Who loves to pick veggies from the garden.
Loves to peel, dice, and slice.

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Loves to make soup.

I take him to another farm
To pick up our vege share
And photograph the baby chicks
And find peace at the pond.
New memories.

And I never miss a chance to tell him
That I love him.
Because we always think we have more time.

THE MADNESS
By Neelam Chandra (7th Place)

The smell of the *halwa* emanating from the neighbourhood,
Makes me numb. I switch off my mobile,
Turn the room dark, hoping to get some relief from the unease around-
But the more I try to forget, the more I remember.

My father had schizophrenia, which was little understood at that time-
I still remember the stigma that my mother always carried around!
She was blamed and cursed for his madness-
Everybody said, "He was so good till before the marriage!"
No relatives or friends thought that showing him to a Physician could be an option!

I clearly remember the shrill wailing of my mom-
After all, her grandfather had died that day!
"I was too attached to him," she told me, "I want to attend his funeral!"
I, an eight-year-old understood,
And while I was trying to comfort her, he returned from the office.

My mom hadn't stopped crying and when he was told the reason,
He grinned and then laughing loudly said, "Make some *halwa*!" to my mom.
Till then, *halwa* used to be my favourite dish!

When she refused, he touched the naked skin of her face with cigarette butts,
While I meekly prayed to him, "Please leave her *papa*!"

The smell of the *halwa* brings back that hidden memory
From the crevices of my heart into the open and I feel exposed.
I can feel the same madness of my father,
I can feel the same helplessness of my mom!

If only my mother was well-educated, she would be earning her own money,
Would have left him and his madness forever or might have tried to get him treated,
And *halwa* would have remained my favourite dessert-
But you can't change the past and I too have to live on with the memories!

Unable to bear the smell of the *halwa* from the neighbourhood anymore,
I go out for a long drive and eat some ice-cream on the way.
The taste and smell of the *halwa*
Is forgotten as of now,
Till some neighbour decides to cook it again

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Starting the same cycle of unease!

I still wonder if *halwa* remains my favourite dish
I decide to get over my dark memories and taste it again-
After all, my father is no longer alive!

Savor

By Aditi Tandon (8th Place)

The sun rays touched it
at precisely half-past four
Filtering through the glass door cabinet
As if tantalizing us more

That 12-inch box of steely goodness
Glistened and beckoned
As we eyed that ancient lock
to be unlocked any second

My grandmother would stride in
And wait for us to get in line
Out would come the round steel box
And we would get them one at a time

What you might ask required to be bolted and protected?
Sweet balls of heavenly goodness
'Laddoos' that needed to be respected

Cos left by myself, I could finish the whole box and some
How could my grandma of many
Allow that absurdity to happen?

It took her hours of slow cooking
And stirring and waiting
Gram flour in clarified butter
Its comforting aroma permeating
Every corner of grandmas home
fragrant as she heaped in sugar
Cooled it down, and shaped them up

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into perfect balls, as we watched her

So I learned to savor my one laddoo

Bite it, swirl it, but not chew

Cos one was never enough

But one was all you got

Until the next day

At the very same time

At the very same spot

Besan laddoo is what I crave

And now I'm a mom, I can easily make

But alas, I'm no longer a child

Shouldn't pig out and shouldn't go wild

So I make them for my girls and take one too

Bite it, swirl it, savor it, but not chew.

LET ME TELL YOU A DIFFERENT STORY

By Ojo Taiye (9th Place)

are you aching? then feed from my mother's deep black cast iron skillet: amala is like a skein produce inside the pit of my mother's hand. i long for dinner, the washing of hands in a bowl of water, surrounded by familiar voices. i don't know exactly what joy is. but as always, i get lost somewhere in love, in a deep bowl filled with *amala & efo riro*. how quickly we become something else. behind the walls of every memory, a child. is living not the shape of my panting? what use is a country with no family to eat what it yields? there are so many infants on the inventory sheets. tomorrow the drums will call for us. i am sorry you think i had all those years misunderstood the concept of absence. these days it can be hard to tell the difference. what song will you sing for them? i want to be a better animal: this is a manifesto of survival. how i wear the words: good spoon, kindness & salt loaf. this is how i was born: in a field of hunger where i bury the past & free myself from every partial poem.

Mulberry Mud Pies

By Dana I. Hunter (10th Place)

Mulberries were not the tastiest of treats to fill a six-year old's belly.
Recalling afternoons spent underneath its branches
fill my mind like a visit to a candy store of forgotten dreams.

Remembering the cool soft soil underneath my bare feet
splotched with purple and black hues in patterns created
with each plop of a globe.

Running with cups of water used to create lakes and rivers between
berries not smooshed by giants or claimed by ants.
Hands and clothes stained with colorful adventures dug in the dirt.

Each summer spent under its shade became shorter as I grew taller
and the patting of endless piles of Mulberry Mud Pies lost its
appeal as my age entered double digits.

I haven't eaten a Mulberry since those summers
like I said they weren't the tastiest of berries to eat
maybe they were put here only to feed my imagination.