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With Mothers' Day approaching
I'm feeling a little sentimental.

I've been thinking about some of the gifts my mom has given me. Not the baby dolls or bicycles, the Fair Isle sweaters or even the bright red stew pot I still use today. I could dwell on the fact that she didn't passed on her very long legs but I won't.

Looking back, one of the best gifts my mother gave me was her enthusiasm for spirited conversation.

Dinner at our house served two critical purposes. It kept the family from starving and, more important, it brought us together every night. My mother was never particularly interested in cooking. I don't remember her spending long hours in the kitchen. She gravitated toward quick and easy recipes and didn't hesitate to throw a can of soup on a piece of chicken or into a pot of stew.

In spite of her indifference towards most things culinary, Mom was very keen about family dinner. For some of our neighbors, family dinner was a rare occasion, reserved for holidays or special occasions. Others raced through the evening meal and fled the table. Not so at my house, most evenings we hung out for a good hour, sometimes longer. The television was never on. Phone calls were only answered to take a message to call back later.

Every night we shared our news, victories, trials and tribulations. We discussed everything and anything. We talked about our day at school, our favorite books, celebrities and stars as well as the Boston Bruins and Red Sox. As we got older, political and social issues became key topics during our nightly conversations.

It was an exciting, turbulent time, a time of great change; kind of like now. We vigorously discussed the virtues and vices of the President and a whole host of politicians, public figures, crusaders and crooks. We deliberated over the war, civil rights, women's right and the environment. We shouted, we laughed, we jockeyed for position. We talked all at once, we interrupted each other in our excitement and enthusiasm. Somehow or other we managed to listen to each other (if only barely) and respect each other (if sometimes grudgingly).

Once in a blue moon, a subject was deemed off limits, inappropriate for my little brother's young ears. Those times were few and far between. For the most part it was no holds barred. My sister and I were free to discuss, rant and rave with the passion and intensity of idealistic teenagers. Mom insisted that we never argued. In her words, we discussed enthusiastically.

Looking back, those dinners were tremendous confidence builders. I don't ever remember my mother telling me I was wrong. From time to time she cautioned me that a particular opinion could be unpopular. She sometimes warned that a certain stand could put me on the outs with friends or neighbors. Even when she disagreed, she never discouraged my youthful dance with new ideas. Within our protective family circle, I was able to test new insights and changing opinions. I learned to listen and scrutinize an idea before accepting or rejecting it. Those dinners helped me develop the self-confidence to speak up, share my ideas and stories and listen to others. I am forever grateful.

How did I thank her? When we were little, my sister, brother and I took turns serving Mom an English muffin in bed on Mothers' Day. Later I sent cards and flowers (when I remembered.) Now it's a plant and I invite the family over for brunch or lunch. All in all, I definitely got the better half of the bargain.

Thank you Mom - Happy Mothers' Day! Bon Appétit!





Tarte à l'Oignon (Onion Tart)

This earthy French tart is perfect for brunch, lunch or a casual supper. Give it a try on Mothers' Day and enjoy!

Serves 6-8

4 slices thick cut bacon (about 1/4 pound), chopped
 About 1 tablespoon butter
 2 pounds onions, cut in half lengthwise and sliced in thin wedges
 1-2 cloves garlic, minced
 2 teaspoons fresh thyme
 Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
 Savory Flakey Pastry (recipe follows)
 2 large eggs
 1 cup sour cream
 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
 Pinch nutmeg

Cook the bacon in a skillet over medium heat until crispy. Remove from the skillet, drain on paper towels and reserve.



Add more or less butter to the bacon drippings to coat the skillet and melt. Add the onion, season with salt and pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and lightly caramelized, about 20 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 2-3 minutes more. Remove the pan from the heat and toss the onions with the bacon and thyme. Cool to room temperature.



While the onion is cooking and cooling, roll out the pastry dough on a lightly floured surface. Line a 9 or 10-inch tart pan with the pastry leaving about 1/4-inch for shrinkage; crimp the edges. Cover the pastry and store in the refrigerator until ready to use.

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Preheat the oven to 450 degrees and arrange the rack in the middle of the oven.

Put the eggs, sour cream, mustard and nutmeg in a large bowl, season with salt and pepper and whisk to combine. Add the onions and bacon and toss to combine. Pour the onion mixture into the tart shell.

Put the tart in the oven, lower the oven temperature to 350 degrees and bake for 30 minutes or until the custard is set and the top is golden brown. Cool for 5-10 minutes and serve.

Savory Flakey Pastry

1 cup all-purpose flour

1/2 teaspoon salt

4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) chilled butter, cut into small pieces

3 tablespoons solid vegetable shortening, cold, cut into small pieces

2-4 tablespoons ice water

Blend the flour and salt in a food processor. Add the butter and shortening and process until the mixture resembles coarse meal.

Sprinkle with ice water, 1-2 tablespoons at a time and process until the dough comes together in a ball. Remove the dough from the food processor and flatten into a disk. Wrap the dough in plastic and chill until firm, at least 30 minutes.



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