Cooking Up Smiles

Memories of a favorite uncle who traveled with his songs and recipes.

By Tina M. Hultslander

When the smell of crackling bacon and honey-coated biscuits wafted its way up the stairs and into my nostrils, I woke instantly. I grabbed my robe and ran down the stairs because I knew what it meant: Uncle Al had made it down from New York City for his yearly vacation stop at our Hagerstown, Md., home.

Al had learned to cook at the ripe old age of 12—not because he wanted to learn, but because he was forced to learn. My grandmother passed away shortly after my mother, Grace, was born, and Al was the eldest son. Consequently, while my grandfather worked, Al was left in charge of cooking, cleaning and rearing the other children. It was a big job, but Al never complained.

"If you're going to do something, then you do it right," he'd always say with a big smile on his face and a swagger in his step.

Unfortunately, my mother never quite picked up the flair for cooking that seemed to come so naturally to Al. I tolerated her meals, from lumpy potatoes to tough–as–shoe leather roasts, on a regular basis. So whenever Al came to visit in the late 1940s, it was a real treat, with real good food to eat. Al would start by checking our cupboards and pantry for all of the items that he needed to cook the week through. Mom dutifully bought whatever Al needed, because that gave her a much- needed break from cooking.

While Al cooked, he serenaded everyone with song, and he could sing pretty well, too. Mrs. Lowry, who lived next door, would open her windows and yell, "I can tell Al's here!"

His charm permeated our home, just as his food dressed up our dinner table. Even though Al had lived a life out of necessity rather than desire, he never showed displeasure with his circumstances. He went to New York to make his fortune, but he had no formal education. He used the talents that he had acquired from his childhood to secure a job with a tailor, sewing and altering men's suits.

He could do almost anything a woman could do around the house, and sometimes I think that he could do things better than a lot of women. I wondered if it bothered Al that he could do so much girly stuff, that he never got a chance to be tough like other boys.

"It's not what you can do, but how you can do it."

"Al, do you ever get teased about doing all these kinds of things?" I asked him one evening.

Al taught me a valuable lesson with his response: "It's not what you can do, but how you can do it." Al smiled back as he looked me straight in the eyes. "If you are ever going to be truly good at anything in this world, then you have to attack it with enthusiasm and reflect that enthusiasm back to others.

"When I cook, I sing, and I put the love of song in my food, and I give it back to all of you."

I lowered my head at Al's answer. I felt ashamed of what I had asked this proud man.

Uncle Al did everything out of love. He took care of his siblings, and he learned how to do it because he loved his family that much. The key to his success was a combination of the right amount of drive, enthusiasm and desire.

I appreciated Al for his cooking, but after that day, I admired him more for the life lesson he taught me. I applied it to my own life, and I never could have done that without dear Uncle Al. ❖

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