

Sooner or later you get it right

“Gramma, would you teach us how to make tourtière?” My sister Elaine mangled the beautiful French word for meat pie. But I could do no better, as none of our generation has learned to speak the language of our heritage. Of the three girls, Elaine is the oldest and often elected to speak on our behalf because she is both assertive and wily, as first children often are. But when she made her inquiry, she still sounded like a little girl. We all feel astronomically small in the presence of our grandmother.

“Sure,” she shrugged her shoulders and puckered her lips.

We are in my sister Sylvia’s kitchen. Elaine is visiting from her home, then in Qatar, and I, from Arizona. Each summer, when the days are balmy and tumbles of clouds meander through the blue brilliance of unending sky, we make our journeys back to Brandon to spend time with our family – our parents, Sylvia and our two brothers, Ed and Bob. We are farm girls at heart and cannot pass a year without being near the yeasty musk of wheat fields and the purple seas of flax. On this occasion our grandmother is visiting from British Columbia, too.

We conspired beforehand to ask her to give us a lesson in meat pie-making. Not that we had to conspire, as my grandmother has always been generous with her time and willing to share whatever we ask of her. But, we agreed that in order for us to make her tourtière the way we remember it tasting, there was no other way than to corner her and watch her do it from beginning to

end. And we also agreed that this recipe definitely needed to be preserved because it is part of our best memories of her, the savoury pies lined up on the counter as we would sit at the kitchen table sipping cups of Red Rose tea and talking about all manner of things. Never one to monopolize a conversation, she was a good listener, and when we were young that made us feel special. It still does. But if you could get her to talk about her own experiences, she would take you there in serpentine memories, a reflection of her long and varied life.

I learned a lot about my grandmother over cups of tea. That's when I found out that while growing up on a farm in Saskatchewan she gained no experience in the kitchen.

"So how did you learn to cook, Gramma?" I remember asking her.

"Oh, I watch. Every chance I get, I watch."

And now we are here, her three granddaughters, eager to watch her in the kitchen, eager to learn. "We're going to write down your recipe," I say.

"You don't need to write nothing down. It's only a few things," Gramma sputters out the words in a little laugh. Her eyes glitter; her face always bursts into light when she is amused. Of course, the recipes she used didn't come to her in that way. They came from observing out of the corner of her eye while separating milk in her mother's kitchen, and then from the edge of the room in her mother-in-law's home.

"You got some hamburger, dear?" she asks, already up and out of her chair, rubbing the palms of her hands on her hips as if priming them for action.

Sylvia jumps to attention. “Yes, we do, Gramma,” her voice sing-songy with excitement, “and what else do you need?”

“A good-sized onion and maybe about six potatoes ... and the spices. We start that first and then I make the crusts. So I need some flour and lard, too.”

My sister bustles about the kitchen, quickly setting on the counter a frying pan, a cooking pot, four pie plates, a bag of flour and a can of Crisco, before standing at the edge of the U-shaped kitchen like a soldier, hands behind her back, awaiting orders.

In her advancing years, my grandmother doesn't move quickly but every move is deliberate and rhythmic. It feels like we are in the prelude to a song and when her work begins we will be caught up in the melody of it. She begins by lightly sautéing some chopped onion in a bit of butter, then crumbles the ground beef into the pan and stirs and pokes at it so the meat breaks apart into little morsels. Then, her old hands nimbly pare the potatoes.

Elaine and I lean on the outside of the counter that separates the kitchen from the dining area, papers and pencils in hand, both taking notes, which we have decided we will compare later to fine-tune her instructions. We watch quietly.

I clear my throat before I ask, “Was that three pounds of ground beef?”

“Yes, about that. But you could use less and add some pork if you want.”

“And you cook it slowly for an hour?”

“About an hour, 'til it get nice and crumbly.”

“At medium heat?”

“Or a little lower. You watch it and stir it, make sure it get nice and brown.”

I write “nice and crumbly and brown” in brackets next to “medium heat” with a question mark beside it.

“So, Gramma ... um, you said six potatoes, right?”

“Yes, dear. But if the potatoes are small maybe you use eight or nine.”

In one fluid motion she cuts the last potato into the pot of water, puts it on the stove, turns it up to high, shakes a bit of salt and pepper into the pan of meat and onions, and stirs it briskly.

In unison, Elaine and I put pens to paper: Season meat with salt and pepper. So far she has only used three ingredients but I already have a page of notes.

Sylvia steps tentatively toward the counter. “Do you need anything else, Gramma?” She doesn’t have to be tentative in her own kitchen. This is a woman who churns out monstrous meals for four hungry boys every day; she’s being respectful of the long-held rhythm of our grandmother’s way of moving about her work when she’s in the kitchen. The feel of it is perceptible, an almost audible hum. We are watching her performance; we are in the middle of her song.

“No, dear. This is just fine. I think I make the crusts now,” she announces in a small voice.

I wonder if she is uncomfortable with all of us leaning in on her, watching her every move, as she has mostly worked alone in the kitchen, maybe as a way of leaving everything behind for a brief hour or two. Or, as I look at her tiny

frame, frailer now in her eighties, I am worried that maybe this has been too much to ask of her and she is getting tired.

Her hand dips into the flour bag, then drops the mound into a mixing bowl quickly, deftly – once, twice, how many times?

“Uh, Gramma, how much flour would you say that is?”

She stares into the bowl. “Oh, about four, four and a half, maybe five cups.” And then she laughs, “You know I don’t use no measure. I use a special bowl and fill it a certainty amount. I been doing that all my life. That bowl, it go everywhere with me.”

I know the bowl she speaks of; the middle-sized one of a set of three – thick and milky white inside, pale yellow outside and multi-purpose – which she used for mixing, or serving a dish of cold potato salad, or oven-hot macaroni. I think about all the moves my grandmother has made, and how deliberately and lovingly she must have packed that bowl, one of the small constants in her continually changing life.

“Like your black, iron pot, eh Gramma?”

“Oh yes, dear. Like my black pot. I cook many a meal in that old, black pot.”

She has scooped a couple of hunks of Crisco into the bowl and is working the shortening into the flour with magnificent speed. Her voice shakes a little with her movement, “This stuff don’t make such a good pie crust. Lard is better. Pig fat, you know. That’s what I use when we were on the farm ... yes, that lard make such nice crust.”

Her actions flow in a mounting crescendo as she rubs the flour and shortening into a butter-coloured meal and tips a trail of water from a cup into the bowl. Her hands push and move the mixture into dough, her body rocking back and forth with the rhythm. A dusting of flour floats through her fingers onto the counter. And then the rolling pin whirls and spins this way and that, loose but controlled in her grip, pulsing the knob of pastry until it's smooth and thin. Then the gentle flop of crust into a pie tin, more pushing and moving and cutting the edges with a paring knife in a calliope spin. Again and again and again she does this, each crust perfect in its plate.

Sylvia stands with her hands over her mouth, and Elaine and I, our minds twirling, wordlessly try to record her dervish magic. How much shortening did she use? Was that more flour she added, or was it water? How much would that be in cups? Teaspoons? Tablespoons? What?

“Okay,” she says, “those potatoes should be done. Do you have a ricer, dear?”

My sister pumps her arms and high-steps her way out of the mesmerizing moment. “Of course, Gramma, but let me do the potatoes for you,” she offers.

My grandmother finally accepts my sister's help, “Oh, all right.”

She shakes what she tells us is about one teaspoon or so of cinnamon, about a half teaspoon of nutmeg and the same of cloves, and a little more salt and pepper into the meat and then folds in the fluffy, riced potatoes. She quietly tends to the savoury mixture for a few minutes, stirring and watching, one hand on her hip, then spoons equal amounts into the pastry shells and delicately covers each

with a top crust. Moving the pie tin slowly in a counter-clockwise direction, she uses the palms of her hands to define its edge and, after slicing away the excess dough with a knife, rhythmically presses her thumb and index finger along the edge to seal the crust in fluted beauty. Four quick slashes on the top crust of each pie and into the hot oven. Her song is done.

Our pencils are on the counter. We have recorded the ingredients of the filling for our grandmother's *tourtière* on paper, but my sisters and I have no idea how we will ever replicate her delectable melt-in-our-mouths crust. When we tell her this she says, "It take me a long time to make a good crust. See, you watch me do it, now you go try. Keep trying." She shrugs and puckers, "Sooner or later, you get it right."

TOURTIÈRE

3 lbs "not too lean" ground beef
1 large onion, chopped
Salt and pepper
6 large potatoes, peeled
1 teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon each nutmeg and ground cloves [LH Q: ok?]
3 unbaked double pie crusts

Brown meat and onion in a large frying pan; add salt and pepper to taste and cook slowly for about an hour, stirring often so meat doesn't stick to pan.

In the meantime, boil peeled potatoes [LH Q: are we baking the crusts here? List implies they are already made.]. When potatoes are cooked, rice them into the meat mixture and add cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves and more salt and pepper to taste. Mix and cook for approximately 15 minutes on low heat, stirring often.

Divide evenly into pie crusts, cover with top crusts, which have been vented, and bake in a preheated 375 degree oven for 45 minutes, or until crusts are nicely browned. Serve immediately. (Extra pies can be cooled and frozen for later use: reheat at 300 degrees for about 1 hour.)

Though this dish was not reserved for Christmas, my maternal great-grandmother Philomène, my grandmother and my mother always served it on Christmas Eve, and made enough extra (kept cooled in the root cellar or frozen in the granary) to heat up and munch on well into the New Year. That lingering fragrance of meat seasoned with cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves and the subtle earthy, smooth scent of baked pie crust will forever be synonymous with the holiday season in my family.

PIE CRUST

(Makes 6 shells or 3 shells and pie tops)

4 cups white flour

2 teaspoons salt

1 pound pork lard (or shortening) [LH Q: not nec. for brandnames]

Ice-cold water [LH Q: how much? more than ¼ cup specified below]

Blend flour and salt in a bowl. Cut up lard and add to flour mixture with a pastry blender until crumbly; then rub mixture between hands to make into even finer texture. Add ice-cold water, ¼ of a cup at a time until dough is firm. (If the dough is sticky, you have used too much water. Start again.)

Separate enough dough to make one pie crust. On a floured surface, roll out to ¼ inch thickness with rolling pin. Lift dough delicately but quickly into a pie pan and mold to inside; then cut extra dough from edge of pan. Leftover edges can be used for making next crust.

To make extra pie shells for other use, bake at 400 degrees for 30 minutes.

My grandmother obviously had a magic touch when it came to making pie crusts. (Personally, I've cried, cursed, mostly given up and called on my good friend, Sara Lee to make one that isn't chewy or hard as stone.) And even more wondrous: she could make a batch in minutes. This recipe is as close as my mother and I could come to recording her magic. I wish you peace and joy, should you decide to try it.