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Sunday Sauce

Cover Page Footnote

Written for WRT 422

Lombardi: Sunday Sauce Sunday Sauce

Ava Lombardi



I arrive home from school for winter break. I park my car in the snowy driveway and run into the house, leaving my bags in the trunk to get later. I walk in the door and am immediately greeted by the familiar scents of oregano, olive oil, and tomatoes. I hear something sizzling in a pan and know that just a few hours before, my mom was standing over the counter combining three types of meats and a special concoction of Italian spices to make meatballs.

“Hi, honey,” my mom says, leaving the stove and running over to give me a hug. “I am making sauce and meat—”

“I know,” I interrupt her. “I could smell it from outside.”

I’ve grown intimately familiar with the way this dish ignites the senses. “Sunday Sauce” has been a tradition in my house for as long as I can remember. During the months that I am away from home, I find myself dreaming about the crunch of warm

garlic bread and the sound of forks scratching plates as everyone twirls their spaghetti. Watching as heat rises from a meatball that has just been cut in half, feeling it melt in your mouth with every bite.

Sunday Sauce was the first meal I ever ate with my parents. I was propped in my high chair and fell asleep on my plate five minutes later. My dad’s favorite photo of me is one he captured that night as I was passed out, my face covered in sauce.

My mom grew up with Sunday Sauce, cooked every week by her grandma Felicia, who would make the pasta from scratch, crush her own tomatoes, and serve a group of more than 30 people as if it were nothing. My mom often recalls bonding with Felicia—who spoke no English—through food, and particularly through this meal. My mom would simply imitate Felicia’s movements in the kitchen, rolling meatballs and seasoning sauce as she had watched her grandmother

do. I never met Felicia but am eternally grateful to her for leaving such a legacy.

My mom and her two siblings went on to adopt their own versions of Sunday Sauce and often bicker about which qualities constitute the real deal. My aunt's sauce is thinner, spicy from the extra red pepper flakes and hot sausage that she "can't believe Felicia never thought of using." My uncle's secret ingredient is a dash of sugar, adding to the sweetness of the tomatoes—a little too much, in my opinion—and thickening the sauce just a bit.

Our Sunday Sauce falls somewhere in the middle, slightly infused with oregano from the meatballs that my mom lets sit in the sauce for hours before we eat.

"How remarkable," my dad says every time our extended family is gathered, "that three children, all raised in the same house with the same meal, took one recipe and created three new ones." He's right. Their individual methods are so different, yet are all rooted in the same values.

My dad was somewhat skeptical of Sunday Sauce when he first met my mom: "How can you have the same meal every week and not get sick of it?" he would ask her every time she would make the dish, though he would proceed to finish his entire plate and go back for seconds.

Though he too had an Italian heritage, my dad was not raised with its influence and was not familiar with any cultural practices until he was married.

Over the years he has tested his luck at convincing my mom to change the tradition, suggesting that instead of serving the same exact dish, she rotate through sauce-based dishes like lasagna and meatball subs.

"It could add a little excitement to Sundays, like, 'What is she going to make this week?'" he has explained. Despite his best and most humorous attempts, though, my mom has never given in.

"Feel free to make yourself lasagna with the sauce that I make every week!" she replies every time, knowing full well that he would rather eat Sunday Sauce every day of his life than be responsible for a meal.

I often think about how Sunday Sauce will continue to evolve as my sisters and I grow up and begin families of our own. I, unfortunately, have not inherited my mom's talent for cooking and cannot even fathom taking on this meal alone. But I also can't fathom a world without Sunday Sauce—and I know that nothing would mean more to Mom than to one day come over to our houses for Sunday dinner. This recipe is coveted, as my mom and her siblings have only ever shared it with their children. I don't know if my mom would be thrilled or offended if my sisters and I changed her recipe. Probably somewhere in between. Italians can be *very* sensitive about their recipes.

I get my bags out of the car and go upstairs to change, the scents of garlic and olive oil following me, permeating the entire house. This is the same smell that used to wake me up every Sunday for most of my life. My mom likes to start her sauce in the early morning hours so that "the flavors have time to marry each other."

I walk back down and take a seat at the island, right across from my mom. I can't count how many hours I have spent sitting here, watching her roll meatballs or frost cupcakes. She maintains such an ease in the kitchen: she is confident in both her

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technique and her palate, never bothering to glance at a recipe because her ability to eyeball measurements and identify what is missing from a dish surpasses that of most people. She commands a kitchen like it is something that she was born to do, offering support and guidance but unafraid to keep people from destroying a meal.

My efforts to help her cook are usually short-lived, as she will take one look at my knife skills and subtly ask if I want to “take over stirring instead,” fully knowing I’ll probably mess that up, too. Her need to control everything is only ever offset by her excitement to be with her kids.

My dad begins pouring everyone a very generous glass of red wine while my mom portions out the pasta and meatballs, giving everyone way too much as she does with every meal.

We sit down for dinner and start passing around the block of Parmesan cheese and homemade garlic bread, as we’ve done every Sunday for 18 years. We are wine and dined, my sisters and I falling into our typical banter as we do every time we all come back together. I find myself savoring every bite of pasta, which has been my favorite food for as long as I can remember.

“How come every time Ava comes home we have to have this meal?” asks my youngest sister, Mia, who turns her nose up at Sunday Sauce for a reason unbeknownst to me.

“Because it’s her favorite, and we don’t have it nearly as much as we used to,” my mom replies. We share a mutual love of this meal and sadness that it has become less frequent in our house since I left for college.

“Mark my words, Mia,” I say. “When you leave for college next year, you will be counting down the days until you can come back and have sauce.”

“I can guarantee you I won’t,” she snaps back. *We’ll see*, I think to myself.

“I go months at a time without having Sunday Sauce and still don’t want to ever look at it again,” my sister Bella chimes in. She shares my dad’s point of view: having the same meal every week is redundant.

I’m not sure why I have such an affinity for Sunday Sauce, and perhaps I didn’t even realize how important it was to me until I left for college. My roommates at school laugh at me every Sunday, when I open a can of subpar tomato sauce and boil pasta and treat myself to the college rendition of Sunday Sauce. But they get just as excited as I do when my mom comes to visit, bringing with her a duffle bag full of sauce and meatballs for us to freeze. Murmurs of “holy crap” and “oh my God” ring through the kitchen of our apartment as my friends all indulge in our freshly thawed meal.

Little do they know how much better it is when served in my dining room, accompanied by fried eggplant and sprinkled with parsley from the garden.

“Honey, I think that may have been one of the best batches of sauce you’ve ever made,”

Photo by Julia Nagy from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/tomato-lot-1327838>.

my dad says, setting his utensils down. He says this just about every time we have this meal, but my mom takes the compliment, nonetheless.

We have a lot of traditions in my house, many of which I find to be trivial, unimportant. Using a specific knife to cut our birthday cakes every year? Minor. Participating in an annual Easter egg hunt even though we are all adults now? Embarrassing, to say the least. But Sunday Sauce is the furthest thing from trivial. I would even go as far as to say that Sunday Sauce defines my house, my family. It is the meal that my friends hope to be invited to every week, though only an elite few get the invite. It is the meal that my mom has waiting for me when I come home from school each break. It is the meal to which no other meal matches up. My home is in the fresh pasta and the homemade tomato sauce and the dense meatballs that my mom refuses to let anyone else make. Sunday Sauce is not a tradition, because to compare it to any other tradition would be an insult to the food that has shaped my sense of culture and family.

We leave the dinner table, my sisters run

upstairs and my parents begin cleaning up. I bring a few dishes to the sink and take my seat back at the kitchen island—my way of keeping my mom company while avoiding being put to work. One would think that the copious amounts of food my mom always makes are intended to last for days, but no one in my house really eats leftovers and, unfortunately, a lot gets tossed.

“Can you freeze some of the sauce and meatballs for me to take back to school next month?” I ask my mom.

“Don’t be silly. I’ll make you a fresh batch, and give you even more to make sure your friends get their fix,” she says as she dumps pasta into the garbage. *Such a waste*, I think to myself. I would eat years-old-Sunday Sauce if I had to.

I feel grateful to be home, surrounded by my family and comforted by a meal that is so much more than just that. Sunday Sauce serves as a connection to our heritage, to each other. Now more than ever, it’s a source of comfort, a constant in a world that is changing with every passing second.

Photo by Terje Sollie from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/person-pouring-wine-on-clear-wine-glass-313715>.

