

Lee Coppola and Lee Coppola
(No, That's Not a Typo)
and Their Secret Recipe
by Sal and Mary Dee Martoche

One of the most wonderful traditions among Italian-Americans passed on to them by their born-in-Italy ancestors is the importance of bonding over a dinner table as bountiful as they could make it. When their ancestors were forced to leave their homes and families in the old country to seek a better life for their children because mere survival was becoming ever more challenging, they said goodbye with tears in their eyes and fear in their hearts.

And with little more than the clothes on their backs and the pennies in their pockets, they boarded ships, found steerage and headed for the promised land. While life would be very difficult for them economically and culturally in the new world, they would persevere in large part because they had each other.

They brought with them the tradition of joining together after Sunday Mass to spend the day together, usually over a simple plate of pasta pomodoro of some kind and a glass of wine.

Amid the shared thoughts, opinions, events and stories, they angered and comforted one another, they discussed their ailments and perhaps sought counsel for their challenges.

They talked about everything - from their illnesses to their neighbors to their government. Even when circumstances dictated that the meals would be sparse because the crops in their farms or gardens were less productive or their finances pinched for one reason or another, they came together to share a meal and to linger long over coffee, the last of the wine, fruits and nuts. Everybody came - nonnas, poppas, brothers, sisters, children. And it usually happened on a Sunday because that was the one day that time away from work allowed. After church, the women met in the kitchen to do their best to please their families.



Lee and Lee Coppola

This tradition continued among Italian-Americans for many years, but eventually, as people moved away from city neighborhoods into suburbs and as transportation and communication allowed them to participate in more and different activities, it became more difficult to carry on. Yet some of us held on to that tradition longer than others and some of us even maintain it to this day.

But no one we know has continued the tradition quite like a husband and wife who share the same name - Lee and Lee Coppola. Their house has long been the meeting place for family members for dinners and holidays. Mrs. Lee (Lena Elardo by birth), as we call her to distinguish her from Mr. Lee, loves to cook and entertain. She loves to make people happy. As anyone who knows this couple will tell you, she is the *sofrito* of this family, the essential element to all good sauces. Her labor of love requires long hours of preparation because, together with Mr. Lee, they love to share their abundance with others.

Their dinner table(s) sometimes, for special days, might have 20 or 30 people crowded into a space of love and laughter. It's their way. Mr. Lee (born Leibert after Liberace's brother, - go figure) is a larger than-life-figure who proudly pours his own home-made wine. You may know him as a celebrated investigative journalist, both from his days at the Buffalo News, when he was reporting on organized crime and uncovering other serious crime or corruption, or as the troubleshooter on Channel 4 or 7.

Or perhaps as the dean of the Jandoli School of Communication at St. Bonaventure University. Or, if you look a bit harder, from his service as an assistant United States Attorney, or from his coining of the iconic term, "The French Connection," to mark the greatest trio of hockey players in Buffalo Sabres history.

And while Mr. Lee relished the public arena, Mrs. Lee relished the intimacy and the warmth of the haven she created for her husband and children, Julie, Frank and Michael. She instilled in them all the strong connection to family as the root of their lives and challenged them to strengthen their wings to make their own ways in the world.

These two have had their children and their spouses, their grandchildren, in-laws, cousins, nieces and nephews

from Western New York and beyond at their Sunday dinner table for over 50 years. Oh, did we mention friends and acquaintances? Sometimes strangers who were invited to this weekly celebration? Did we mention that Mr. Lee has occasionally forgotten until the 11th hour that he had invited others to join the celebration? And never, ever, did Mrs. Lee blink or get angry. Her response always - "Well, the more the merrier," or occasionally, she'd warn him to go easy on the meatballs.

The secret ingredient in all of Mrs. Lee's recipes is love. You can taste and smell it in every dish. Together, Mr. and Mrs. Lee set an example of true love, not only for one another and their immediate family, but for so many others for whom they are the magnet. What a couple! What an inspiration they are to all of us. They have succeeded in carrying forward the best traditions of the ancestors they loved so much to generations who never knew them but will never forget them and what they meant to those gathered around the Coppola dinner table, laughing, talking over one another, sharing food, wine, hopes, dreams and fears and, finally and reluctantly, leaving replenished both physically and spiritually.

We know that Frank and Lucy Coppola and Frank and Lena Elardo see this and say to one another, "We got it right."



Sunday dinner at the Coppolas