

From Prairie to Pasta

By Mary Dee (Benesh) Martoche.



Mary Dee and Sal Martoche, wedding day, May 30, 1967, in Grand Forks, ND

My introduction to what it meant to be Italian-American in Buffalo in 1967 began before I was married, with Easter dinner at my fiancé's home (Sal Martoche in case you haven't read the byline) - which was, or at least I thought it was, homemade

chicken soup, which seemed a little strange for Easter dinner but it was really good chicken soup and I cleaned my bowl. And then to my complete amazement followed homemade ravioli and meatballs and brasciole - and then ham and turkey, mashed potatoes, many vegetables, and on and on. And, of course, salad at the end. Next, three kinds of pie, something called cannoli, which I really liked, and nuts and fruit. And lots of wine and coffee. And lots of conversations punctuated with appropriate waving of hands and arms. I was stunned. My future mother-in-law and sister-in-law really outdid themselves that day. By the end, I was trying to figure out how to push food around my plate so they wouldn't notice I had stopped eating. Who could eat all that food?

There were so many differences between growing up in Bismarck, North Dakota, and growing into adulthood in Buffalo, New York, it's hard to know where to start. In Bismarck, we were all pretty similar - mostly of northern European descent, lots of Scandinavians and especially Norwegians, and a group we called "German-Russians," who had traveled to Russia from Germany and then emigrated to the northern prairies. There was one African-American family and a few native Americans. We all went to church on Sunday, most of us to a

Protestant church, but some to a Catholic church. Almost none of us attended a temple, a mosque or any other place of worship. We were pretty isolated up there in North Dakota, especially in the 1950's. The closest big city was Minneapolis, more than 400 miles away, a long drive before interstate highways, with a population of about 500,000, but still the people who lived there were a lot like us. We grew up in a time before the ubiquitous presence of TV and certainly smart phones and had only each other to compare ourselves to and we were all pretty similar. We were modest, reserved, stoic, pretty taciturn. Our homes were small Cape Cods and ranches. Even the rich doctors and lawyers didn't live so differently. We mostly went to public schools, although a few attended Catholic schools. There were no private schools or clubs, no small corners of privilege and exclusion. Of course there were no major sports teams anywhere close so the teams we rooted for were our high school and local college teams. All in all, we lived in a safe, sheltered environment.

For me, this all changed when I took home somebody entirely different from all of this and announced he was the man I intended to marry. As I've said many



Author, held by her mom, Marjorie Handy Benesh and flanked by grandmother, Blanche Reeshagen Handy, and great-grandmother, Gina Herreid Reeshagen, Washburn, ND, 1947.

times, when I took Sal home to meet my family, aside from the fact that he was Italian, Catholic and from New York, they didn't mind him too much. And then I married into an Italian-American family - a group of people who were about as different as they could be - demonstrative, loud, outspoken and who couldn't be around one another often enough, who kissed and hugged coming and going from the grocery store.

Looking back, I'm pretty sure my new family wondered if I was not able to speak - at the large family dinners with many conversations going on all at once it took me a while to figure out that I couldn't wait for a break in the conversation in order to say something, because there never was one - I had to make eye contact with someone who wasn't talking and start talking and then I was in! And all of this was punctuated by Big Grandma as she was called, Sal's Grandma Angelina Pignone, calling out to me from time to time: "Mangia, Dolly Girl! Mangia! Wha's a matter? Nunja lika Buffalo? Eat." The bountiful, celebratory and somewhat chaotic table - whether we were celebrating St. Joseph's Day, Christmas or a birthday - was a constant. And of course Sunday sauce at my in-laws was a weekly compulsory event.



Angelina Pignone

I remember the first Buffalo Bills game I attended at the old Rock Pile, which held 46,000 people. Looking around, I realized there were more people in the stadium than in my home town of Bismarck, population 30,000 the year I graduated from high school. To me, Buffalo was the big city and I was totally unprepared for its size, its grittiness, its robust ethnic life, its Catholic-ness, if that is a word. The notion that different ethnic groups had their very own specific identities - Irish, Polish, German, all distinct from Italian - was new to me. The summer of 1967 saw unrest as a result of racial strife in many large cities and Buffalo was one of them. That was a source of worry.

I was unprepared for the exuberance of Italian-Americans at family or other social gatherings, the force of emotions, both happy and sad, so readily displayed, the pettiness of Italian-American women (I often felt like the Jolly Green Giant in their presence). I fell in love with Italian food, especially pasta, a love which continues to this day. Luckily, my mother-in-law was an able and generous teacher, although it took me a while to get past a "smidge" of this or a "tish" of that in her oral recipes which I carefully translated to teaspoons, tablespoons and cups.

I learned and adapted and found a life that continues to fulfill me. I developed my own friendships with many people in Buffalo, some of the closest of whom were and are Italian-Americans. Those friendships continue to this day. I found a true home in Buffalo and feel a deep, abiding connection to its people, its spirit, its gutsiness and its open arms to all newcomers, especially a (mostly) Scandinavian young woman far from her home in North Dakota. And, yes, especially for its Italian-Americans who continue to amaze, fascinate, welcome and love me.