

## In Nancy's Kitchen

CAROLINE M. GRANT

---

In Nancy's kitchen, we found nineteen pounds of pasta, three bottles of clam juice, six jars of chutney, and seven different types of olive paste. In Nancy's kitchen, three packages of ice cream cones stood next to two bags of chips and one box of matzo meal. In Nancy's kitchen, you could open any cupboard and find the fixings for a complete meal, but you might search for an hour before finding a measuring cup (there was one, behind the ramekins, next to the olive oil, in the cupboard over the stove). In Nancy's kitchen, crystal wineglasses clinked shoulders with French country pottery, and a tin of white truffles threatened to fall over onto a twisted, half-spent tube of sweetened vanilla chestnut puree. We found enough rustic burlap bags of Arborio to sandbag the house in a flood. My mother-in-law had cans of soup for emergencies and a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese because her niece and nephews didn't really like what Jim, her late husband, made them from scratch. They've grown past the mac-and-cheese stage, but a box remained, just in case.

My husband Tony, our one-year-old son Ben, and I were staying with Tony's mom Nancy because she was bedridden with leg pain. We thought it was a result of overly ambitious physical therapy after a back injury, just a temporary inconvenience. We thought she just needed company and a couple warm meals until she was back on her feet and back to her morning routine: the paper and a bowl of polenta with cracked pepper at the Depot downtown, then home for a spell before heading over the hill to Larkspur, where she would sit at her regular table in the Italian café with a cappuccino and the *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

The first weekend we were all out of sorts. Ben didn't sleep well in the unfamiliar portacrib; Tony and I didn't sleep well in the overheated guest room; Nancy didn't sleep well for concern about us. We didn't bring enough clothing; we didn't bring enough toys to distract Ben from his Nonna's unbabyproofed cupboards. But the second weekend, though fighting a rising tide of worry (why is she still in such crying pain?), we were ready. We loaded the car as if for a trip cross-country, not just across the bridge, and settled in.

At first we kept Ben's high chair in the dining room and excused ourselves from Nancy to feed him. But Ben's a good eater, and we soon realized his meals could highlight our days. We rolled his high chair into her bedroom, and three times a day his meals were a show, the day's entertainment. He flapped his arms, impatient at how slowly we shoveled spoonfuls into his eager mouth, then flapped again to demand the sippy cup. Working on finger food, he carefully picked up each piece, head bent low with concentration, his fingers awkward tweezers, then held it aloft like a trophy: "Ta-da! Apple chunk!" we'd narrate. "Ta-da! Green pea!"

Nancy, her glasses temporarily lost somewhere in her bed's chaos of newspapers, telephone, and remote control, would ask what Ben was eating and would be particularly pleased if it was something she enjoyed, too—Cheerios held her interest somewhat less, for instance, than pasta. "What kind of pasta is he eating? Fusilli, really? With sauce? What kind? Has he had ravioli yet? Oh, tortellini? Mmmm." Invariably, Ben's dinner would inspire a reminiscence of some past meal, maybe one long ago, when she and her husband lived in Rome, or perhaps one we'd all shared at a restaurant just weeks before.



I met Nancy the summer that Tony and I started dating, when he brought me to spend the weekend at his parents' house in Stinson Beach. Tony's relationship with his mother was easy, companionable, maybe because she'd had a whole life—twenty years of marriage, full of travel and music and art—before having kids. She'd been surprised by motherhood and viewed it always as a gift to celebrate. (The night she went into labor with Tony, she liked to remember, she'd enjoyed a shrimp curry and a dry martini.) She treated him with the same delight she'd met him with thirty

years before; he treated her like a queen; they both made plenty of room in the sun for me.

That weekend, she greeted me warmly and took us out for dinner at The Sand Dollar, the local seafood place where everyone knew her family so well that our dinner was frequently interrupted by friends stopping by to say hello. Friday was lobster night, and since Tony is a vegetarian, she was delighted that I would keep her company with the messy meal. After dinner, and for the rest of the weekend, she made herself scarce. I woke Saturday morning to find a variety of sweet rolls and three different kinds of peppermint tea laid out for me on the rough wooden kitchen table; Tony had given her an idea of what I liked to eat for breakfast, and she characteristically, as I would learn, bought a generous assortment to cover all possibilities. Tony sometimes hesitated to tell his mom he liked some food, knowing from long experience that she would lay in abundant supply for his visits; she would literally buy stock in the company if that would keep a favorite product on the shelves.

I was delighted to find in her a kindred spirit. Like me, she was as interested in talking and reading about food as she was in cooking and eating it. Food was her religion and her culture: she ate corned beef and cabbage for St. Patrick's Day, latkes for Passover, and steamed pork buns for the Lunar New Year; she filled the family's Christmas stockings with chocolates and oranges, of course, but also bottles of hot sauce and jars of chutney, and someone always found a roll of polenta. The next year, when Tony and I planned a trip to Italy, we coordinated our itinerary to overlap with Nancy's holiday in Venice and Florence. My friends were amazed, asking, "You're meeting Tony's *mom* on your romantic Italian vacation?" And I just nodded and smiled, knowing that meeting up with Nancy always meant meeting up with good food, interesting people, memorable experiences. We arrived in Venice, a few days after Nancy, and found a message to meet her in the Piazza San Marco. We showered quickly to wash off the long journey, then headed out. I spotted her from across the piazza, sitting at a small metal table, her smile growing broader as we walked across the stones. I was bleary-eyed from jetlag and everything looked hazy to me in the late afternoon sun, but I could see tears spring to Nancy's eyes as we reached her, so glad to introduce us now to this country she loved.

She had her own plans for the trip, personal reunions mapped out with a particular list of churches and museums. But starting that first afternoon in Venice, and each day following, we would rendezvous at her hotel around five to share details of the day's explorations over a bottle of Prosecco and a bowl of salted almonds, a ritual we dubbed "Nancy Hour." We mark it with our friends to this day.

Her delight in a good meal shared with close friends never diminished, even as her ability to host them did. Before she was widowed, she and her husband Jim would gather friends regularly for sumptuous meals at the beach house. They would start in the kitchen with drinks and salty snacks, and always at some point Nancy would turn from what she was doing and ask, "Jim, would you chop some parsley for me?" (One year for their anniversary she gave him a knife inscribed with those words.) Then they would all carry their drinks into the dining room and sit around the monastery table Nancy and Jim had carried home from their life in Italy. The table is long but very narrow, so everybody feels close. Its dark walnut top is scarred with knife marks and burns from hot dishes that lost their trivets, water rings and even some glitter from the boys' elementary school art projects. It's a table to linger over, so they did, talking and feasting for hours—bouillabaisse and paella, roasts and pastas—enjoying the food for longer, even, than it took to cook.

After Jim died, Nancy sold the Stinson Beach house, put the monastery table into storage, and moved to a small place in Mill Valley. She needed to be less isolated, wanted to be closer to friends and family. She no longer entertained the way she once had; the gatherings were smaller, mostly just family, and she wasn't too proud to buy a dish or two ready-made from the nice market in town, or to laugh at her cooking misfires. She made us a beautiful, complicated vegetarian jambalaya once (how do you make vegetarian jambalaya? I still do not know) but didn't manage to get all the plastic off the veggie sausage, so we fished the glossy bits out of our mouths and set them, like so many shrimp tails, on the edge of our plates. Her friends still gave her the ingredients for the generous feasts she used to make before her hands became too knotted up by arthritis to mince garlic easily. The generosity that inspired the lavish food gifts never abated; that's why she had three different kinds of lemon-flavored oils (olive, hazelnut, and grape seed) in three different cupboards.



We fell into a tradition of renting a house in Stinson for Thanksgiving. Nancy packed old cardboard wine boxes with the rolling pin, the food processor, extra mixing bowls, and sharp knives. We couldn't help teasing her a little for bringing most of her kitchen with her on vacation, but we used it all. The rental kitchens were always too small for more than one cook at a time, but we were used to that in Mill Valley; she and I cooked in turns, like children engaged in parallel play, talking about each other's dishes but not involving ourselves in them. We didn't share the intimacy of tasting and adding to each other's food; instead, the conversation about recipes or ingredients, articles in *Gourmet* or *Saveur*, breakfasts at the Depot or Rulli's—this soundtrack to our cooking—was always a bit more important than the cooking process itself. Sometimes the food conversation moved into the living room, where we would play Scrabble to determine what dish would get the tiny oven first, the turkey or the vegetarian shepherd's pie. Over the course of the week, she made at least three trips to Mill Valley for forgotten ingredients and fresh provisions. We accused her jokingly of sneaking over the hill for her polenta fix, and she laughed but didn't correct us.

After Tony and I married, we found a house with a dining room just the right size for the old monastery table. I don't know who was more pleased, Nancy or I, when we took it out of storage, dusted it off, and set it up. Just a few weeks later, the 9/11 attacks occurred; I was pregnant with Ben and feeling particularly vulnerable, so we gathered friends around the table for the first time. We made comfort food: Tony's mushroom ravioli with brown butter and fried sage leaves; salad with pears sautéed in red wine and spiced walnuts; my chocolate bread pudding.

To no one's surprise, Nancy was an even more doting grandmother than mother, and we made sure she saw a lot of Ben. Sometimes Tony would take him out to Mill Valley before work to surprise Nancy at the Depot and share some polenta. More often, we met up for weekend lunches, first with Ben nursing quietly in my arms or, when he was older, gnawing away at a sourdough crust. No one was happier than Nancy when Ben started eating table food, and she established a fancy high chair in her dining room so that he could easily participate in the family meals.

But the familiar space became suddenly fraught when Nancy fell sick. We were anxious about her, and newly anxious about Ben, too, who was just starting to walk. Her house seemed a minefield of disaster for a

curious toddler. And no room held greater appeal—because it was the place we all spent so much time—or greater potential for harm than her fabulous, messy, disorganized kitchen.



Her kitchen was my dream come true. To call it well stocked was an understatement. Name an ingredient, she had it on hand, and had the talent to turn it into a delicious dish. Name a cuisine, you'd find the ingredients to make a full meal.

But her kitchen was also my worst nightmare. Nesting bowls lived apart from their mates, stacked awkwardly with plates and pots; measuring cups sat far from any ingredients needing measuring (the breakfast cereal?) while a bag of rice, bottle of brandy, and tins of ground cinnamon shared a crowded shelf with a corkscrew and two silver platters. (I imagined the cooking show her kitchen would inspire: You have one hour to make a meal from the materials found in one cupboard. Go!) A black plastic trash bag sat slumped on the floor (I never understood why she wouldn't use a trash can), and good luck finding a free surface to set a dish. One year, Nancy cleared off the kitchen table, put a red bow on it, and "gave" it to her husband for Christmas (he was thrilled, though of course it didn't last).

I always steered clear of Nancy in action in her kitchen. The room's cramped L didn't allow for multiple cooks, but we would have stepped on each other's toes in less literal ways, anyway. Like me, she'd start any menu plan with cookbook research, pulling several off the shelf and consulting their grease-stained and dog-eared pages while she assembled a grocery list. But once back from the market, our approaches diverged. I'd prep my ingredients, chopping, measuring, and methodically assembling my *mise-en-place*. She'd pull ingredients out of cupboards, shopping bags, and refrigerator shelves as she needed them, measuring (or not) on the fly, and leave the open tins, sagging packages, and half-chopped bunches of herbs, still bundled at the stem, jumbled on the counter in her wake. A soggy stew of potato peels, eggshells, and dirty pans simmered in the sink.

When Nancy was cooking, none of this mess mattered—she certainly never seemed to notice it, let alone apologize for it—because somehow it never interfered with the generous feasts that would emerge from her kitchen. But now that she was bedridden, the kitchen mess was just that: a sad mess. And with Ben suddenly able to walk in, open any low cupboard,

and help himself to a snack of dish soap and hot sauce poured over food-processor blades, the mess mattered.

So before I could cook for Nancy in her kitchen, I had to make it a tiny bit more like my own. I had to tidy up. It was an act of faith. Every box of stale crackers that I threw away, every can of tomato paste that I wiped off and reshelfed, was assurance that Nancy would come back to the kitchen and mess it up all over again. It is my father's side of me that counted what I found, my mother's side that rearranged and organized it. And it was a gift I received from Nancy that turned it all into a game to distract her from her pain.

It started one morning, while she and Ben were both napping. I wandered into the kitchen (figuring that while moving the hazards out of Ben's reach, I could find something to fix for lunch) and was temporarily paralyzed—always my first reaction—by the clutter. I took a deep breath, opened a cabinet, and started unloading the contents onto a tray. I made a list of it all, then moved on to the next cabinet with another tray (there was no shortage of trays). Lunch forgotten, I continued my project, digging into the scrapbook of her kitchen. A messy kitchen doesn't keep secrets, after all, and if you know how to read the signs, you can learn about a person from the packages on the shelves. I dusted off labels, laughed at the bag of raspberry-flavored licorice (a gift from a well-meaning friend who knew she loved the flavors and mistakenly assumed the combination would be even better), and lost myself happily in reminiscences of meals past.

After a while, Tony appeared in the doorway, took in the scene (me, sitting on the floor surrounded by towers of tuna cans, stacks of crackers, and piles of pasta), and announced he would go pick up sandwiches.

That afternoon, while Tony and Ben sat playing in Nancy's room, I began making periodic reports of my findings.

"Nancy, guess how many pounds of pasta you have?"

"Oh, my, well . . . maybe, four?" She laughed, embarrassed, knowing it was likely more.

"Nineteen!" I called out.

"Mom!" Tony laughed. "You could start a restaurant."

"Well," she answered thoughtfully, "maybe I should. Maybe I should."

We played "Guess How Much Is in Your Kitchen?" for hours over the following days, until eventually I typed up the list and presented it to her. Over the next few weeks, I often overheard Nancy on the phone

with friends, distracting them from the bad news of her diagnosis (lung cancer, metastasized to her bones) by reading passages from the list and marveling over her own excess.

We fell into a routine that spring and summer, trying to care for Nancy without disrupting ourselves too much, as that would have upset her. Weekends were easy to spend together with her; during the week, Tony would rise early and drive to work before Ben was awake, so that he could get home in the late afternoon and eat dinner with us. After dinner, I'd put Ben to bed and Tony would drive out to Mill Valley to spend the evening with his mom.

She was hospitalized briefly for treatment, and I was determined to bring her a proper Easter dinner. I spent hours trying to figure out a meal I could cook ahead, transport easily, and serve at room temperature. I pored over cookbooks, hunting for ideas and comparing recipes. I was so pleased with my eventual menu: poached salmon with dill sauce, steamed green beans with lemon zest and slivered almonds, lemon tart. I'd never poached a salmon before, and Nancy was delighted, so proud of me.

But otherwise, I didn't cook much for Nancy during her illness. Her appetite diminished, her sense of taste deteriorated. One shop's chicken soup still tasted good to her, sometimes a little toast. She didn't want us to go to the trouble of stirring polenta just for her and didn't want us to eat something just because she did. Besides, it was rare now that I cooked anything healthy. Tony and I were settling into separate kitchen roles: he cooked with the stove; I used the oven. I was reverting to what I had first learned as my own mother's sous chef; she'd hand me the butter wrappers to grease the cookie sheets, show me how to sift flour onto a piece of waxed paper. I absorbed, through hours of baking at her side, the feel of kneading bread or rolling out biscuits. But, also, stove-top dinner making now seemed to me, to the mother of a curious toddler, all sharp knives and high heat. The oven felt safer. I could make bread or cookie dough in stages, prepping ingredients while Ben sat on the kitchen floor banging away with his bowl and spoon, and then leave it all to settle him for a nap. After a break, we could roll out and cut cookies together, or he could knead his own lump of dough. He'd sit and play for an hour with the (unplugged) stand mixer, pushing in and swapping out the whisk, the dough hook, and then the flat paddle, one by one. So I happily ceded dinner making to Tony, who, like his mother before him, was graceful and easy with stovetop

improvisation. For me, caught between the needs of an unpredictably declining mother-in-law and a clamorously insistent toddler, the steady rhythms and predictably satisfying outcomes of baking were a balm.

She came home from the hospital in time for her birthday, just a few weeks before she passed away. Tony steamed tender green beans and dressed them with butter and lemon zest, grilled baby zucchini, and made pasta with homemade pesto; I baked a chocolate torte topped with a scattering of raspberries for dessert. We opened a bottle of Prosecco and toasted her, and although she brought the glass to her lips, I don't think she tasted her wine. I don't think she ate more than a bite of anything. It took all her strength to come to the table (she insisted on coming to the table). She sat very quietly, pleased with our effort, happy that we were celebrating her birthday with such a meal.



Nancy's been gone almost seven years now. Ben doesn't remember her, and our younger son, Eli, never knew her. I show them pictures and tell them about the meals we shared. I tell them about the steak she ordered in Florence, covered with a bed of the brightest green spinach we'd ever seen, or the chocolate tower that was a regular part of our dinners in a local Italian restaurant; she'd tap the bottom with her fork to release a stream of chocolate. I tell them how happy she was when In-N-Out Burger, a fixture of her LA childhood, finally opened in Northern California, or about the meal at the raw-food restaurant that left her so hungry she went out for a second dinner afterward. We make wishes, as she did, on the first peach of summer. We talk while we cook, and I tell them stories of their Nonna.

#### SIMPLE POLENTA

Combine 3 cups of water and 1 teaspoon of sea salt in a large pot. Bring to a rolling boil over high heat and then, while stirring, slowly add 1 cup of coarsely ground cornmeal, pouring it into the water in a steady stream. Once the mixture returns to a boil, turn it down to simmer and continue to stir constantly until the polenta has thickened and started to pull away from the edges of the pot, about 15–30 minutes. For soft polenta, pour into bowls and serve with butter, salt, and pepper to taste. Or pour the polenta into a roasting pan and let cool until set. Slice into wedges and then grill or fry with olive oil.