

## The Potato Salad Legacy

by Carole Glass

When Aunt Rose called and said, "Of course you'll bring the potato salad to the reunion," I gulped. Our annual family reunion was going to be held the next Saturday. I couldn't decline, but that was not the type of assignment I was looking for. Potato salad was one of my Mother's specialties. She always made it for all the gatherings. Her secret recipe gave the salad a unique flavor and everyone loved it. But now she was gone. I was eager for something to do for the reunion, to take my mind off the idea of facing all the aunts, uncles and cousins. But the potato salad was so tied to Mother, it would not be the distraction I'd hoped for.

The day before the reunion, I reluctantly gathered the ingredients: eggs, potatoes, peas, celery, condiments. I picked some chives and parsley from the pot by the back door. The earthy scent of the herbs took me back to the garden Mother kept at the far end of our yard when I was growing up.

We moved out to the suburbs the year I turned nine. The next spring and for many springs thereafter, Mother put in a garden. "Carole get your nose out of that book and help me weed!" She would call as the screen door slammed. I didn't like getting dirt under my fingernails or getting scratched by the briars, but I loved the smells, colors and textures of the garden.

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In the moderate-sized plot there were sturdy rows of sweet corn, tangled cucumber vines, bright green lettuce, willowy asparagus and of course, her favorite, tomatoes. All this abundance and open space was an adventure for me, a city child.

Mother seemed to know so much about the natural world: how to plant, when to pick and prune, what conditions were best for each variety. I attributed her knowledge to having grown up on a farm. In my child's mind, this equated to the frontier.

Putting the potatoes and eggs on to boil, I thought about how potato salad typified Mother's cooking: fairly simple, hearty and plenty of it. As an adult I learned these parameters were dictated by my father's preferences. "No spices, no rice, just meat, potatoes and vegetables." Our meals were typical of the '60s; yet I don't remember her ever using a recipe. There were a few ethnic dishes, like goulash and stuffed cabbage, but mostly Mother gravitated to the new convenience foods: frozen fish sticks, dehydrated potato flakes (instant mashed potatoes); a can of tuna and cream of mushroom soup made a casserole.

As I peel the hot, steaming spuds and eggs, all these memories are swirling inside my head. I'm overwhelmed still, with grief and memories. My Mother and I were not really close when I was growing up, but as I got older I felt we shared a bond. We came to accept our differences and enjoy each other's company. I looked forward to shopping, going to the theater, or just sharing a meal together. Tossing

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the salad ingredients, a tear or two roll down my cheeks and threaten to join the mixture. Those times together are now just memories.

A few years ago, after her first stroke, Mother asked me to make the potato salad for the reunion. She gave me the recipe over the phone and I was surprised to learn how easy it was. Still I was somewhat intimidated because I knew I could never rival her in the domestic arena. I also felt honored that she, the perfect one, asked me to fill in for her.

The salad does smell delicious. I've followed Mother's recipe, but like all traditions, added a few ideas, or seasonings of my own. With a sigh, I turn the chunky mixture into one of my favorite antique bowls. The rustic container is a fitting setting for this salad; it represents our family's history.

The next day, holding the salad on my lap as we drive to Aunt Rose's house, the bowl feels as heavy as my heart. This may be our first reunion without Mom, but she'll be there. As I opened the door to the kitchen, Uncle Joe shouts, "Oh good, you made Anne's potato salad!"

THE END

Bio -

Carole Glass is a freelance writer who specializes in helping others document their family stories. She lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and continues to make her mother's potato salad for family get-togethers.

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