



MAMA Accomplished cook, unsuspecting author

How one family turned its matriarch's kitchen prowess into a book

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On the cover of "Macaroni With Gravy," Grace Catapano stands at the front door of her Greenvale home, dressed in a pink housedress. At age 87, she is both the subject and

co-author of a book of recipes, memoirs and photographs, a work conceived by an adoring granddaughter.

You won't find the book at Barnes & Noble or Borders. Katie Catapano, a 28-year-old medical student, had only a few copies published by a small press in New Jersey for an audience of family and friends.

"Not only did we want to document all of my grandmother's cooking and her recipes, but we really wanted to document her experience," Katie Catapano said.

The book, with a preface by Katie and an introduction by Grace, is loosely broken down into chapters such as "Breakfast," "Pasta" and "Christmas," which contain not only Grace Catapano's recipes (plus a few from other family members) but essays by relatives, too. Throughout the book are lists - Grace Catapano's favorite brands, famous sayings and words of advice. A centerfold of photographs, with captions by Grace Catapano, underscores the book's highly personal character.

The idea for such a work came to Katie Catapano after she heard a radio report on self-publishing. Once determined to put the book together, she set a deadline: "We wanted to get it out and published and have a book signing on Christmas Eve, when we have a traditional dinner of 13 fishes," she said. It was at that meal, in the old-fashioned house where her grandmother has spent the past 54 years, that Grace Catapano was presented with and proudly autographed the books.

"I was flabbergasted," said Grace Catapano, who hadn't realized the extent of the project her granddaughter had undertaken. "Katie would ask me, 'How did you make that?' I thought when she said she was making a book, she meant a notebook. This was very professional."

In the kitchen, though, it's Grace Catapano who is the pro. "I mostly taught myself how to cook," she writes, "although I did learn a little from my husband. For example, I never used to put raisins in the meatballs, and he suggested the raisins." To this day, every meatball Grace Catapano makes contains two raisins at its center. Her "gravy" (tomato sauce) is at once light and full-flavored, her chicken soup - afloat with meatballs, vegetables and pasta - quintessentially comforting. And then, there's her manicotti.

Gathered around her dining room table on a recent afternoon, Grace Catapano's middle son, Philip, Katie's dad and an attorney, and her grandson Donnie, a hairdresser and son of her eldest son, Donald, tried to define what makes her manicotti unlike all others. The secret, they agree, is the crepes.

"The flour mixture is so delicate and thin." Philip said. "She takes that pan - it must be 50 years old - and she shakes it."

"I think it's the pan," concurred Donnie. He turned to his grandmother and gently touched her arm. "And your touch."

It's a deftness and a personality no recipe can convey. Indeed, her recipes are more like loose ideas than exact instructions. Katie spent months with her grandmother, watching her cook, learning from her more than ingredients and procedures. "At the end of making chicken soup," said Katie, "my grandmother said, 'You can finish it, you can refrigerate it overnight, and don't forget to say hallelujah, it's done.'"

Grace Catapano's good humor has buoyed her through difficult times. Under the header of "Grace's Famous Sayings" is the statement "I wouldn't wish my life on my worst enemy." Born in the Bronx to parents who had arrived from Bari, Italy, a few years earlier, she lost her father when she was only 8 months old. She lived, alternately, on Arthur Avenue and Mulberry Street in Little Italy. Her mother, who remarried but lost her second husband after five years, cleaned marble floors on Wall Street during the day and sewed men's jackets at night. Grace Catapano and her sister helped with the sewing and would scavenge for wood from a nearby factory for their potbellied stove. "I never had a toy," Grace Catapano said.

She was 23 when she married John, then 31. For most of his life, John Catapano sold dry goods from a truck to immigrant workers on the Gold Coast estates. In 1954, he moved his family to Greenvale, where he and Grace Catapano raised their three sons. He died in 1992.

These days, with five grandchildren, Grace Catapano takes pains to cook each their favorite dish. "Donnie likes meatballs, Danielle likes my cooked vegetables, Lisa likes pasta fagirole, Matthew likes eggplant Parmigiana, and Katie likes pickled eggplant and my chicken soup," she said. "Every time the kids go home, they have to take a care package. I feel so honored that they like everything I make."

Katie writes of traveling back to school with food her grandmother has wrapped like Christmas presents - chicken soup, potatoes and eggs, a meatball sandwich and some rice pudding. "My favorite part by far is the notes she puts in each present," Katie writes. "Under the paper towel of the potatoes and eggs will be a small square of paper that says, 'You are a doll' ... under the rubber band of the pasta container, another paper might read, 'I love you for being you.'" Katie never throws the notes away. "I always feel a sense of expectation when I open an old book and see a white paper falling to the floor. It is one of Grandma's notes again, and she will be telling me she loves me."

HOW TO PUBLISH YOUR BOOK

Looking to immortalize Mom's or Grandma's memoirs or recipes?

Self-publishing used to be expensive and limited to large-quantity printing. The relatively new InstaBook method of printing is inexpensive, quick and allows a writer to publish as few as 10 copies.

To publish "Macaroni With Gravy," the Catapano family used Books by Bookends, a company in the basement of Bookends, a bookstore at 232 E. Ridgewood Ave., Ridgewood, N.J. 201-670- 1440). "We're the first bookstore in the country to do this," said co-owner Tim Harper.

According to manager James Potter, a trip to New Jersey is not necessary. "Send us a copy of the manuscript, either as an e-mail attachment or on a disc, either in word or pdf format. Then, we'll take a look and within a day or so get back with a price quote."

Katie Catapano decided to hand-deliver the manuscript. "I'm a micro-manager, so I drove up there and we designed the cover together, which is better."

After she picked out the paper she wanted for the cover, the company printed a single copy of the book. "They have this machine that looks like Ben Franklin made it," she said. "You can see it all happening."

The typical cost for 10 books is \$175 without photos to about \$250 with photos. Detailed instructions are on the Web site, www.booksbybookends.com. - JOAN REMINICK

RECIPES

Grace Catapano writes in her book: "I use no measurements whatsoever. But once you know how to cook, it sort of comes to you. Of course, you should go by how I wrote it in these recipes, but you should use your own sense as well."

Meatballs

1 pound or a little more of chopped (ground) beef

3 eggs

¼ cup whole milk

½ teaspoon pepper

½ teaspoon oregano

½ teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon sugar

1 cup Italian bread

¾ cup grated cheese

Raisins (2 for each meatball)

Back in the old days, we made meatballs out of pork, veal and beef. We did everything the hard way in those days, and it was a lot of work. I say that because at my age, everything is a lot of work; even breathing is a lot of work. Now, in my old age, I am getting lazy, and we just use beef for the meatballs. But sometimes, you can find packages of meat in the store with a combination of pork, veal and beef, and you can use these for meatballs or meat loaf.

To the chopped meat, add eggs, milk, pepper, oregano, garlic powder, grated cheese and sugar. Mix them all together with your hands. Then, take the crust off a loaf of Italian bread and use only the inside of the loaf ... you must use Italian bread and not American. Soak the soft part of the bread in water and then squeeze it out. Blend spongy bread into meat mixture.

Take out some meat and roll it in your hand. While making the meatball, add two raisins to each one. If it is too soft, add a little more bread crumbs or grated cheese to firm the meatball.

Fry each one in vegetable oil until slightly brown on each side. You can put them in a plastic bag when they cool and then freeze them. When you make the sauce, put in as many meatballs as you want. This way, your meatballs are always ready.

Potatoes and Eggs

2 potatoes, peeled, washed and dried

2 chopped onions

Chopped garlic

6 eggs

½ cup bread crumbs

Salt and pepper

1 teaspoon oregano

1 teaspoon garlic powder

Grated Parmesan cheese

Peel potatoes and wash and dry them with a paper towel. Dice them and brown them slowly in vegetable oil. After a couple of minutes, add a couple of chopped up onions to the potatoes along with chopped garlic. When they are cooked, you add a mixture of eggs, bread crumbs, salt and pepper and a teaspoon each of oregano and garlic powder.

Don't forget some grated cheese to make it thick enough to pour over the potatoes and onion. Beat them all together and pour the egg mixture over the potatoes. Keep stirring until everything in the pan is blended, then cover and cook for several minutes.

When it is slightly brown underneath and the top is not too liquid, put a dish on top of the pan and turn the whole thing over. That way, you can flip the omelet and cook it on the other side. After about a minute, it should be ready. Make sure the flame is low throughout.

If you don't want to turn it over, you can leave it covered and let it stand until it looks very cooked.

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