

MY FAMILY RECIPE

How Pizza Fritte Brings Me Home for the Holidays

One writer's cherished Sunday afternoon tradition with her grandfather comes full circle.

by: Erica Gaetano | December 11, 2021 | [10 Comments](#)



Growing up, every Sunday when church let out, we drove straight to my grandparents' house. Even with the door closed, you could hear them from the driveway—a crowd of family, friends, neighbors, and the occasional priest or nun gathered in the kitchen. The adults sat around the table or leaned against the butcher block island, laughing with their mouths full; the kids ran in and out of the room playing games. The table would be strewn with Italian food: sausage rolls and meatballs soaking in the sauce my grandmother made that morning; bread, still warm from the bakery down the street; and homemade sausage-in-oil (more on this later), sliced paper thin.

My grandfather would invariably be at the stove wearing a grin as big as the giant cast-iron skillet in front of him, a shimmering lake of hot olive oil inside. On the counter, a half dozen balls of pizza dough sprinkled with flour, and a plate layered thick with paper towels.

"How you doin', Sam?" he'd ask as I sidled up to him at the stove. "Good, George," I'd reply, like I had since I was a toddler. George and Sam: pretend names, like a secret handshake.

I lingered as he cut off hunks of dough and picked them up with weathered fingers—calloused and brown from working outside—laying each one gently into the oil bath where they sputtered in the heat. I loved watching them bubble and dance up when they were ready to be flipped to the other side. A minute

later, he'd fish them out with the tine of a fork and pile them, dripping, onto the paper-towel-lined plate.

As the last few came out, I'd grab two or three, burning my fingers, but it was the only way to get some without waiting for the next batch. Once they were piled up, he was off—a few quick steps to the table. But before the plate left his hand, they'd disappear in a flurry of fingers. He'd return to the stove carrying the plate, now topped only with oil-soaked paper towels, laughing all the way.

Most of my family liked dipping the hot pizza fritte into a bowl of sugar, pressing it down and flipping it to the other side so the whole thing glistened with crystals. Not me. I preferred it plain: a hot piece of dough, crispy and golden on the outside, soft and bubbly on the inside. Simple and delicious.

When I think back on those days, food was only one part of it. I can trace so many childhood memories back to those Sundays, to the comfort and security I felt in that kitchen.

There was the first Sunday in February when, as other families got ready to watch the Super Bowl, we'd finish our pizza fritte and bundle up in winter coats and hats to begin making "sausage-in-the-oil." In an unheated sunroom just off the kitchen, we took our places at folding tables that had been pushed together to span the length of it. The adults formed an assembly line of jobs: meat grinder, seasoner, casing filler, link

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twister, very careful carrier. We kids sat at the very end, our sewing needles at the ready. When the links arrived, we'd prick them with our needles to get out any air bubbles before carrying them up to the attic and hanging them over rafters to dry. Months later, the dried links would be separated, crowded into Ball jars, covered with oil, and sealed tight for the coming year.

One such sausage weekend, I learned a hard truth when I found my grandfather alone at the sink, elbow-deep in an enormous metal bowl of cloudy water. "What's that?" I asked. He lifted his hands, tangles of white strings spilling through his fingers. "Pig intestines!" he exclaimed, so cheerily I swore he was joking. He was not. As he went on about how and why you need to clean them, I tried not to cry, swearing to myself I would never eat meat again. I did—but could never eat sausage in link form again.

Some Sundays I would stay for a bit after most people left. On those quiet afternoons, I'd help my grandmother make sausage rolls, pulling apart slices of American cheese with my fingers. On one of those afternoons, when I was nine, the phone rang. My 10-year-old cousin was thrown from his bike when a driver in a

recognize her? How could I build the kinds of memories I have of family when our family was on the other side of the country? Would she ever find the refuge I once found on those Sundays in the kitchen? ...Would I? Then, I remembered a spare ball of dough left over from the night before.

"Would you like pizza fritte for breakfast?" I asked my five-year-old daughter.

I had never made pizza fritte alone, only next to my grandfather, and that was decades ago. But I knew what to do.

I laid the dough on the floured counter and covered it with a towel. After it had warmed to room temperature, I broke off 2-inch pieces, stretched them a bit with my fingers, and laid them gently into the hot pool of olive oil waiting in my cast-iron skillet. When bubbles puffed up to the surface and the edges turned golden, I flipped them with the tine of a fork. A minute later, they were piled onto the paper-towel-lined plate and I was off, carrying them a few steps to where my daughter sat looking at me skeptically. Instead of sugar, I placed a small white bowl filled with a mix of Parmesan

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truck, coming over a hill, didn't see him. Worry hung over us like a cloud as we awaited further news (he would be in the hospital for months before coming home), but even in that moment of dread, the warmth of the kitchen and the people in it wrapped around me like a blanket. I never wanted to leave.

I haven't lived close enough to join those pizza-fritte-filled Sundays for more than 20 years. Regardless of my attendance, the gatherings became fewer and farther between. My cousins and I grew up and started our own families and traditions. Some of us moved away. Our parents took on weekend projects and traveled more. Many of the voices that filled those Sundays with stories and laughter are no longer with us, my grandmother included. Living across the country, our own visits back East became less frequent as our daughter grew older, eventually becoming a two-week trip each July to coincide with my grandfather's birthday.

In 2020, my pizza-fritte-making grandfather turned 97, and we couldn't be there to celebrate. Some 3,000 miles away, I found myself craving something—anything—that would bring me home. As the days blurred into one another, I turned to the kitchen, like so many others. Bread one day. Pizza the next. Another bread. Another dough. Soon I was making pizza dough at least once a week.

One day, after a call with my grandfather, I was left feeling helpless and so, so far away. Would my daughter remember him? Would he

cheese, red pepper flakes, oregano, salt, and pepper next to it. Warily, she picked up a piece of glistening dough and pressed it down into the cheese mixture, knowing instinctively to turn it over to make sure every inch was coated. She took a bite. "Mmmmmmm," was all she said before the rest disappeared into her mouth.

I reached for one and took a bite—plain, the way I've always liked it—and closed my eyes. For one split second, I was home.

This past July, my grandfather turned 98. Thankfully, we were there to celebrate with him. Before we ate, the whole family gathered in the kitchen just like we always have. My aunt made a toast and we bowed our heads for grace, my grandfather adding a few words about family, as he always has. In that kitchen where so many laughs have been shared, tears cried, holidays celebrated, pizza fritte eaten, we gathered once more.

For Christmas this year, my daughter has already requested pizza fritte for breakfast instead of the usual waffles. In our California kitchen, we'll gather around a paper-towel-lined plate, renewing a tradition that will always mean home. I can't wait to call George and tell him all about it.



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