

Gramma's Boy

As a kid, I was in the kitchen with Gramma cooking and baking and wasn't just a spectator or designated cleaner upper. She had me in there chopping and stirring and reading recipes (and cleaning up).

Her specialties included kolaches, bread pudding, and pecan cups. Her name was Marcella and she was from Portsmouth, Ohio on the banks of the Ohio River across from Kentucky. They weren't *pe-cabn* tarts, but *pee-can* cups. She was country and really stretched out the *e*.

Her number one creation was cinnamon rolls. Gramma's were small, smaller than the palm of your hand. Moist and tender, they had the perfect balance of dough, sugar, cinnamon, and icing. You never had a bite that didn't squish and melt in your mouth.

Every year she'd enter this confection in the Cuyahoga County Fair, which inspired me to try my own baked goods. Winning second place for homemade oatmeal cookies and a first place blue ribbon for chocolate cake was quite thrilling for a kid.

However, Gramma not only won the first place blue ribbon for her cinnamon rolls, but the massive Best of Show rosette for beating out all the sweet and dinner rolls.

The love I have for cooking and baking and chopping and stirring and reading recipes (and cleaning up), is because of Gramma and my specialties include cornmeal pancakes with cranberry sauce, sticky bun bread pudding, and chocolate chip *pee-can* cookies.

Yet, my number one creation is cheesecake and after moving back to Ohio, tried to recapture that culinary magic from my youth by entering the Cuyahoga County Fair after nearly 30 years.

Mixing cream cheese, sugar, eggs, and vanilla extract, I built a 6 pound monstrosity, which included me carefully slicing open two vanilla beans and folding in the microscopic beans. For the crust, I used several flours, salted butter, brown sugar, and *pee-cans* and the delicious aroma filled my entire home.

Winning the first place blue ribbon was just as exciting as it was nearly 3 decades earlier, but it was tiny sitting next to the massive Best of Show rosette. Not only did I beat out the other cheesecakes, but all the pies as well.

Gramma died in my twenties, during that period where I was being a jerk and not calling or visiting. If we could have 20 more minutes, I'd excitedly tell her about my cheesecakes and thank her for teaching me how to cook and bake and chop and stir and read recipes (and clean up) and for being so generous and sweet and gentle and I'd ask for one of her legendary hugs and I'd let her know that I love her so much.

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