Introduction

For much of my young life, I ate my meals at a big oak kitchen table that my dad, in a mash-up of fashion and thrift, had painted black. That was before I was born, when black and white were in vogue and the Severson family was just getting started. The other table in the house, the fancy one in the dining room, was reserved for Christmas dinners and birthday parties and visits from relatives. But even before I was old enough to carry my empty cereal bowl to the sink, I knew the real action was at that black kitchen table.

Over a million meals there, our lives played out in front of one another. We five Severson kids—Keith, Kent, Kim, Keely and Kris—took instruction on how to become good citizens and helpful guests. We learned to be part of a tribe. And we figured out how to behave. Making my sister, Keely, laugh so hard that milk poured from her nose wasn't cool. Bringing home a good report card was.

Depending on the day, I arrived at the dinner table happy, sad, angry or bored. As a teenager, I sometimes showed up stoned. I once sat at that table for hours, refusing to eat green beans despite my father's declaration that my freedom could be earned with just three bites. But mostly, our meals did not include much drama. I lived a middle-class childhood of pork chops, baked potatoes and

milk, punctuated with bursts of ambitious cooking for dinner parties and holidays.

My rock-solid dad, James Howard Severson, fought the good fight in the middle management battlefield of a national tire company. He comes from Norwegian stock. Although he likes a good martini and prefers the woods to all other places, he was never a man prone to playing hooky or calling in sick, even if he was. "Just don't be a burden on society," he'd say when we came to him for advice on what to do with our lives. Every morning he would wipe a bit of fried egg from his fingers, scoot back a chair and head out the door with his briefcase. The goal was to leave the office early enough to make it to one of the ball games or music recitals or swim meets that rolled through our lives in an endless loop.

By the time he left in the morning, my mom, Anne Marie Severson, had already been at work for hours. Her people were Italian, and the kitchen was her office. Brown paper lunch sacks had to be filled with apples and sandwiches. A Bundt cake had to be baked for a volunteer group luncheon. Something had to become dinner. She had been a farm girl whose childhood home in the far north Wisconsin woods saw its first refrigerator when she was in elementary school. As a result, she embraced every new twist of kitchen technology. We had a crepe pan and a food processor before anyone else on the block, and she prized her rectangular harvest gold electric frying pan. She ran the kind of efficient and reliable home kitchen that's hard to find these days.

On the surface, I looked like a lot of other resilient, freckled kids. I was athletic and social. But I was the middle child, pulled by the moods of the siblings above and below me. And I was eager to make myself an integral part of household business. (Others might say, less politely, that I was nosy.) I was desperate to stand out in a

family that prized the team, but I was more sensitive than I let on. I felt overwhelmed by the world, and my solution was a constant quest to fit into it somehow. This was exhausting. At the end of the day, arriving home to that kitchen brought instant relief. I relied on my mom's predictable roster of lasagna and fried chicken and even the dry venison roasts from deer my dad had shot. And I especially loved it when she would get fired up on a mix of women's magazines and boredom and we would eat with a certain middle-class culinary panache. Pasta alla carbonara, Oriental pepper steak and French crepes would appear like exotic relatives.

Despite the warmth and consistency that came from that kitchen, pity the child who pushed things too far. Who can forget the afternoon my oldest brother, Keith, smarted off one too many times? My mother hit him in the head with a frozen bass. That night, the bass was on the table. To this day, he still doesn't care much for fish. Still, no matter what happened during the day, no matter how many times you took a frozen fish to the head, getting back to that table by dinner was the one rule you absolutely wanted to obey—at least, it was the one I tried to obey even when I became a teenager and discovered how many rules there were to break. The table was where I was safe. It was home. And when my mother started to teach her earnest little elementary school daughter to put dinner on that table, she gave me everything I needed to know to make a safe home when I grew up.

The problem is, somewhere between those early lessons and the ones I am trying to teach my own young daughter, I stumbled hard and lost my way. It would take a series of women who knew how to cook to reteach me the life lessons I forgot and to teach me the ones I never learned in the first place. Most of those lessons—simple truths about the way life works—have been delivered in complex

wrappers that have taken me years to open. Others were hidden in the smallest of packages delivered by the most unexpected people.

Let me give you a little example. Early one cold California morning, long after I had started my career as a newspaper reporter, I stumbled out of my car chilled and stiff. I had driven for an hour northwest from Berkeley to Inverness, a tiny town near the Point Reyes National Seashore. My editor at the *San Francisco Chronicle* wanted me to write about Margaret Grade, a psychiatrist who runs a quirky little inn that was popular with chefs and actors. They liked the peace and quiet of her down-covered beds and her quirky affection for taxidermy and old books. They had also fallen for the food she made from local eggs, fish and vegetables that people with names like Eat Dog and Lumpy delivered to her doorstep.

I walked around to the back of the inn until I found a heavy wooden door. I pushed hard against it and took a few tentative steps into a dark kitchen. Before I could even unbutton my coat and say hello, Margaret appeared out of nowhere and slipped a spoonful of warm polenta in my mouth. She had been up for a couple of hours already, kayaking in from her house across the water. She had put some scones in the oven and then got busy melting Taleggio into soft cornmeal. To finish her porridge, she stirred in pieces of meaty chanterelle mushrooms that had pushed themselves up in nearby woods only a couple of days earlier.

The warmth of the cornmeal hit me first, wiping away the chill. Then came the tang of the cheese, working like a bright, creamy tonic on my sleepy senses. The mushrooms offered a solid sense of place and closed the deal. In the moment it took to pass the spoon from her pot to my mouth, we bonded. Two strangers became friends. We were women who were willing to stop whatever we were doing and stand in awe of something good to eat. I left at the end of

that day with a nice newspaper story, but I also had a little life lesson in my back pocket: Giving someone a taste of something delicious at exactly the right moment is a fail-safe way to start a good relationship.

I have made it this far in life only because people took the time to teach me those kinds of lessons. And the biggest lessons were delivered in the kitchen, given to me by women who made their families dinner every night, who saved favorite recipes to pass on and needed only a paring knife and a sturdy spoon.

I'm one of those people who grew up in the backwash of the Baby Boom. We are a generation of adults who didn't get our first computers until college and now live in a world defined by Google searches, video clips and smart phones we will never really figure out. My generation wasn't issued a GPS device, and the previous generation didn't leave us directions. Certainly not directions to the kitchen. The kitchen was a prison for the wave of feminists that included Hillary Clinton and her Wellesley sisters. When Hillary's husband was running for president the first time, she said, "I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was fulfill my profession." The editors at *Family Circle* magazine, in a rare moment of genius that had both political junkies and home bakers applauding, decided to stage a bake-off: Hillary Clinton v. Barbara Bush. Contender v. Incumbent. One Round. One Recipe.

When the dust settled, Hillary's way with chocolate chip cookie dough carried the day. The thing that bothered me most about the cookie incident wasn't the inherent sexism. It was that Hillary acted like giving out a good cookie recipe diminished her. One can

understand the insult, of course. Women still get the short end of things. When the roles were reversed and Hillary was running for president, no one asked Bill for his favorite shortbread recipe.

On the other hand, I can always use another good cookie recipe. And I want a leader who is thoughtful about these kinds of things. Having mastery of the art of cookie baking should not make one less of a person. It has, on several occasions, made me the most popular person in the room. But I didn't always see it that way. I had to learn that food is power. And it took spending time with women who don't know Twitter but understand a lot about life and cooking to teach me.

My heroes are women who never abandoned the kitchen. They use cooking as a source of strength. Their recipes have helped save their communities and kept families together. They have made political change through their love of food. These are women who can whip egg whites just long enough that they don't cross the subtle line between soft peaks and stiff. To them, braising a piece of inexpensive beef until it becomes a slick, tender miracle or picking exactly the right plum from the produce bin is as natural as turning over in bed. They also know that the best thing to do in a crisis is feed people something soothing—a cup of tea, a spoonful of warm polenta and mushrooms, a perfect roasted chicken stuffed with Meyer lemons.

I learned to cook from a series of women that begins with my mother and spills out over a decade of writing about food. My time with them, whether as brief as a handshake or as long as my life, helped me figure out how to walk through the world. Through them, I came to see that the one constant in my life, the thing that I have always been able to count on, was my ability to go to the kitchen, turn on the stove and feed someone.

The women in this book shined the light on what was ahead for me when I couldn't find my way. They showed me that food is the best antidote for anything life throws at you. They became my tour guides, helping me figure out what I really believed in, how to re-make my life and re-create a family, and, finally, how to face death.

Your life lessons might look a little different from mine. The cadence of everyone's childhood and coming of age is unique. But I venture that we could sit down at a kitchen table and find that parts of our paths look just the same. Like me, you learned from people who navigated life before you and then took the time to tell you how they did it. For me, those guides were these women. And their kitchens were my classrooms.