

My Parents' Apple Trees

Nancy Gerber

MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER WAS born in the Ukraine and emigrated to the US sometime during 1910 when she was fifteen years old.

She traveled alone in third-class steerage, a frightened girl parted from her mother, whom she never saw again. The story my mother told me was that my grandmother Bessie boarded a ship clutching a feather comforter and a sack of cured beef.

I was never told how my grandmother learned to bake. I assume she absorbed this knowledge by watching her mother. But if baking is a mother's legacy to her daughter, this skill was not handed down, since neither my mother nor I ever learned how to make a pie crust from scratch, although both of us were blessed—or cursed—with a taste for sweets and a craving for Bessie's apple pie.

When I was a child, my grandmother's arrival at our house in New Jersey was accompanied by a flurry of activity. My grandfather's enormous gray Pontiac would pull up our driveway, my grandmother seemingly out of the car before it had even stopped, juggling grocery bags stocked with delicacies she was sure could not be procured in the wilds of northern Jersey, including egg salad and pickled herring.

For her baking venture, my grandmother supplied the rolling pin and pastry board; we supplied the apples. There were two enormous apple trees in our backyard that bloomed in spring with frothy pink and white blossoms.

Most of the time, those trees were the bane of my brother's and my existence. The apples would fall to the ground, their sweet decay attracting hordes of flies. My father told us to collect the rotten ones and place them in bags for compost. The process of bending and gathering the fruit was tedious and tiring; it was more fun to roll them like bocce balls down the incline of our lawn and watch them come to rest in our neighbor's yard. "Yes, Dad," we'd report. "We've cleared away all the apples!"

But when my grandmother came, my brother and I would race to those very same trees, searching the low branches for ripe apples,

inspecting the fallen ones for unblemished specimens. We'd fill a grocery bag or two, bring them indoors, and the magic would begin. The honeyed fragrance of simmering apples filled the kitchen as my grandmother rolled out the piecrust. If there was fruit left over, my grandmother would save it for apple compote to be ladled over vanilla ice cream.

Long after my parents' apple trees were gone, my husband and I took our young sons apple picking. After fifteen minutes in the bright October sun, the complaining would start. "I'm tired!" "I'm thirsty!" "It's hot!" "This is so boring!" So we'd gather the barely filled bags and head to the farm store for cider and cinnamon donuts. My sons, filling themselves with tart liquid and sweet pastry, would grin and declare: "This is the best part!"

And I'd remember my grandmother's golden-crustured pies and agree. ♦





The Art of Baking

*Flour, butter, water, salt.
Roll dough into a circle.
Gently lift and press across the plate.*

*My grandmother knew the art
of baking. A fork would glide
through pie crusts soft as silk.*

*My crusts always failed.
Doughy, thick and dense.
This art was not my own.*

*My son, an architect, assembles
pies with artisanal skill.
His gold encrusted domes cradle*

*fillings of custard, sweet berries.
Hands light, quick and deft
mirroring my grandmother's.*

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