



My Father's Way with Fennel

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ALARGE MASON JAR SAT EMPTY ON my kitchen counter, two black peppercorns drowning in the last drops of vinegar. How was that possible? How had I eaten through another batch of citrus and pepper-flavored sliced fennel canned only a week ago?

Better yet, why?

Two bulbs of fresh fennel, or in Italian,

finocchio (rhymes with Pinocchio), were within my arm's reach. I bought them at the public market. I gathered fennel wherever it was found, as if I had grown and harvested the vegetable myself. The fennel waited patiently for me in baskets and bins to be hand-selected, carried home, and carried on about, until I knew what they wanted from me.

Most of the time, I wanted to try the green stalks in some new recipe or use the fronds for garnish. Most of the time, the fleshy white bulbs asked to be consumed raw—the same way I had eaten them in my youth.

While growing up, our family obsessed over Italian bread from DeLuca's Bakery. We thought all cookies were Italian ones. We ate Italian cheeses that made the mouth salivate. It was years before I figured out my friends' parents didn't shop at Gallucci's in Cleveland, where my father made his traditional holiday treks for Italian goodies that weren't homemade.

He returned with the coveted prize—*finocchio*—Italian celery. At least that's what we said about fennel to friends and dinner guests to get them to eat it. While they had expected a watery crunch and stringy bite, we watched with delight as their mouths puckered, confused by the sweet, spicy flavor on their tongues.

Finocchio as a vegetable and as a word played a starring role in the preparation of our family's holiday meals. The youngest in the brood was given an introductory role in the kitchen to plate the relish tray. Set atop a star-shaped glass platter, Spanish olives and black canned olives joined the skinny Italian ones lifted from a brine of Calabrian peppers. Alongside the olives, carrots and celery were cut lengthwise in equal strips.

And then my father stepped into the spectacle to cut the *finocchio*.

Damp dishtowel over his shoulder, he stood on the sunburst linoleum. With hands still sun-kissed in winter, he opened his palm and calmly said, "Hand me the *finocch*," using a hard "k" and no "io" at the end of the word. Clutching an old paring knife, he

carved up the bulbs to match the shape of the celery.

We didn't know about southern Italian dialects, much as my father had been schooled to leave his mother language behind. But we listened whenever his parents spoke or swore, dropping the final vowel in their Italian words, and English ones too. *Capicola* was *capicol*. *Prosciutto* was *prosciutt*. And *finocchio* was *finocch*.

When in my twenties and dining at an Italian restaurant with a boyfriend, I came across *calamari* and *gnocchi* on the menu. I could hardly wait to order. "I'll have the *calamar*," I said, dropping the "ee" sound. The blond waitress, with no hint of Italian to her eyes or her locks, scrunched up her nose. "Do you mean *calamari*?" she asked, emphasizing the "ee" sound. In the dim light of the restaurant, my face grew Italian-red.

When I next ordered *gnocchi* and pronounced it "nyowk," dropping the "ee" sound, the server corrected me again. "Where my grandparents came from in Italy, they used a different dialect. It's the same thing. I'll have the *gnocchi* (no ee)."

A mention of the word *finocchio* unleashed the same pride in me as those other Italian words; the memory also opened my heart. There was nothing more satisfying than hearing my father say *finocch*—the sound at the end resembling the crunch in his mouth. A declaration of who he was and where he came from. Savoring the zip of fennel on my tongue produced a longing for him.

In raised beds or terracotta pots, I planted fennel a few times with varying degrees of success at keeping the rise of stalks from tipping over or going to seed. As of late, fennel has been listed on more menus in the

states. Its appearance at farmers' markets has been prolific, at least to me. My eyes were drawn to the bulbs flashing their white bellies like a distress signal I couldn't ignore.

Fennel rose to the top of my morning grocery lists and mid-day cravings. I pickled fennel or chopped it up and tossed it in slaw dotted with bacon bits. I bought Italian sausage speckled with fennel seed from a German butcher because it was made in the same vein as what I ate growing up. And while re-reading an old Italian cookbook of my mother's and searching for *frittatas con riso*, I discovered a list of entries for *finocchio* recipes right above *frittatas* in the appendix, so I cooked a fennel sauce with raisins to serve over spaghetti and grilled white fish.

In more recent times, the relish tray became known as the charcuterie platter. But to my siblings and I, it was the relish tray. And its preparation was one of the few times my father stood side by side with us in the kitchen. Usually, the *capocuoca* (my mother) ordered, "Ette, go get me the stock pot," or he was occupied with waking up the last kid to "go help your mother." Like any good *cuoco*, he followed orders and returned to his station, more than happy to remind us *finocchio* was a digestion aid while he munched on a piece or two long before the meal began.

I would pickle a hundred jars of fennel to save those memories of my father. He heroically wrestled with the fennel, and was particularly adept at declaring it as "*fin-nook*." ❖



