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Mom's the best

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What in the world would we do without our mothers? Most of us believe that our own mother is the best mother in the world, and rightly so. I'm certain mine was, and hopefully you are just as certain that yours was, too. This year for Mother's Day I thought I'd share a few memories to dedicate the day to her and to her own mother, and to all of the "best" mothers in the world.

Don't Mess With Mama

Mothers are not perfect, but their love for us surely is as near to perfect as anything this side of Heaven can be. A mother's love is fierce and not to be toyed with, for the protective instinct of the human mother has been compared to that of a grizzly bear, and only the foolhardy dare test that adage.

My mother, Barbara McGregor Hunt, married for the first time when she was just 12 years old, to a man who was 20. When she discovered, 3 years later, that she was going to have a child, she told her husband who was not at all happy with the idea of having another mouth to feed. He made the mistake of losing his temper over the matter in front of my little grandmother, Louisa Crick McGregor, whom we called simply, Maw. She was frying bacon in a big cast iron skillet at the time, when just behind her, the man knocked my mother to the ground. Without so much as a blink, my grandmother — a half Cherokee woman roughly the size of a sparrow — whipped the skillet off of the stove and took it to that man's head. He left, and my mother stayed.

Enter The Handsome Stranger

A few months later, my sister, Martha was born. It was August of 1946 and she weighed in at around 11 pounds. It was a breach birth and difficult for my 90-pound mother, who was by then 15 years old. At the moment of my sister's birth, the bed fell and the doctor caught her in his arms. My grandmother was outside, running around the house and yelling, "My baby's a dyin'!" Indeed, she very nearly did die, but my mother laughed heartily on telling it to me some 40 years later.

Around the time that my sister was born, my mother started writing to an army airman from Nortonville, who had reenlisted after the war for a couple more years of service. In 1948, the young airman returned to Hopkins County and looked my mother up. As he approached my grandmother's house, he knocked on the door and looked through the screen. His first sight of my mother was of her kneeling down and cleaning the fireplace grate. When she heard the knock, she turned her head and looked to see who it was. Her face was covered with soot and she had a large goiter.

Of course, the airman was my father, and he loved telling us kids his hilarious version of their first meeting. A short time afterward, my father proposed beside the old church house up on McIntosh Chapel Road. He liked say that he wasn't sure which he wanted the most: To marry my mother, or to be the Daddy of her sassy dark-haired little girl, whom he loved as his own child.

My mother went on to bear six more children, and lost another three. By the time I came along, birthing babies



A 2006 photo of the food writer's mother, Barbara McGregor Hunt, frying up a rabbit.



Barbara McGregor Hunt, left, seated, rests while non-smoking sister-in-law Melba McGregor, baby sister Wanda McGregor Headen and Laura Hunt Angel, seated, try rolling smokes for her.

was par for the course, and the evening I was born she decided to fry up a chicken dinner before heading to the hospital.

Time Flies

As she grew older, my mother's lifelong hearing problem worsened and resulted in total deafness in one ear with only about 30 percent hearing in the other. Because she had been somewhat hard of hearing most of her life, she often misunderstood or mispronounced words. She made the best of it, though, and her misinterpretation frequently resulted in a comedy of errors that left everyone, including herself, laughing.

On one occasion, she decided to try out a new recipe for stuffed mushrooms. The filling was a combination of sausage, breadcrumbs and spices. Like most cooks, she tweaked the recipe to suit her taste. One of my sisters lived a couple of doors down, and she and her husband happened to stop by just as the mushrooms were coming out of the oven. She offered them to my brother-in-law, and he took one. As he was biting into the mushroom, my mother said, "I tried something different. This time I put rigor mortis in them." My brother-in-law grabbed his throat as if he were performing a spectacular death scene in an old western, but my mother, not realizing she had used the wrong word, thought that he was actually choking. It took a bit of straightening out but finally we learned that Mother's rigor mortis was actually oregano.

Shortly before before her

death, along with deafness my mother also began to go blind. We still tried to get her out as often as we could, and on one of our last visits we took her out to a buffet which was something she always enjoyed.

After our meal she said she'd like a cigarette, so I took her outside to sit on a bench while hubby Chuck paid. My mother had started smoking when she was 11 years old and, despite her poor health, was not about to give it up. She couldn't see much, but bright light bothered her eyes greatly so she carried a little pair of sunglasses with round blue lenses in them. We called them her John Lennon glasses.

Sitting out on the bench in front of the restaurant, she put on the glasses and fished around in her purse for a cigarette. In order to save money on tobacco, she had started rolling her own smokes the old fashioned way, but because she couldn't see well, her hand rolled smokes were odd looking to say the least. Sitting there, enjoying the breeze and her cigarette but unable to hear or see, she was completely unaware of the surprised passersby taking double looks at the curious old woman in rock star sunglasses, smoking a peculiar looking cigarette on a public bench.

The Recipes

Here are two recipes worthy any Mother's Day meal. Treat your mother, mother-in-law, or yourself to one or both while reminiscing about the wonderful ladies in your life.



Treat a special lady in your life with this violet topped cheesecake.

MOM'S 'RIGOR MORTIS' MUSHROOMS

24 large mushrooms
1 pound sweet or hot Italian sausage
1 1/2 teaspoons dried oregano
4 slices stale bread, crumbled
1 egg
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
A few tablespoons chicken broth, if needed
Parmesan cheese for garnish

Clean the mushrooms, removing the stems and chopping them for the stuffing mixture. Sauté the sausage with the oregano and mushroom stems, breaking the sausage into small pieces. Drain, cool slightly and add remaining ingredients except broth, mixing well.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Spray a large baking dish with non-stick coating and place the mushrooms in the pan. Bake about 25 minutes or until tops of mushrooms are slightly brown. Check about halfway through cooking and add a little chicken broth to the pan if the mushrooms look too dry. Top with a sprinkling of Parmesan cheese.

CHEESECAKE WITH VIOLETS

My sister, Martha, was born many years before I came along and was actually old enough to have been my mother. In my teens, much to her dismay, I dubbed her my "other mother." This beautiful cake is a spring twist on a favorite of hers, Lindy's New York Style cheesecake. I opted for a quick and easy graham cracker crust rather than the traditional shortbread, and the violets were from my own backyard. If violets are in short supply, use pesticide free pansies or fresh fruit. This is a great recipe to convert to sugar free.

Crust

2 cups graham cracker crumbs or

sugar free shortbread
1/2 cup margarine, melted
1/4 cup sugar (or substitute)

Combine ingredients in a medium bowl; press into the bottom and slightly up the edges of a 9-inch springform pan. Bake at 400 degrees for about 10 minutes. Remove from oven and continue with the recipe.

Filling

5 8-ounce packages cream cheese, softened
1 1/3 cups sugar (or substitute)
3 tablespoons flour
1/8 cup whipping cream
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
6 eggs
1 1/2 cups sour cream
1/3 cup sugar
1/2 teaspoon vanilla

In a large mixer bowl with an electric mixer, beat the cream cheese until it is smooth. Gradually add the 1 1/3 cups sugar sugar, then add the flour, whipping cream and 1 teaspoon vanilla. Add the eggs one at a time, beating slightly after each. When thoroughly combined and smooth, pour onto crust. Bake at 325 degrees for about an hour or until the center is nearly set. (Although the standard time is an hour, I prefer my cheesecake less creamy and bake it a little longer.) Mix together sour cream, 1/3 cup sugar and 1/2 teaspoon vanilla; spread on top of cheesecake and bake another 10 minutes to set. Cool completely before removing the ring from the pan, and chill at least 4 hours before arranging the flowers on top.

EDIBLE FLORAL TOPPING

A handful of violets or pansies
A few flower leaves
Sugar, or substitute

Rinse the flowers and the leaves, taking care not to crush them; set them on a paper towel to drain for a few minutes. Pour some sugar into a shallow bowl. While still slightly damp, gently dip the leaves to coat with sugar; arrange the leaves on the cake, then top with a little bundle of flowers and serve. Serves 10-12.