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FOOD

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Cabbage: The king of the cruciferous

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Generally speaking, after Daddy retired he stayed busy outside as long as the weather was good, but once winter set in he was forced to stay in a little more.

He spent a good part of the winter squatted down in front of our old wood stove, playing solitaire, or carrying wood from outside and piling it near the stove door.

Sometimes, he got to cooking or making birdhouses or some such thing that usually ended up in him making a mess and getting into trouble with Mama.

But there was one time when Mama was the one who made the mess.

Is something rotten in Denmark?

"Mama, there's something dead under my bed." I had been gently stroking my mother's arm for several seconds, trying to wake her. Speaking loudly would be of no use because she couldn't hear anything with her good ear pressed against the pillow, so instead I whispered more to myself than to her.

She began to wake and looked toward me with a smile, as always, no matter what time of night it was.

Mama had what most folks would call "Bette Davis eyes," but we knew better than that. They were Crick family eyes, big and brown like our grandmother's, with touches of amber that smoldered like there was a fire in there somewhere.

As Mama rolled her head toward me I could clearly see them, even in the dark. She gave a little cough, and I leaned down with my face against her ear and said again, "I think there's something dead under my bed."

Now, being awakened at 2 a.m. with a statement such as that might startle some parents into thinking something was seriously wrong. But I was near the tail end of a trail of seven, and by then Mama had been awakened by nearly every foreseeable scenario — and a few unforeseeable ones — so she merely nodded her head, lifted the covers and climbed out of bed.

At about this time we had two mama cats, who between them had had 21 kittens. Add a number of mixed beagle pups, the box of frogs I couldn't part with, and the fact that I had a little brother (everybody knows that little brother is prone to carry/sneak anything and everything indoors), and, well, you get the picture. There could have been anything under my bed, but whatever it was I was certain it was dead.

We headed into my room and crouched at the side of my old iron three-quarter bed.

"It's been smelly in here for the last few nights. I think it might be in that box, but I can't move it."

Possessed not only with beautiful eyes but also with a peculiar strength despite her diminutive size — I credit that to the McGregor side of the family — Mama reached under the bed with both hands and hefted the offending box in a single motion.

Together, we made our way into the kitchen and she set the box on the dinner table, which I thought was strange considering it contained something dead.

As we crossed the hallway we saw Daddy squatting, flatfooted, in front of the old wood stove poking a chunk of wood into its mouth. Accustomed to sleeping next to Mama for the last thirty years or so, the bare spot in their bed woke him like an alarm clock.

He rose up and followed Mama into the kitchen, where he turned on the light and then leaned over the box. "What did it do, spill over a little?"

The box was full of quarts of fermenting kraut. He picked up one of the jars and tilted it to get a better view, then set the jar back in the box, sat down at the table and lit a cigarette. Fully awake now, Mama set to making coffee and remarked that she thought it was



A large cabbage like this flat Dutch variety may be enough to create several recipes.



Filled with ground ham instead of ground beef, Hungarian Cabbage Rolls are rich and satisfying.

going to be good kraut.

"Well, I'm cold and I'm going back to bed," I said, leaning over to kiss the top of Daddy's head.

I gave Mama a kiss, too, knowing that I would be tired in the morning. She laughed and said, "Sorry, babydoll," as I headed across the hall. I climbed into my now cold sheets, but at least the offending odor was beginning to fade.

Several weeks earlier, Daddy had come home from a trip to town and told us to go look in the back of the truck. Mama, Joey and I threw on our coats and walked out to take a look, thinking it was going to be a great surprise.

There Daddy stood, next to the truck with a smile as big as Christmas morning: the back of the truck overflowing with cabbages.

He told us that he had been rambling around looking for cans when he saw the cabbages lying all over the road. There was a big produce market nearby, and our road was along the route between the farm and the market.

Daddy knew they must have fallen off of one of the farm trucks, so he picked them up and took them to the market. The owner thanked him, but said that he couldn't sell the cabbages anymore since they had been dropped in the road. He told Daddy he could have them if he wanted. Being a scrounger from way back, that was all Daddy needed to hear.

Mama was stunned by the unexpected bounty and wondered out loud, "What are we going to do with all this?" Daddy laid his hand on the tailgate and said, "Call the girls!"

After my sisters had taken all that they could use, Daddy took cabbage to the neighbors and delivered cabbage to church members. Mama made up packages of stuffed cabbage to freeze and Daddy made lots of his famous cole slaw — a concoction that included sweet pickle juice instead of plain vinegar — but there was still cabbage left.

For a while, we had cabbages tucked under chairs, rolling around in corners and stacked anywhere else we could put them. Mama laughed when I asked her if she was looking to find another baby under all of those cabbage leaves.

I came home from school one day and Mama was standing at the table, slicing up the remaining cabbage for kraut. She didn't have a spare crock (it was full of limewater pickles at the time), but my grandfather had taught her how to make kraut in quart jars.

Unbeknownst to me, several of those jars ended up under my bed, where it began to ferment until the night that I discovered it. While the end result of kraut making is a wonderful thing, the process is more than a little smelly. But it is definitely better than a dead body under my bed.

The Recipes

One large cabbage, let alone a truckload, should be more than enough for the average family. However, if you find a sale or more than you can use, it will keep in the fridge for several months as long as you keep it dry. These tasty recipes are best intended for regular green cabbage, but if you are feeling adventurous, you



Sweet Pickle Juice Slaw is just right for topping a hot dog.

could use a savory for the stuffed cabbage and red cabbage for the slaw.

HUNGARIAN CABBAGE ROLLS WITH SOUR CREAM-PAPRIKA GRAVY

Until hubby Chuck and I married, I'd never heard of cabbage stuffed with ham. If you don't have a meat grinder, ask at your grocer's meat counter to have it ground. The tomato soup is a shortcut, for flavoring and thickening the sauce.

1 large cabbage, about 3 lbs
2 lbs ground smoked ham
1 medium onion, diced
2 eggs
¾ cup uncooked brown or white rice
2 tablespoons paprika, divided
½ teaspoon seasoning salt
black pepper to taste
up to ⅔ cup water
1 48 oz can tomato juice, divided
1 10.75 oz can tomato soup
1 cup sour cream or Greek yogurt
2 teaspoons ham base, optional

Preheat oven to 325 degrees F. Core the cabbage and rinse it. You will need to blanch it by either boiling or microwaving it. To microwave it, place the cored cabbage, whole, in a glass pie plate or other microwave safe dish. Microwave it on high at 3 minute intervals, carefully removing outer leaves as they soften and returning the cabbage to the microwave until you have about 16 leaves. If the center leaves are too small you can double them up for rolling. Set aside the leaves and any remaining cabbage.

Next, in a large mixing bowl combine the ham, onion, eggs, rice, 1 tablespoon of the paprika, seasoning salt and pepper to taste. If the mixture is crumbly, add water, ⅓ cup at a time, until it is just moist enough

to hold together.

To assemble the rolls, take an amount of the ham mixture roughly equal to a small hamburger patty and roll it into a football shape. Lay out a cabbage leaf and center the ham roll at the base of the leaf. Roll it up, tucking in the sides as you go, laying the rolls side by side in the bottom of a large baking dish or roasting pan. The number of rolls you will get depends on the type and size of the cabbage. Chop any leftover leaves and scatter them on top of the rolls.

Mix together 4 cups of the tomato juice with the can of tomato soup and pour over the rolls. Cover tightly with foil and bake for 1½-2 hours. Most of the liquid will have been absorbed by the rice in the cabbage rolls.

For the Sour Cream Paprika Gravy: Pour remaining sauce, if any, off of the cabbage rolls and into a large saucepan. Add the remaining tomato juice and paprika, and the ham base, if using. (If not using the ham base you may want to check the seasonings and add seasoning salt if needed, but this is already a fairly salty dish so use care not to oversalt it.) Bring the mixture to a boil, stirring occasionally, then reduce heat to a simmer, stir in the sour cream and heat through. Serve the gravy over the rolls. Makes about 16 rolls.

EASY SWEET PICKLE JUICE SLAW

This slaw is especially good with fish, beans and corn bread or as a hot dog topping.

1 lb shredded cabbage
1 large carrot, shredded
¼ cup onion, diced fine
¼ cup sugar
½ cup mayonnaise
¼ cup sweet pickle juice
salt and black pepper to taste

Combine all ingredients and refrigerate at least 4 hours before serving. Serves 6.

Photos by Laura Hunt Angel