

TIES

Family Dishes

By Karen Stabiner

May 4, 2018

My father was truly a fool for love. I was born with 10 fingers and 10 toes, a big thing to a man who had 10 fingers but only nine toes, the second and third on his right foot fused together. The doctor thought that the standard “You have a healthy baby girl” would suffice, but no: My father insisted that he run back to the delivery room — run! — to inventory my hands and feet.

I could breathe on my own, a common enough feat among newborns, except that my parents’ first child, a boy who arrived too early and spent a single day on earth, could not.

So I was more than the standard miracle to my dad. He had been held hostage by longing for years; mere language was not going to suffice to convey how he felt.

He turned instead to his native dialect. He had a set of dishes specially made with my name on them.

My dad and his dad owned a small restaurant supply store on Chicago’s Skid Row, so he called in a favor at Carr China, one of the lines he carried, and got them to make a special order — two cups, two fruit dishes, two cereal bowls, two lunch plates, one mug, each of them with “Karen Sue” worked into the rose-colored border, under the glaze. That was a big deal, a custom border. Anyone can paint by hand on china. It takes connections to have your name immortalized at the factory in a font that worked well with the flowers and curlicues, as though someone had just opened a coffee shop named Karen Sue’s and needed to stock up.

The dishes have so far outlasted my dad by 30 years and counting. It's heavy restaurant ware, the kind you can heave across the room and ding the wall rather than break the cup. I own five other sets of plates, including two vintage services for eight from Shenango, my dad's biggest line and a mainstay in restaurants from 1920 to 1980; my maternal grandmother's refined wedding Limoges, 97 translucent years old, with matching platters, bowls, butter dish and a cream and sugar set; and about two dozen glass cake plates with various etched floral borders. When I wanted to commemorate a trip to Italy with my own family, I bought a service for eight from a World War II veteran and his daughter at their workshop two hours from anywhere. This was how my father celebrated family. I took my cue from him.

My sister has the fancy set with the hunt scenes, even as we wonder why a family in a Jewish suburb north of Chicago chose images from the British countryside. It's not as though we ate a lot of pheasant, living as close as we did to Herm's hot dog shack and Sam & Hy's deli. But a solid middle-class midcentury family had to have party dishes, and those were ours.

Each set had a job to do, as though they were members of the family with assigned household chores. The hunt plates came out on the day our elementary school teachers came to lunch — always the same lunch, chicken à la king in noodle baskets my mother bought at Marshall Field's and a double-decker lime and black cherry Jell-O mold.

The Shenango plates were for less formal gatherings of bigger crowds, and were likelier to be heaped with my mother's signature spaghetti casserole.

For decades, the glass dessert plates were for when my maternal grandmother had the ladies over for cake. Once she hit her 90s she asked me if I wanted them — and I turned her down, too young to grasp that she wanted to be sure the tradition would continue. Magical thinker that I was, I figured she'd live as long as she had the means to entertain friends.

I had cake on a plate with my grandmother when she turned 100, just me and my mom, but it felt like a party. She made it to almost 102, at which point I grabbed the plates that no one else in the family wanted.

Clearly I'd inherited the dishware gene from both sides. My friends acquired a grandmother's diamond ring or a great-aunt's pearls, surely more practical and more portable than the stuff that ties the generations of my family together. I never envied them, not for a moment.

I'm not one for journals, which worries me, sometimes, as memories crowd each other out. But these dishes are like a stack of notebooks. All I have to do is look at them and my own celebrations come wafting back: Thanksgiving dinner served to my small extended family on those boisterous Italian plates; my daughter's favorite pasta in the Italian bowls on nights when we needed either to feel better or to acknowledge that we felt fine. Her first birthday dessert on the Limoges, at least for the grown-ups. Latkes for four families on the old Shenango.

Coffee, always, in one of my cups. They've become fused: A great cup of coffee is equal parts beverage and vessel.

A few months ago, I started a divestiture program to get rid of stuff I didn't use, and as I got underway I called my daughter to fish for compliments. My list of expendables included my sixth set of dishes, still packed in my mom's quilted, zippered cases, the surface of each plate protected by a thin plastic circle.

"You can't give those away," my daughter said in a tense tone of voice I'm grateful not to hear very often. "That's my legacy."

I should have known. She is my father's namesake, after all, and she has worked in restaurants since she was 16. I sent her the plates.

When she gets married later this month, I plan to have my morning coffee in a Karen Sue cup, a brief moment before the festivities begin, just me and a host of happy memories that are about to increase by one. I've known my plates longer than I've known anyone who is still on the planet; we've had good times together since before I was allowed to turn on the stove.

By now I, too, have come into more traditional family heirlooms, my mom's locket and my dad's ring, and I like to wear them when I go out.

But that's the key to the dishes, isn't it — the reason I don't pare back to one set and get on with it. A necklace is for leaving home. A dinner plate says, "Sit down next to me and let's talk," and each one has its own family stories to tell.

Karen Stabiner teaches at the Columbia University School of Journalism and is the author, most recently, of "Generation Chef."