# NOTES ON A CULINARY EDUCATION (Parts 1 & 2)

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1.

It was called *biancomangiare (*eat white)...the first thing I ever learned how to cook. I was six or seven and, of course, the experience was magical. I don't know who demonstrated: mom, grandmother? Neither was skilled in the kitchen. They knew little. On one end, I was unaware of their lack. On the other, the dish was so basic they easily explained the entire process in clear, simple sentences and their words stayed with me like a prayer. Like nursery rhymes, a cherished mantra.

The *Biancomangiare.* I was soon allowed to try it by myself, with some kind of supervision. Starch—*amido di grâno*—and sugar in equal proportions were mixed with a teaspoon of salt which, mysteriously, didn't alter the sweetness. Then a tad of cold milk was added, through vigorous churning, while on the stove a whole quart was brought to a boil.

The main purpose of the recipe was, indeed, 'saving' milk about to go bad. If it had already spoiled it would separate upon boiling. In such case we wouldn't throw it away: nothing was disposed of. We could do various things both with curd and serum.

But if nothing happened we would proceed with our recipe, pouring hot milk—a spoonful at a time—on a very low flame. Incessantly turning clockwise with a savvy motion, careful to sweep bottom and sides, thus nothing would stick.

It was almost hypnotic...the turning, unstoppable...for a pause would botch the whole thing. One minute, one second, and the mixture would adhere to the pan, bunching into inedible lumps.

I hung in there and kept stirring, perched on a stool to reach the needed heights, stoically bearing an aching elbow (denying even to myself such childish weakness), ignoring the urge to sneeze or go to the bathroom, the temptation of impatience or boredom, the irresistible wish to turn the spoon the other way, for a change.

No, no, and no: I focused on the white expanse, encircled by the metal frame of the pot, and its transformation...invisible for an excruciating long time. I had to develop faith: through the apparent stillness a metamorphosis would happen. Sure like the sun in the sky, like tomorrow, like summer.

Later, I have practiced the same philosophical virtue while beating eggs whites. It is the same process: you sweat steadily for about twenty minutes, while nothing happens. When you're ready to give up, the fork

finds a pleasant resistance. One more minute, and the slimy fluid becomes foam. You can shape it into self-standing mountaintops. It holds the fork if you drop it. Just the opposite of an iceberg melting, but equally impressive.

*Biancomangiare*, meringue, and few similar prodigies, taught me about the paradox called 'change of status'. Steady action is required for a discontinuous result that responds to the law: nothing, nothing, still nothing, maybe forever nothing, then something. 'Something' doesn't resemble a bit the nothing of a minute ago. And all those identical nothings are, indeed, very different.

Such a concept is hard to grasp for a child. But it comes through, wrapped inside two basic capacities: patience and belief. Something is readying itself at the bottom, where the wooden spoon stirs into muddy depths. A surprise, a joke, are concocted under water. The saucepan winks at me, and I'm happy. I'm aware. I won't be discouraged. I'll keep turning in spite of appearances.

I have spent sweet hours at the stove, during childhood: never tired, never overwhelmed.

*Biancomangiare* was one of very few treats (if the name applies to such a bland comfort) grandpa's ulcer permitted. With unquenchable enthusiasm I produced a zillion editions.

Once it became dense I turned off the flame, then I poured the pan's contents into a salad bowl. Rather, separate saucers: on cooling, the *budino* further solidified, forming a thick skin. Such outer stratum was nice when homogeneously covering the surface. Breaking it while scooping was unaesthetic. Single portions—I was taught—solved the issue. I complied.

There could be variations to this basic pudding. Cocoa boosted its popularity: but grandpa couldn't eat it, and the name made no more sense. Other possible flavors were cinnamon, vanilla beans, almond extract, fancy colored syrups. Adding egg yolks made *crème patissiere.* Raisins, ginger root, nuts of all kinds, provided consistency and texture.

I of course tried it all. Mom and grandma stuck with the dictates of tradition, still admitting a touch of fancy: lemon skin was part of the original recipe. A long strip, spiraling like a golden curl. Peeling it very thin was important: only the yellow part should be used. The white under skin of the citrus would turn the milk.

What zest does to the recipe is subtle. Impalpable, like the aroma of tea: not a taste, but a quintessential enhancement. With a zest of lemon sweetness becomes exquisite, said grandpa, slowly spooning away. Oh so gratefully: in the summer evening, at the dark wooden table, crickets chorusing outside.

I made *biancomangiare* after thirty years of latency, at least, on the day my child left for college. The house, briskly, emptied itself, and I was

alone. I don't drink milk, but I couldn't see myself dump what my son had left. It would have been disposing of his childhood, I guess. Of mine, in the same gesture.

*Biancomangiare* came to mind: I had Pillsbury Flour instead of *amido di grano* (it would probably do). Sugar? Maybe. I had salt, I missed lemon. Patience…I should summon it anyway, once I dipped my wooden spoon in the saucepan: I had forgot how long the recipe takes. Maybe I had not: it just seemed surprising. I felt I should have done millions of things—all at the same time—while I concentrated on one gesture, looking at a single spot that didn't pulsate, flicker, send out signals or words.

I stared at a still frame where nothing happened. Nothing seemed to happen, I mean, but it took me longer, this time—or it was more strenuous—to supply the faith (was it knowledge?), I needed to trust that in spite of all evidence milk would soon make pudding. Such an effort seemed useless, at least disproportioned. To give up was more tempting than ever, though I believed I had grown wiser with age. Maybe I was out of shape…but why should I train myself? No gastritic relatives were around to be pleased.

I went all the way, then split the pudding into portions. I ate them one by one, on the following days. They are meant to last…that pays off for the slight laboriousness of the making. Though it didn't seem laborious when I was a kid. As it didn't, I guess, to all those who had prepared it in a not-too-remote past. Times have changed.

I ate the entire thing, dish by dish, cup by cup, as if I were many persons. Grandpa and grandma, Mom, Dad, and a miscellanea of uncles, aunts, cousins. As if I weren't alone. I enjoyed the thick skin on the surface, and I missed the lemon.

2.

When my son reached teen-age, he briskly stepped out of a precocious yet transitory vegetarianism. Although getting proteins within a vegetarian regime is entirely possible, it takes skills, time, and the money I lacked. Clearly, I didn't do a proper job. Suddenly the boy starved for meat.

I hadn't cooked any in a longtime, and was taken by surprise. Should I brush up old recipes from my motherland—dishes that I had liked, then forgotten after I left for good? I still had a small journal filled with handwritten notes. Browsing it, though, I realized all meat-based dishes I knew were obsolete—they all required a long preparation time, a myriad of ingredients to chop, mix or marinate, a great deal of operations such as grounding, stuffing, filling, sometimes a slow cooking…Just the opposite of a steak you'd toss into a skillet and retrieve, minutes later, fork in hand.

The philosophy behind such arabesque methodology was to use as little meat as possible, being still able to apply the term while presenting

the final result. For most families, when I was a child, meat was too expensive...skillful strategies, elaborated through the centuries, disguised its paucity. Thus the word 'meat' designated a lengthy list of concoctions, only reaching the table after several hands had intervened, leading all ingredients through a complex metamorphosis.

Little wrappings, meat balls and meatloaf, thin strips cooked in a variety of sauces, same strips rolled then stuck on skewers, little bites with potatoes, chop roulade with carrots and onions, folded pockets with cheese and ham, meat-stuffed vegetables, thin slices cooked in lemon and sprinkled with Parmesan, same covered with capers and tuna, shredded beef with olives and pesto...

Not to mention lower varieties: hearts and livers, kidneys and tripe, tongue, brains and sweetbreads. Those were served even six days a week, and we called them meat in good faith, just as we called the above-mentioned masterpieces. The only 'non-meat' was fish. Eggs, of course.

Let me describe meatballs. They required so much labor, helpers were recruited at a tender age. Tender like the meat itself, with its pinkish color, so dear. My paternal granny initiated me to a task she had performed—I'm sure—a million of times.

Meatballs are to be started in the morning. Early, for the mix needs rest, the longer the better. Blending the ingredients isn't hard. You only need to take mental note, make sure you have missed nothing. The meat doesn't provide the bulk that's indeed the bread (old bread, hard, about to go stale) soaked in milk. Or in water, if you are dirty poor.

Soaked bread, grounded meat or meats, salt and pepper, grated cheese (the sharpest, most savory, grated as close to the crust as you can without scorching your knuckles—then the crust will be tossed in the soup), plenty of garlic and parsley. And an egg or two, if you have them, to tie everything in.

Now the fun part: you vigorously mix with your hands, as if kneading bread dough or wedging clay. Most exciting is knowing when you're done: the amalgam suddenly changes, taking a life of its own. It breathes—you can tell—levitates, becomes springy, wants to keep its own shape. It abandons your fingers. Time to let go.

We are called back into the kitchen way before lunchtime. The tables set for ten or twelve—large families. And meatballs are popped down like cherries: we need to make tons of them, covering the entire kitchen counter. Flour is on our clothes and fingers. Without it, all becomes a gluey mess, and grandma has no time to waste.

Gauging the amount of mix you take in your hand is important. Aim for the equivalent of a tablespoon. You can use a spoon in the beginning. Only in the beginning. You make balls, quickly, neatly, rolling them between your palms (lightly! lightly!) or instead on the counter. Everyone has her method...only results count. Grandma might leave some

batches round, make some into ovals, or flatten them with an expert tap—it depends on how she will cook them.

In a few different ways, of course: variety fosters the illusion of quantity. Some will be boiled. Pasta will be tossed in the saucepan, once the meat is removed, to use the juices it released, popping another dish out of nothing. Boiled balls are for the sick, the fragile, the baby.

Some are baked in copious tomato sauce (those are flattened out—they will need less cooking). Some are pan-fried (they need thicker coating and have to be smaller). At grandma's they like them dark, almost black, crusty, crunchy. So hard, they could stone enemies or neighbors (here, they're often the same). Tasty bites…I love them.

But in mother's family the other grandma's crunchy meatballs get disparaging comments. They are spoken of as examples of unhealthy cooking. Those brown bullets grandma keeps for her husband's and sons' delight respond to a popular, rough, quite masculine taste...I like them even better.

In my mother's family (where I learned *biancomangiare*) meatballs are simply boiled in vegetable broth. They are so soft, they crumple at the very sight of a fork. They are so pale you would think them albinos. Truly, they taste of nothing: a good enough taste, reassuring.

Anyway, diatribes about the best way to make meatballs are as common as those about lasagna, or ravioli. Secrets are buried deep into each family's past. Let's leave them alone.

I also learned to make roulades from my father's mother—helping her in the morning, again, to be ready for lunch with enormous platters. Two meat recipes are all she ever taught me, but her succinct lessons are etched in my brain. You can read her words in the circumvolutions of my gray matter.

The idea behind roulades is the same lying behind meatballs… only, instead of adding stuff to a fistful of ground beef, we stretch a steak transparent thin, hammering it with all the strength we can summon. No marinade—furious beating sufficiently breaks the fibers. Then we tear this quasi-veil in triangular fragments—corners and diagonals can be further pulled (popular wisdom gets that smart). After having multiplied loaves and fishes—so to speak—we start stuffing.

Each piece is coated with previously salted and peppered breadcrumbs, sprinkled with oil of olive, complemented with grated cheese plus a cascade of garlic and parsley (they come at no cost). On each coated piece we add a curl of butter and a shard of cheese, before rolling it and perfectly sealing the corners. We line up seven per skewer. Redundancy is paramount: we re-coat each skewer (they look like stocky parallelograms) with breadcrumbs, then spread butter all over.

Roulades are baked for twenty minutes, turned now and then for homogeneous browning. They become deliciously crusty, sprinkled with

tears of cheese and shining with fat. They are directly gulped from the skewers, disappearing by the dozen as soon as they reach the table. The meat—so well dressed, pulled so thin—melts elegantly on the tongue. There are no leftovers.

Something comparable to a beefsteak—quick and easy—still landed on our table when I was a child. It was called *fettina*—a diminutive word I could translate as 'steakling'. The name mirrored the not-quite-impressive size, the thin cut, the poor quality of the meat, always strewn with unchewable tendons and nerves. Recently inspired by richer, foreign cuisines, it didn't have a local tradition and we didn't know how to prepare it. Thus it reached the table as hard as a shoe.

Leftovers became tougher, of course, but we tossed nothing. Nannies would refurbish *fettine* from lunch to the children's dinner, happening at an early hour, in the kitchen, while mom was still at work. I remember cutting small squares for my youngest brother, who painstakingly munched the unsavory thing, sipping water after each bite. While I waited, I kept cutting the meat—smaller, smaller and smaller.

So when my adolescent son emerged from vegetarianism, suddenly famished for proteins, I rediscovered the meat I had let slip to the background, the meat I had never cared for as an adult: the sad 'steaklings' of my mom's table were better forgotten; the adventurous, amorous recipes learned at both grandmothers' sides were sealed in a past too remote.

Yet I'd better resuscitate them, I thought, rather than venturing into a world of Rib-Eye and T-Bones I couldn't afford, also risking to handle them as badly as *fettine*. I had my tiny notebook... should I look for a tenderizer? A hand-grinder? Skewers, for sure. I should carve those fragments of time, before work, to prepare a marinade, mix a bowl of stuffing or season my breadcrumbs, to grate Parmesan or slice it transparent thin. Then leave it for later.

The effort needed wasn't huge, after all. Just a matter of parsing the process in small steps. Domestic economy...was it? Not too hard, I discovered. I liked it, indeed. The repetitive motion of shaping meatballs or folding roulades had its own Zen quality. Though I made relatively large quantities, I was not feeding a table of ten. I could find the required patience, could I? I possessed it—I might have misplaced it perhaps, but it was at hand.

Exactly.

My son pronounced my meatballs were mythical. Maybe not quite, I thought, yet I didn't fully disagree.