

lifestyle

RECIPES FOR LIFE

My copy of Marcella Hazan's 'Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking' is covered with food stains

by John Stark | Sunday, October 6, 2013



“Cookbooks. \$3 each,” said the sign on the table in my driveway.

They were gone within a few hours — hundreds of cookbooks that I had spent decades collecting. I had cookbooks for every country’s city and region; for every technique, from roasting to outdoor grilling; by big-name chefs, celebrities and foodies. I had the classics, from "Julia Child" to "Joy of Cooking" to "Escoffier." I had cookbooks whose recipes I didn’t give a fig about. Their sumptuous photographs were a meal in

themselves.

But there was one cookbook that didn't make my moving sale: Marcella Hazan's "Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking." Even if I had wanted to sell it, I doubt I could — its pages are frayed and covered with food stains.

Instead, I put the 688-page hardcover book in the trunk of my car. I took it with me from Minneapolis to Boston last August. It's the only cookbook that I own now, and the only one I need.

My Boston friends always loved it when I made Hazan's lentil soup in the fall and winter months. It's enriched with butter and pancetta.

I lived in Boston for 15 years before moving away. I came back because I missed my neighborhood. I may have left Emeril and Martha and Marcus behind, but it was important I bring Marcella with me.

My decision to let go of my cookbook collection was prompted by economics. Moving companies don't charge by volume, but by weight. It was going to cost me a small fortune to put them on the van.

Besides, I don't cook like I once did. Should I feel the urge to make Thai coconut soup, I just have to Google it and a dozen recipes come up.

Moving is a time for downsizing. Why not go paperless? I had no place to put all my cookbooks in my Boston digs.

I tried at first to lighten my cookbook load by selecting certain ones to keep, like Rick Bayless' "Mexican Kitchen," or Deborah Madison's "The Greens Cookbook." But trying to choose was proving too painful. No, I reasoned, better they all go.

In Minneapolis, my cookbooks were on shelves in my den. Some were still in unpacked cardboard boxes from my move there. But not Hazan's "Essentials." Heavy as a bible, I kept it on my kitchen counter.

Her death from emphysema last week at age 89 was reported on the front page of the New York Times — she was a two-pack-a-day smoker. She was a reluctant, unlikely chef who had a degree in biology. She never went to cooking school. She didn't have to, having grown up in Emilia-Romagna, the agricultural heart of Italy. Starting in 1973, she wrote six cookbooks, which were translated into English by her American husband, Victor. The headline on her obit read, "Changed the Way Americans Cook Italian Food."

She certainly changed the way I cook.

I have a reputation for being good in the kitchen. I'll admit I was in my younger days, but no more. I now only make a handful of familiar recipes. I no longer do complicated sauces, bone chicken breasts or make pie dough.

I have, for the last decade, only made recipes for my dinner guests from "Essentials." They're plain, not fancy, gimmick-free and trend-resistant. Most — like her "Bolognese Sauce" and "Lentil Soup" — are cheap as hell. Despite their simplicity, every recipe of hers has proved to be a culinary masterpiece, both earthy and elegant.

Even though the recipes are easy to prepare and shop for, they're not for every home cook. That's because their most important ingredient is time. I only make the Bolognese sauce on weekends. It takes all day for its simple ingredients, which include milk, butter, nutmeg and canned Roman tomatoes, to simmer on the stovetop before alchemizing into culinary gold.

"I believe with my whole heart in the act of cooking, in its smells, in its sounds, in its observable progress on the fire," Hazan writes in the preface of "Essentials." She then berates the microwave, which she says she's tried to befriend: "The microwave separates the cook from cooking, cutting off the emotional and physical pleasure deeply rooted in the act."

The day before she died, Marcella and Victor shared a meal of trofie, the twisted Ligurian pasta, the Times reported. He sauced it with pesto that was made with basil from their terrace garden in the Florida Keys.

Maybe this weekend, in her honor, I'll make pesto, too. I have a lot of basil on my deck. I'll use the recipe that's on page 176 of my cookbook. I'll serve it with pasta and invite my old friends to join me.

It's time I had them to dinner again.

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