

ROOTS

BY MADY KAYE

TEARS IN THE GRAVY, CIRCA 1974

My mother's cooking advice to her children was straightforward "Never apologize! Bring the food to the table, smile, and if it doesn't turn out exactly as planned, don't apologize!"

The rest of her kitchen wisdom was more general: "Whatever you do, do it with aplomb." For a long time, I thought my mother meant I should carry a plum around in my hand. This confused me.

"A-p-l-o-m-b," she clarified. "Go look it up in the dictionary." Being a dutiful daughter, I did.

So it was with great delight that I got to remind my mother of her own words during the Great Thanksgiving Gravy Disaster of '74.

I had invited a college housemate to Connecticut for Thanksgiving dinner. We joined my parents and my grandmother, making a cozy quintet for a late-afternoon repast. My mother told me to serve the appetizers in the living room, and to make sure conversation never lagged. Meanwhile, she would be putting the final touches on the dinner.

All went according to plan, for a while anyway. But as time passed, both appetizers and conversation wilted. I made a quick trip to the kitchen to check on mother's progress.

"Nearly done," she said. "Go back to the living room until I need you." This scenario played out several times.

Finally I entered the sacred ground of the chef one last time, only to find the kitchen in quiet bedlam, my mother viciously stabbing the gravy as she stirred it and crying into the gravy pot.

"Oh my gosh, Mom, what's the matter?"

"I ruined the gravy. Dinner's ready," she said, crying quietly, "but the gravy is burned beyond recognition."

Sure enough, the gravy was charred, with blackened bits of stuff floating around in it. I'd never made gravy in my life, but I knew it wasn't supposed to look this way. A disaster like this could only be rescued by a small miracle, and I'm certain that's what happened—I remembered some cooking advice my mother had given me many years before.

"Wait! I've got it!" I said. "Remember what you told me about saving a dish that goes wrong?"

"I have no idea," she said, distracted.

"You add butter or brown sugar or lemon juice, depending on what food needs help!"

"I said that? When did I say that?"

"I can't remember, Mom. But that's exactly what we're going to do, because I can't think of anything else that might help."

I had enough cooking sense to know that we probably



My mother, Miriam, in the kitchen c. 1959

shouldn't add lemon juice to gravy. So we strained the gravy repeatedly and got most of the charred stuff out of it.

Then we added one or two sticks of butter and a fair amount of brown sugar, to cover up the burned flavor. It worked! The gravy was, um, serviceable. It even looked like gravy.

Before we left the kitchen, I made my mother promise to stick to her own advice: no apologizing, no explanation, no nothing! Just serve the meal and **DO IT WITH APLOMB!** My mother agreed, but I could tell she was waffling.

The family was seated, the lovely dinner served. My mother sat, fork in hand, literally holding her breath. Watching. My housemate, Julie, was the first to break the silence.

"Holy cow, ma'am. This is the absolute best gravy I've ever eaten! How did you get this wonderful, smoky flavor?"

Without dropping a beat, my mother shot back, "I burned it." She looked right at Julie, actually beamed, and said, "I burned it." To this day I'm not sure anyone else at the table believed her, but dinner proceeded without a hitch. Julie raved about the "blackened gravy" for months.

As I said, I've never made Thanksgiving gravy—not because I was scarred by the Gravy Disaster, but because I married a man who makes it so well that there's really no need for me to go there myself. I'll stick to what I do well and let him handle the turkey and fixins'.

But bear in mind, if a dish needs fixing, I know what to do. And now you do, too: *add butter, brown sugar or lemon juice*, and, whatever you do, "do it with aplomb."