

Julie Robinson



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At the heart of it all

Mother's recipes draw family to the table

By [Julie Robinson](#)

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WEIRTON, W.Va. -- Twenty-five years ago, one of her five sisters-in-law asked Theresa DeCaria of Weirton for a special Christmas present. She requested copies of the recipes her mother-in-law, Virginia DeCaria, served her large Italian family all her married life.

This task was no simple matter of copying recipes because her mother had never written the recipes down. She had learned to make the dishes from her own mother, who learned from her mother, and so on. Theresa began transcribing her mother's recipes as they spent many pleasurable hours in the kitchen working on the family project.

"The recipes were all in her head. Every time she made something, I would stand beside her and watch her measure out the ingredients before she added them, and then write them down," she said. Eventually, DeCaria produced 40 typewritten pages of family favorites and made copies for each of her siblings.

They all agreed that she should publish a cookbook, sharing the recipes that held center stage at countless leisurely family meals.

The project was on the back burner until DeCaria purchased a digital camera. She photographed every dish as her mother prepared it for family meals. Her recipes, photos and family stories were accepted as a design project by the Design Studio of the Art Institute Pittsburgh. The result is "The Table My Mother Set," a charming, nostalgic collection of her recipes, each one with a photograph, old family photos and Italian sayings.

It's the book every large, ethnic family with great food traditions wishes it would have written.

The recipes are traditional Italian - nothing too sophisticated, but every one looks delicious. The recipes are far from convenience food - many require extended simmering - and everything is made from scratch. But you're not going to have to search out any hard-to-find ingredients. This is comfort food, Italian style.

DeCaria said she hopes her book will inspire others to gather family and friends around a table of good food, and she did inspire me. I made the Baked Pasta Supreme for a recent family dinner and it easily served nine hungry adults. I followed her mother's Spaghetti Sauce recipe, which starts with sautéed meaty bones, onion and garlic simmered in red wine before adding tomatoes and spices. I made her meatballs and simmered them in the sauce for about an hour. I'm not Italian, but our house smelled as though one lived and cooked there.

I didn't have quite as good luck with the Love Knots, those classic Italian, anise-flavored cookies. I was low on flour, so my dough wasn't quite stiff enough to shape into ropes to form the pretty love knots featured in DeCaria's photo. Mine were more like love blobs, but they still tasted quite good. (This is why Darcie Boschee's column focuses on baking and mine on cooking.)

DeCaria self-published her book, which she describes as having a "sophisticated scrapbook look," just in time to give it to extended family members for Christmas last year. "They were just ecstatic. They thanked me for carrying on the tradition of our family," she said. "It's the most rewarding thing I've ever done in my life. People tell me how touched they are by the book. It could be about any large family - or any nationality."

It's peppered with Italian sayings that she heard all her life. She and her now deceased father sat down and wrote them out one afternoon.

A former principal and teacher of English, math and computer science and a yearbook adviser, DeCaria is now a school district treasurer. Her elderly mother lives with her so DeCaria can care for her. "I think she's very proud of the book," she said. "She's becoming forgetful, so I'm especially grateful that we finished the book when we did."

If you follow the recipes exactly, you'll get a taste of the food that Virginia DeCaria served her family. Readers often tell Theresa DeCaria that the recipes remind them of their own families, but that they tweak a bit here and there.

DeCaria doesn't care how you make them, she just wants you to make them and gather the family around for a relaxing meal. My copy is already covered with spattered tomato sauce.

"Food and togetherness is very important in our family," she said. "What I'd like for people to get from this book is the importance of family and traditions. I'd like it to help bring the family home."

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### **Want to order?**

'The Table My Mother Set'

To order:

\$24.95: check or money order (includes postage) Send to The Table My Mother Set, P.O. Box 2315, Weirton, WV 26062. Make checks payable to  
Theresa DeCaria

CREDIT CARD: Visit [tablemymotherset.com](http://tablemymotherset.com)

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### **Baked Pasta Supreme**

Serves 8 to 10 people

2 pounds ziti or rigatoni pasta

1 pint fresh mushrooms, sliced

2 hard-cooked eggs, sliced

1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese

1/2 cup grated romano cheese

Spaghetti Sauce (recipe below)

Italian Meatballs in sauce (recipe below)

1 tablespoon diced onions

2 tablespoons butter

1/8 teaspoon crushed red pepper, or to taste

PREPARE the sauce. Add Italian meatballs to the sauce and cook about 45 minutes to 1 hour.

COOK pasta as directed on the package.

WHILE pasta cooks, place onions in a small pot and sauté them in butter until soften. Add mushrooms; cook about 5 minutes.

ADD crushed red pepper and about one-half cup of sauce to the mushrooms. Set aside.

DRAIN the pasta and coat with sauce.

COAT a greased baking lasagna pan with 1/2 cup of sauce.

PLACE half the pasta in a layer of the lasagna pan.

MASH the meatballs in a separate bowl.

LAYER on top of pasta the meatballs, mushrooms, 1 sliced hard-cooked egg, and the cheeses.

ADD remaining pasta and top with remaining egg slices.

DILUTE 1/2 cup of sauce with 1/4 cup of water.

POUR the diluted sauce over the pasta and sprinkle grated cheese over the top.

BAKE in a preheated 350° oven for about 30 minutes.

SERVE hot.

Spaghetti Sauce

Serves 8 to 10

1 pound meat pieces (such as chuck roast, port neck bones, country-style spareribs or sausage)

2 tablespoons olive oil

Italian Meatballs (recipe below)

1/2 onion, chopped fine

1 clove garlic, chopped fine

1/4 cup dry red wine, optional

2 cans (28-ounce) plum tomatoes

2 cups water, approximately

1 can (6-ounce) tomato paste

1/2 teaspoon parsley flakes

1/2 teaspoon oregano

4 to 5 fresh basil leaves, chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

HEAT oil in large saucepan. Add meat and, on high heat, brown it on all sides to lock in the juices. Reduce to medium heat.

ADD finely chopped onions and garlic and sauté until softened. Add red wine, if desired, for flavor.

PUREE the tomatoes by straining them, or using a food mill, and add them with their juice to the sauce pan. (I used cans of crushed tomatoes.) Fill each tomato can halfway with water (approximately 1 cup for each can) to loosen any tomatoes still in the can, and add this to the sauce as well.

ADD tomato paste, parsley, basil, oregano and salt and pepper to taste. Stir to incorporate all ingredients.

IF ADDING meatballs to the sauce, prepare meatball mixture and shape into round balls, about 2 inches in diameter. Bring the sauce to a boil.

ADD uncooked meatballs to the sauce; reduce the heat to medium, and cook the meatballs in the sauce, covered, about 45 minutes to 1 hour, stirring occasionally.

TURN DOWN the heat and simmer, covered, for another hour. Stir occasionally to prevent sticking.

SERVE the sauce over any cooked pasta of your choice and serve the meat as a separate dish.

### **Italian Meatball Patties**

Makes 4 to 6 patties

1 pound ground chuck or ground sirloin

1 teaspoon finely chopped fresh parsley

1/2 small onion, finely chopped

1 egg

1/4 cup bread crumbs

1/4 cup grated romano cheese

1/2 teaspoon garlic powder, or one fresh clove, chopped fine

1 tablespoon water

Salt and pepper, to taste

2 tablespoons olive oil, for frying

MIX together all the ingredients, except for the oil.

SHAPE the mixture into patties and fry them in hot oil in a skillet on medium heat until browned on both sides OR Bake the patties in a preheated 350° oven for about 20 minutes (add a little water to the bottom of the pan before baking.)

### **Love Knots**

Makes 7 to 8 dozen)

Dough ingredients

5 cups flour

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 cup sugar

1/2 cup shortening

6 eggs

Juice of 1/2 orange and its grated rind

1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

1/2 teaspoon anise oil

Fluffy Egg White Icing

1 1/4 cups sugar

1/2 cup water

2 egg whites

For the dough:

SIFT together the flour, baking powder and salt. Set aside.

BLEND the shortening and sugar in a mixer.

GRADUALLY add in the eggs, one at a time, followed by the orange, vanilla and anise.

FOLD in the flour mixture by hand until a soft dough is formed. Working with a small portion at a time, roll the dough into ropelike strips about 16 inches long and 1/2 inch in diameter.

CUT each rope into about 4-inch strips and knot each piece. On a well-greased cookie sheet, bake the love knots in a pre-heated 350° oven for 10 minutes.

WHEN cooled, ice the cookies with egg white icing.

For the icing

COMBINE 1/2 cup water and 1 1/4 cup sugar in a saucepan and let it come to a boil. Cook on medium heat until the mixture thickens to the consistence of syrup, about 5 minutes.

REMOVE from the heat and let it cool slightly.

BEAT 2 egg whites with a mixer until stiff peaks form.

GRADUALLY pour the syrup mixture over the beaten egg whites

BEAT with the mixer until thick and fluffy.

SPREAD over cooled cookies.