

Chapter 1

The Story of My Life Began in my Mother's Kitchen



When I was three or four years old, I realized I was Italian. Family, cooking, and stories – in that order – defined my existence.

But the story of my life began in my mother's kitchen.

It was there that I sat in my first high chair and learned to eat homemade pasta with butter and a little olive oil.



Josephine Piedigrossi Cifonelli married Frank George Biviano in 1950, the year our house at 24 Mildred Avenue was built. I showed up in 1960. My sister, Lori, arrived in 1963.

My first real memory besides my sister's birth was the day President John F. Kennedy was shot.

I remember my mother sitting in the living room watching TV and crying.

I knew JFK was Irish Catholic (not Italian) because my parents talked about it. The Irish lived on our side of town and went to St. Mary's Church on Main Street, which looked like a cathedral.

The experience of seeing a President get shot made me appreciate the value of good people, great neighborhoods, and a safe community.

But these were all peripheral things in my 3-year-old world. I was most grateful for my Mom, my Dad, my 5-month-old baby sister, and my mother's kitchen.

Life was pretty traditional back then with Mom and Dad in their stereotypical roles.

Mom stayed home to tend to me and my sister. We watched her cook for what seemed like all day. She was meticulous about cleaning the house and making fresh, homemade meals.

Dad left for work in the morning and drove to the *other* side of town – the “east end”.



This was the Italian side of town – the place where both my parents grew up and where both sets of my Italian and Sicilian Grandparents' houses were.



They lived near the factories and close to St. Anthony's Catholic Church, where I was baptized.

Dad worked hard for 35 years at Brewer Titchener Corporation, a place that made industrial hardware. He was management but the union guys loved him. Dad had a quick wit and sparkling personality. He made a good living.

More than once, Dad would come home and tell us that he spent *all day* dreaming of boiling pasta water, homemade meatballs, tomato sauce, oil and vinegar, and grated parmesan.

We weren't rich but we thought we were. The house at 24 Mildred was just 1,015 square feet. We had three bedrooms, a bath with a shower, and a living room with a TV.

Best of all was the kitchen. It was 240 square feet of heaven! It had a stove, a refrigerator, and an eat-in kitchen table. You could do *anything* from there – watch TV, play on the floor, eat, cook, do homework, and even let Dad in the back door after a hard day's work.

What else could a kid possibly need?

Our kitchen was typical of the houses on my street. It had a small dining room table that seated four (five with the baby chair). For special occasions, we'd put leaves in the table to seat about ten people total.

On any given day, ingredients like freshly canned tomatoes would emerge from the cellar. Italian sausage (hot and mild), ground beef, London broil, a green pepper and a clove of garlic would magically appear.

The spice rack was filled with the standard Italian spices – basil, parsley, oregano – in case the weather wasn't favorable to having fresh herbs in the garden.



All these things would get added slowly and methodically to a large pot which sat next to the boiling pasta water. A little romaine or iceberg lettuce, a garden ripe tomato, fresh cucumber, white mushrooms, extra virgin olive oil from a can, red wine vinegar, salt and pepper made the meal complete.



My Grandmother's kitchen on Bartlett Street wasn't much different. The only exception was that her stove was right next to the kitchen table, giving her about two feet of room between her stove and the table. It was remarkable that she was able to



cook for her husband and six kids in that small kitchen, but she made it work. And it was amazing.

Some of my fondest memories growing up were fitting her six children, their six spouses, and her 13 grandchildren in that kitchen for a drink or two before Easter or Christmas Dinner. She had pastel shot glasses and the standard Italian cordials – Anisette, Sambuca, and Amaretto – and a little red wine.

Since Grandpa came from the “old country”, he liked to make his own wine, which sometimes made its way upstairs from the barrel downstairs.

My Grandmother, Margaret “Rose” Piedigrossi and my Grandfather, Angelo Cifonelli (1920)

For a few holidays, we set up tables in Grandma’s living room to seat all of the extended family for a Christmas Eve or Easter extravaganza.

I loved seeing my uncles and aunts, playing with my cousins, and watching the extended family enjoy each other.

But the centerpiece was the cooking. And the stories.

And that’s why I started to write *Josephine’s Petite Cucina*. It’s a story about my Italian family, my Mom’s little kitchen, heritage, tradition and the food we love.

It’s for Josephine, Frank and all of us who follow them.



Photo Credit: President John F. Kennedy Official Portrait, courtesy of WhiteHouse.gov.