

Eighty-Five & Mediterranean Seafood Stew

Almost Winter 2011/Volume 276

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Today is my father's birthday. He is eighty-five ... yes, 85. Most years, Dad's birthday gets overshadowed by the hoopla of Christmas, New Year's and the start of the ski season. There's only one thing worse than finding a birthday gift two days after Christmas. That's having your birthday two days after Christmas. But eighty-five is an impressive milestone and deserves at least a bit of attention.

My dad is a very special guy. Yes, I know that most kids brag about their fathers but mine is truly remarkable. Without a doubt, Dad is the peoplest people person I know. He's never met a stranger he didn't like. And he meets people everywhere! He'll help you pass the time in that long line at the deli counter on a busy summer weekend or drive away the boredom on a plane ride from here to there. He'll tell you a story and listen to yours over a long, leisurely dinner. Completely genuine, Dad always has at least a few words, more often several, for everyone. It's more than simple charm; he is energized by his friends, family and the innocent bystanders who cross his path. Dad doesn't pretend to be interested in your story; he truly is interested in what you have to say.

And Dad loves to talk. He has a story for every rhyme, reason and season. He can remember the names and idiosyncrasies of every one of his childhood pals. He knows who had a pain-in-the-neck little brother and who had a gorgeous sister. Dad's got a passel of stories about sailing on the Cape and skiing in Vermont and New Hampshire. He's got tales about college in Boston and road trips to and from Kansas. How and why he ended up in Kansas is another story and closely related to having too much fun in Boston.

His grandfather holds a special place in his life and heart and Dad is delighted to share their adventures. Grandpa Nye was a contractor and built a lot of little houses in their hometown of Brockton, Massachusetts. He drove a big, old Buick and loved to take his only grandson with him when he made his rounds. Dad got his first business lessons from Grandpa Nye. Over the years he picked up a lot more from his father, various bosses, employees and customers. He is only too happy to share what he learned from any and all of them.

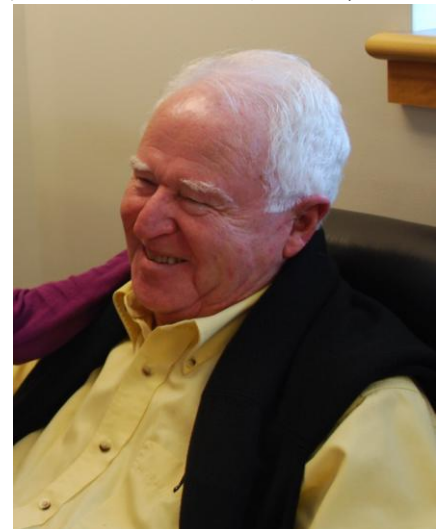
Even better, he can tell you all about the day he met my mother, down to the very last detail.

When I was a teenager, Dad amazed, horrified and embarrassed me. I couldn't begin to understand how he could just jump in and start a conversation ... with a stranger no less. In all honesty, I think I was more or less horrified and embarrassed by any and everything he did. Don't forget, I was a teenager. Luckily, I eventually got over myself and came to admire and even emulate his cheery chattiness. A master storyteller and a decent listener, he made it look easy.

If you're one of those shy fellows, believe me, with a little practice it is easy. And well worth it. Everyone has a story. Most would like nothing better than to share it. All you need to do is ask a simple question or two, pay attention and ask a few more. True, some stories are more interesting than others but all are worth a listen.

Sometimes I'll catch myself making small talk with a stranger and can't help but smile. And give Dad a silent word of thanks. Following his example, I've met a lot of strangers over the years. Happily, some have become dear friends.

Happy Birthday Dad and bon appétit!



Mediterranean Seafood Stew

Birthday celebration or not, this seafood stew is the perfect centerpiece for a festive winter feast. Enjoy!

Serves 8-10



Extra virgin olive oil
 1 medium onion, diced
 1 carrot, diced
 1 stalk celery, diced
 Pinch or to taste chili pepper flakes
 1/2 teaspoon herbs de Provence
 Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
 2 garlic cloves, minced
 1-2 teaspoons anchovy paste
 1/2 cup dry white wine
 2 cups canned crushed tomatoes
 3/4-1 cup shrimp, fish or chicken stock
 1-2 tablespoons capers, drained
 10-12 Sicilian or other large green olives, pitted and roughly chopped

1 pound scrod or other firm white fish, cut into chunks
 1 pound shrimp, peeled and de-veined
 1 pound bay scallops
 Finely chopped, fresh basil

Heat a little olive oil in a large, deep skillet over medium heat. Add the onion, carrot, celery, chili pepper and herbs to the skillet and season with salt and pepper. Cook the vegetables, stirring frequently, until the onion is translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and anchovy paste and cook for another minute. Add the wine and bring to a boil. Stir in the tomatoes, stock, capers and olives. Reduce the heat to low and simmer, uncovered, stirring occasionally, for 10-15 minutes.

Raise the heat to medium-high, add the scrod, return to a simmer and cook for 2-3 minutes. Stir in the shrimp and scallops, return to a simmer and continue to cook, stirring once or twice, until all the fish is cooked through, about 5 minutes. The scrod and scallops will be opaque and the shrimp will be pink.

Sprinkle with chopped basil and serve immediately with warm chunks of sourdough bread.

You can make the sauce in advance. Cool to room temperature, cover and store in the refrigerator. When you're ready to continue, bring the sauce to a simmer and complete the recipe.



Dad Skiing in Vermont

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Another recipe from Susan Nye: Winter 2011/Volume 276

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