

The Pasta Queen:

Ernestina Josephina Frazzini Moschetti
By Marilou Hanley Moschetti

Walking into my mother-in-law Erna's kitchen, the first thing that heightens your senses is the aroma of cooking spaghetti sauce. The second thing I remember is the warm smile, and hospitality of being made to feel welcome any time, any day. Tom and Erna Moschetti welcomed me into their family in 1969. My husband was their third child, and only son. He was spoiled having so many wonderful handmade pasta suppers. It was a challenge for me to learn just the right touch so I could produce the amazing meals his mother prepared. You knew you arrived "home" when the front door opened, you saw the table already set waiting for you and others to enjoy the food.



Typical Moschetti hospitality – the more the merrier!

Tom & Erna Moschetti, Fremont, CA - Circa 1981

Both Tom and Erna considered their home as a sanctuary for their children, grandchildren, extended family members, and friends.

Erna was raised in unusual circumstances by today's standards. She was born in 1911 in Dawson, New Mexico, of Italian immigrant mother Maria Carlini and father Carmine Frazzini. Dawson was a coal mining town comprised of many workers from different nationalities with a population at that time of around 6,000 individuals. It was a "company town" where housing and basic supplies were provided by the company, and what you bought was deducted from the workers weekly salary.¹ When Carmine arrived in Dawson in 1901, he worked for 5 years and saved enough money to bring Maria and their first-born child Angelo from San Pietro Avellana in the region of Molise in the Province of Isernia, Italy.

¹ Tennessee Ernie Ford (Kovacs); Sixteen Tons lyrics



Marie Carlini Frazzini Cinea & Carmine Frazzini's home province in Italy

Their second child LeDora was born shortly after, followed by Ernestina Josephina. Tragically, Carmine contracted pneumonia at age 33, and died when Ernestina was about four months old. It was a very challenging time for this young mother. She spoke no English and had three children to care for. Although Angelo was 8 years older than Ernestina, he was not able to work in the coal mine. He could run errands for others, and until he joined the army for World War I, he was not gainfully employed. After the war, he became Postmaster of Dawson before he was murdered. (More on this tragedy to follow).

Maria brought with her simple recipes that she learned in Italy, mostly “poor man’s pasta” made with and without eggs. To make ends meet after Carmine’s death, she took in boarders, single men who paid her a small fee to live in the house to be provided with breakfast, a lunch bucket, and dinner. Maria had to “make do” with all the men and the children to feed. The weather was hot and dry in the summer, and cold and snowy in the winter. The little house was poorly insulated, and the children were sickly when growing up. They were poor, so poor that the children got scraps left over from the men’s meals for their food. Things only changed slightly when Maria decided to marry Gennaro Cinea, who was 12 years younger. He too was a miner and was paid only a few cents an hour for 10 hours labor, seven days a week.

Over the next years, Maria fed the boarders, Gennaro worked in the coal mine, and they bore additional children. Dominic and Lucile were born, and 3 sets of twins were conceived, were born, but did not survive. My mother-in-law Erna, learned from her mother how to make meals with whatever was available or as she said, “make something from nothing”. They joked about being able to boil shoe leather to give soup extra flavor. (We don’t think they did that). The women in the camp grew small gardens and shared what they could with one another. If an animal was available for slaughter, all would come together to share the meat and bones utilizing every part of the animal to provide sustenance. The offal that was used included: **Tripe** – cow stomach lining from various farm animals, cow, pig, sheep, goat; **Tongue** also called Lengua, which tasted like steak; **Liver**; **Sweetbreads** the animal’s Thymus gland, **Pigs Feet**, which were preserved by pickling; **Chitterlings** or animal intestines made into casings for sausage and

Oxtail, or the tail of cow. Occasionally, Erna mentioned using chicken feet to add flavor to soup broth.



Left to Right: front row– Lucile & Dominic Cinea; Back Row Ernestina Frazzini, Gennaro Cinea, Maria Frazzini Cinea, LeDora Frazzini, Angelo Frazzini – circa 1925

Erna's mother passed down many recipes that are fondly remembered in the family, with names that one wouldn't find in any cookbook. Everything used in the recipe was hand made from the sauce to the pasta. None of the recipe's ingredients were written down since all were improvised. It is well known that good pasta is made by touch and feeling the dough as it is being kneaded. Traditional names are spaghetti noodles, ravioli, gnocchi and pizzelle cookies. Then there were the additional adapted Frazzini/Moschetti favorites: Banonas, Crazy Soup with Dough Bellies, 'Zanya & Beans (Pastafazol), Chitta Beans (Italian cookie also known as Crostoli, Frappe, Cioffe, or Chiacchiere), Bakala Fish, Pizzelle Cookies, and Aglio e Olio, all the food dishes with personal variations from Maria.

Remembering that all the pasta was made from scratch, there were certain methods and equipment that worked well to speed up the process. Hand cutting spaghetti noodles was a labor of love as was cutting the sheets of dough used to make ravioli. But Maria had her own way of cutting the noodles using a handmade cutter. After the sheets of dough were rolled out, they were placed on the fine wires, and pressed with a rolling pin into long strands. The strands were then laid over a wooden dowl for drying before being cooked.

SPAGHETTI ALLA CHITARRA



Abruzzo, Italy, is the place of origin for this particular pasta, which has a shape similar to spaghetti but with a flatter cross-section. What makes it special – and gives it its name – is that it's made using a musical-like instrument called a chitarra (meaning guitar), which must be strummed to release the freshly cut strands. **Spaghetti alla chitarra** can be served with a wide variety of meat and cream sauces.

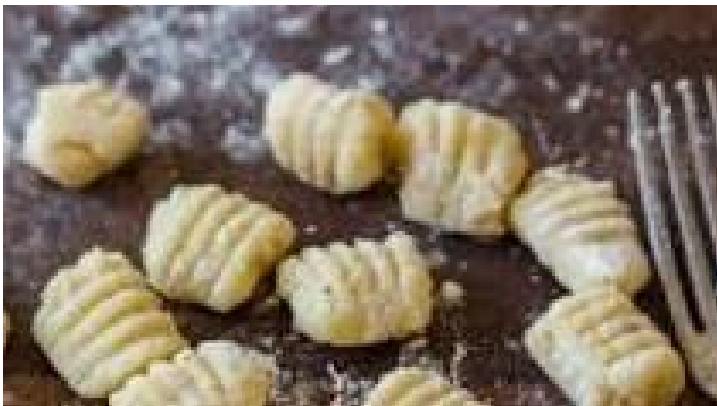


Maria Frazzini Cinea's & Erna Frazzini Moschetti's handmade spaghetti noodle cutter - Chitarra– Circa 1930's

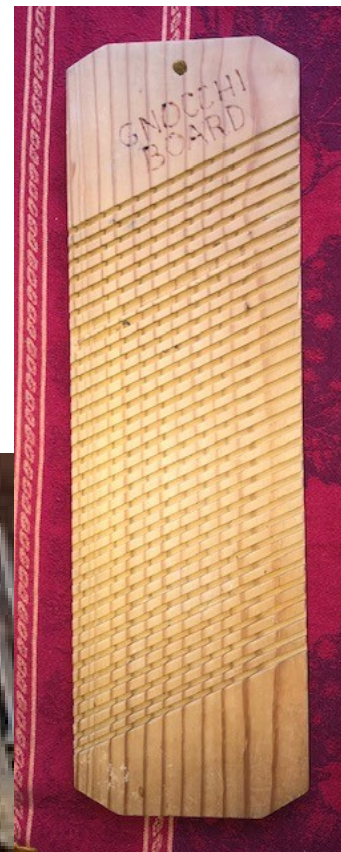


Marie's original rolling pin used with spaghetti cutter

The other hand carved implement used by Maria and Erna was the gnocchi board. Gnocchi, still a family favorite, is made using flour, eggs, mashed potatoes, or ricotta cheese. The dough is rolled into long ½ inch tubes, then cut into one-inch pieces. Each small piece is pressed over the grooves on the board making each into a concave shape. (Some say helps decrease cooking time). The other method to create the shape is by pressing the gnocchi pieces over the back of a fork.



Fresh cut gnocchi



Gnocchi cutting board

To pass the tools from one generation to another would mean the traditional pasta techniques could continue to be made over time. Maria's ravioli roller is a special tool because we all understood how many hours it took to make the dough, roll it to the perfect desired thickness, put all the stuffing in the little cubes, roll the top dough so it wouldn't break during cooking, all a labor of love. I can think of both Maria's and Erna's strong hands spending untold hours standing in the kitchen making their special dinner for loved ones. (I have yet to attempt making homemade ravioli).



Maria's Ravioli roller

We haven't mentioned the spaghetti sauce, which also needed long preparation time. Although I never met Maria, I can imagine she made the sauce the same way Erna did. Perhaps Maria didn't bottle her sauce like Erna, but the ingredients were probably fresh. When the family lived in Berkeley, California, they had a garden with a large plot devoted specifically for growing tomatoes. When they moved to Fremont, California, Erna found a local rancher who grew acres of tomatoes. She bought them by the crate. She would bring the crates home, and the days of preparation began. She found a piece of equipment that the large tomato globes were pressed into, with the skin and seeds separated from the juice by cranking the handle.



Victorio Food Strainer used by Erna Moschetti to make spaghetti sauce

She then put the juice into a huge pot and started cooking it down to a thicker consistency. Sometimes it cooked overnight. She bought canning jars, and ladled each jar with the cooked sauce, with a little salt at the bottom of the jar, and then steamed the jars in the canning cooker. I think one Fall when the tomatoes were at their ripest, she canned up to 70 quarts of sauce. The sauce was used all year long for each pasta dish she prepared. The flavor of the sauce was enhanced with spices and meat such as sausage or hamburger. My father-in-law didn't like seeds in his sauce, so her specially prepared sauce was a success. In fact, he wanted pasta with every meal, so she was busy in the kitchen all the time. Walking into her kitchen was a delight since the aroma of the sauce with fresh garlic and onion combined with the meat just made your mouth water. Besides pasta, there were other traditional foods that the family prepared.

The family kept other kitchen implements, one that may be almost 100 years old. It is the pizzelle iron shown below. It has a long iron handle so it could be used on an open flame or gas stove for direct contact with the heat source. Maria's grandchildren and Erna's children remember her using the iron in the 1940's to make the yearly Pizzelle Christmas cookies. Flavorings were added to the batter and a chunk taken out, rolled into a figure 8 shape, which was pressed onto the mold. The cook time over the gas stove flame was calculated by seconds to be sure the cookie didn't burn. One second beyond and you ended up with burnt crumbs. The family thinks Maria also used the mold over an open fire in a wood burning stove when she lived in New Mexico.



Maria Frazzini Cinea's ancient Pizzelle cookie iron

The Moschetti family replaced the old iron model with an electric unit that was purchased in the 1950's, making pizzelle's two at a time. However, this new model still doesn't have a timer, so you're back to counting the seconds.



Electric pizzelle cookie iron

Other older family kitchen cooking implements are still being used in my kitchen today. The little hand whipping tool beats whipped cream better than an electric mixer.



Still being used in Moschetti's kitchen 2021 - 75-year-old cast iron pot, spatula, Bakelite soup ladle, meat carving fork, Erna's hand beater, measuring cup, funnel

Here is a brief description of several of the family's favorite pasta dishes:

Banonas – For “crepes” - 5 eggs beaten well; 1 cup evaporated milk (do not dilute); Use enough flour to make the batter a little thinner than pancake batter; in large pancake grill or small fry pan, quickly cook 2 tablespoons of batter spread very thin, making each the size of a saucer. Brown on one side only. Set aside.

For meat balls: 2 ½ lbs. ground meat; salt & pepper to taste; 3-4 finely chopped garlic and 1 onion finely chopped. Grate ½ cup parmesan cheese; 1 egg beaten, ½ cup breadcrumbs, combine, and add 3 TB chopped parsley, 1 tsp oregano. Mix all well, and then form balls size larger than golf ball. Brown well on all sides. Remove balls and drain fat. (If meatballs seem dry, use additional egg white only).

For Sauce: To pan add 1 can tomato paste and three cans of water. Mix well. Add back meat balls and simmer in sauce for a few minutes. Then add jar or “Rago” sauce, more chopped parsley, chopped onion, garlic, and oregano. Simmer for 30 minutes.

Grate more parmesan cheese – at least 2 more cups or more if you like. Take out meatballs from sauce and flatten with a fork. Spray 13-inch baking dish with “Pam” and then spread a little tomato sauce on bottom. Take one “crepe” and sprinkle on grated cheese, then smashed meat, and roll into tube. Place rolled side down. Form line of rolled tubes in casserole pan. Spoon over all the remaining sauce. Sprinkle with remaining cheese. Bake 350 degrees until cheese melts. Serves 6-8. (Original written in grandma’s handwriting didn’t specify how much oregano, parsley or cheese, so I guessed the amount needed to enhance flavors).

Crazy Soup – Using any left-over meat such as turkey or all ingredients on hand – celery, carrot, onion, mushroom, garlic, parsley – place all in large kettle and bring to a boil, then turn down heat and simmer until all are cooked. After making spaghetti type dough, cut thin bits of the dough to look like bread stick chips, and put into broth. Cook bits until they rise to the surface to make what grandma called “Dough Bellies”.

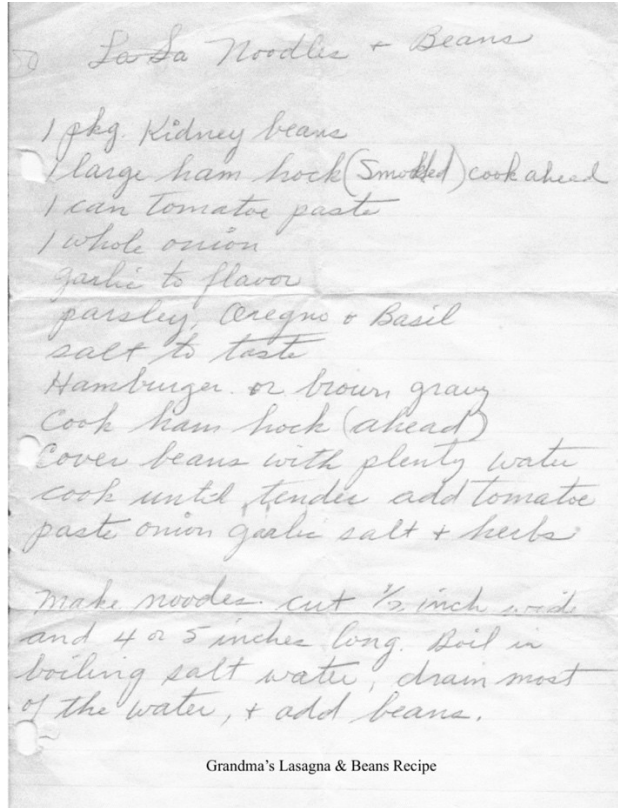
Ravioli – Prepare two fresh thin sheets of pasta dough, one for bottom layer and the other for top layer. Prepare mix of cooked spinach, onion, garlic, breadcrumbs, ground hamburger meat, and put into a blender to chop lightly until well mixed. Chop fresh parsley and fold into meat mixture. Spoon into ravioli mold. Place top layer of thin pasta over mold and roll to seal. Cut individual cubes of ravioli and boil to cook.

Gnocchi – 2 cups flour, 2 eggs, 2 cups Ricotta cheese or mashed potatoes. Put mound of flour on board, mix in egg with fingers, and then mix in potatoes or ricotta (one or the other, but not both at the same time). Knead until soft and silky. Divide into 6-7 square chunks. Cut each chunky square into pieces and roll into ½ thick long tube. Cut tube into 1-inch blobs. Roll over fork or use gnocchi cutting board to shape. Top with meat sauce and lots of parmesan cheese.

Aglio e Olio – Prepare fresh spaghetti noodles. Cook 8-9 pieces of cut up bacon. Cook 12 garlic pieces or more which have been finely chopped in 2 cups of good olive oil or the bacon grease. Mix spaghetti and garlic well. Serve with lots of parmesan cheese.

The best way to enjoy the flavors is to serve the pasta dishes with *Colombo Sweet French Bread*. (Over time, each of Erna and Tom’s children (June, Janet or Tom) would be sent to the local corner market on Hearst Avenue in Berkeley, California to buy the fresh bread before dinner).

Lasagna & Beans (Pastafazole) –



After checking with Tom, his sisters, and several of the grandchildren, most agree that they loved her lasagna and beans or at least fondly remember that dish.

When Ernestina was elderly, she used to emulate whipping eggs in a bowl when we mentioned cooking to her, and we followed by asking her what her favorite dish was to prepare. Undoubtedly, the answer was no surprise: spaghetti!