



HUNGRY *for* RITUALS

Last month my undergraduate alma mater, Ursinus College, held a virtual “benefit and bash” to support its student emergency fund. Like many other spring galas and fundraisers, this event was shifted to an online format. Over the course of several hours, I tracked and bid on a few items, all for a good cause. My stick-to-itiveness paid off as I won something very special — a collection of writings by former Ursinus President, Dr. John Strassburger.

President Strassburger was inaugurated in 1995, my first year of college, and served for over 15 years. He retired in 2010 due to health reasons and passed away shortly thereafter. A distinguished scholar, President Strassburger held an undergraduate degree from Bates College, a master’s degree from Cambridge University, and a Ph.D. from Princeton University. He was kind and down-to-earth, inviting seniors to picnic at his home before graduation festivities.

With more time on my hands for reading and reflection, I dove into my new treasure — President Strassburger’s “series of occasional papers” (seven in total). The first paper’s theme is “Education for Self-Reliance, Responsibility and Hope.” His theses ring true today, decades after he penned them, especially in light of the coronavirus pandemic. The first paper concludes as follows:

“...as our alumni know, rituals at Ursinus are important...Rituals make passages of awareness, where stronger, wiser selves replace the narrower ones we were. They reaffirm that the experience of education is a progress of the whole self in which everything moves together, not just a few of the parts. It is as much about forming habits of the heart as it is about forging tools of the mind. Finally, rituals also affirm that we are nourished by the past in order to contribute to something that extends into the future. Celebrations of memory, they are also acts of hope.”

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a ritual is “a set of fixed actions and sometimes words performed regularly, especially as part of a ceremony.” This sounds a lot like a routine. When I searched for the definition of routine in the same source, I found that it is defined as “a usual or fixed way of doing things.” What, then, is the difference? It seems to me that intent (tort, anyone?) distinguishes the two.

During this time of uncertainty, many of us have discovered new rituals or have reacquainted ourselves with old ones. Walking the dog, engaging in morning meditation, or calling an elderly relative may be among your “habits of the heart” or “tools of the mind,” as President Strassburger described them. Our hearts and minds are hungry for these rituals these days. And, if we extend these actions into the future, beyond this time of crisis, they should continue to provide the “nourishment” we crave.

For more on nourishment, I share a recipe that I consider a ritual. This is one I shared years ago when I started writing this column. I do not need to look at the recipe anymore — the ingredients are easy to remember, and so much depends on “feel.” In fact, if you pull out the old version, I guarantee you will notice refinements, tweaks, and adjustments. All of us have made those in the last few months. 🍴



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RICOTTA GNOCCHI

Ingredients

- 1 32 ounce container of whole-milk ricotta
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 cups flour plus ?

Instructions

In a large bowl, mix the ricotta, eggs, and Parmesan. Add 2 cups of flour to the mixture and check the consistency by rolling a small piece in your hand. The dough should be somewhat sticky, but most of it should not stick to your hand.

Sprinkle flour on a baking sheet, on your work surface, and on your hands. Add more flour to the mixture, a bit at a time, until you are able to roll the dough on the floured surface without it sticking to your fingers. Take a small handful at a time, and roll it into a cylinder about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch thick. Use a sharp knife to cut the cylinder on the bias into $\frac{3}{4}$ inch long pieces that resemble small pillows. As you cut the gnocchi, place them on the baking sheet. Place the baking sheet in the freezer until the gnocchi are frozen. Repeat this process with the remainder of the dough. Remove the gnocchi and store them in a freezer bag in the freezer. This makes them easier to cook.

When you are ready to cook, bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Add a pinch of salt to the water and about half of the gnocchi. Gently stir the gnocchi to ensure they do not stick together. Using a slotted spoon, remove the gnocchi when they rise to the surface and transfer to a serving platter. Repeat this with the remainder of the batch, toss the gnocchi with your sauce of choice, and serve immediately.

Pair with a nice red or rosé.

I hope your rituals bring you nourishment this June and beyond. Be well.