



You Eat What You Are

Robbie Gorr suggests preserving your family's culinary history

IN THESE DAYS OF CONVENIENT PREPARED AND PACKAGED FOODS AND fast food take-out meals it is hard to imagine that some of our favourite meals and comfort foods could have anything to do with our ancestry. But for those of us who were raised with parents that spent time in their kitchens, some of the homemade food that they prepared, and which we ate as children, may actually be an indication of our cultural heritage and our genealogical roots. It's an interesting premise to consider that you are not what you eat, but that, instead, you eat what you are.



Is it possible that childhood favourites and comfort foods may be indicators of your cultural heritage and roots? Do you eat what you are? (Library of Congress)

Recipes With Roots

As I was growing up, I learned to cook watching my mother, following her recipes and making the same kind of dishes that she often made. And I know from her stories that she, in turn, had learned to cook from her mother who she always described as a great cook and baker. And my grandmother learned from her own mother, my great-grandmother Jane, who ran a rural stopping place, a kind of bed and breakfast establishment in her home for local lumber workers, as well as cooking for her eleven children. It takes little imagination then to realize that the food which

we ate, the style in which it was prepared and the manner it was presented were traditions passed down from one generation to the next and these are our family recipe stories.

Coming from a culturally diverse family, it still took me a while to discover that much of the food I ate growing up was connected to one side of my family or the other. My father's family, who lived nearby, was of German and Wendish origin while my mother's family, who lived a short distance away but whom we visited regularly on Sundays, was of English and French origin. And although my mother had learned to cook from her mother, she had spent the first years of her marriage in my father's home and had learned to cook many of his favourites from her mother-in-law. Eventually I noticed that there were things my mother made that I never ate while visiting out-of-town with her family, but regularly saw on the tables of my father's family, like sauerkraut, cherry leaf dill pickles, head cheese and smoked sausage. And the reverse was also true; there were things I ate with my mother's family that I never had when visiting my father's relatives, like boiled dinner, tourtière and mincemeat pie. It was only later in life that I realized that the food I had eaten growing up was connected culturally to different sides of my family.