A once-estranged father and son share their last, best days over favorite, home-cooked foods.

Chili Cheese Dogs, My Father And Me

By Pat Conroy

When I was growing up and lived at my grandmother's house in Atlanta, my mother would take us after church to The Varsity, an institution with more religious significance to me than any cathedral in the city. Its food was celebratory, fresh and cleansing to the soul. It still remains one of my favorite restaurants in the world.

I had then what I order now—a habit that has not deviated since my sixth birthday in 1951, when my grandmother, Stanny, ordered for me what she considered the picture-perfect Varsity meal: a chili cheese hot dog, onion rings and a soft drink called "The Big Orange."

On that occasion, when my family had finished the meal, my mother lit six candles on a cupcake she had made, and Stanny, Papa Jack, my mother and my sister Carol sang "Happy Birthday" as I blushed with pleasure and surprise. I put together for the first time that the consumption of food and celebration was a natural and fitting combination. It was also the first time I realized that no one in my family could carry a tune.

When my father returned home from the Korean War, he refused to believe that The Varsity—or the American South, for that matter—could produce a hot dog worthy of consumption. My Chicago-born father was a fierce partisan of his hometown, and he promised me that he would take me to eat a real "red hot" after we attended my first White Sox game.

That summer, we stayed with my dad's parents on the South Side of Chicago. There, I met the South Side Irish for the first time on their own turf. My uncles spent the summer teasing me about being a Southern hick as they played endless games of pinochle with my father. Then my father took me for the sacramental rite of passage: my first major league baseball game. We watched the White Sox beat the despoiled Yankees.

After the game, my father drove my Uncle Willie and me to a place called Superdawg to get a red hot. He insisted that the Superdawg sold the best red hot in the city. When my father handed me the first red hot I had ever eaten, he said, "This will make your forget The Varsity for all time."

That summer, I learned that geography itself was one of the great formative shapers of identity. The red hot was delicious, but in my lifetime I will never forsake the pleasure of The Varsity chili cheese dog.

When my father was dying of colon cancer in 1998, he would spend his days with me at home on Fripp Island, S.C., then go back to Beaufort at night to stay with my sister Kathy, who is a nurse and was in charge of his medications. Since I was responsible for his daily lunch, I told him I would cook him anything he wanted as long as I could
find it in a South Carolina supermarket.

“Anything, pal?” my father asked.

“Anything,” I said.

Thus the last days between a hard-core Marine and his edgy son, who had spent his career writing about horrific father-son relationships, became our best days as we found ourselves united by the glorious subject of food.

My father was a simple man with simple tastes, but he was well-traveled, and he began telling me his life story as we spent our long hours together. The first meal he ordered was an egg sandwich, a meal I had never heard of but one that kept him alive during the Depression. He told me, “You put a fried egg on two slices of white bread which have been spread with ketchup.”

“It sounds repulsive,” I said.

“It’s delicious,” he replied.

When Dad spoke of his service in Korea, I fixed him kimchi (spicy pickled vegetables), and when he talked about his year-long duty on an aircraft carrier on the Mediterranean, I made spaghetti carbonara or gazpacho. But most of the time I made him elaborate sandwiches: salami or baloney tender high with lettuce, tomatoes and red onions. The more elaborate I made them, the more my father loved them.

He surprised me one day by asking me to make him some red hots, done “the Chicago way, pal.” That day I called Superdawg and was surprised that it was still in business. A very pleasant woman told me to dress the red hots with relish, mustard, onion and hot peppers with a pickle on the side. “If you put ketchup on it, just throw it in the trash,” she added.

The following week he surprised me again by ordering up some chili cheese dogs, “just like they make at The Varsity in Atlanta.” So I called The Varsity and learned step by step how to make one of their scrumptious chili cheese dogs.

When my father began his quick, slippery descent into death, my brothers and sisters drove from all directions to sit six-hour shifts at his bedside. We learned that watching a fighter pilot die is not an easy thing.

One morning I arrived for my shift and heard screaming coming from the house. I raced inside and found Carol yelling at Dad: “Dad, you’ve got to tell me you love me. You’ve got to tell me you’re proud of me. You’ve got to do it before you die.”

I walked Carol out of the bedroom and sat her down on the sofa. “That’s Don Conroy in there, Carol—not Bill Cosby,” I said.

“You’ve got to learn how to translate Dad. He says it, but in his own way.”

Two weeks before my father died, he presented me with a gift of infinite price. I made him the last chili cheese dog from The Varsity’s recipe that he would ever eat. When he finished, I took the plate back to the kitchen and was shocked to hear him say, “I think the chili cheese dog is the best red hot I’ve ever eaten.”

There is a translation to all of this, and here is how it reads: In the last days of his life, my father was telling me how much he loved me, his oldest son, and he was doing it with food.

Pat Conroy, best-selling author of “The Prince of Tides” and “Beach Music,” has gathered personal stories and recipes into “The Pat Conroy Cookbook,” recently published by Doubleday.

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