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Joy, grief and seasoning salt

By DENISE O'TOOLE KELLY, EVERYBODY EATS 

Cayenne pepper makes me sneeze.

If I sneeze when I'm cooking, it usually means I'm using Barbara's seasoning salt -- a homemade staple of my mom-in-law's kitchen and dining room table. Ever since Joe Kelly and I married 13 years ago, Barbara has kept us in steady supply of her signature blend of salt and ground peppers, apportioned in reused plastic bottles from drugstore spices.

Lately, cayenne pepper makes me cry a little, too. When the bottle now on the shelf runs out, Barbara's not here to refill it. She's not here to improvise a homemade soup to serve after church on Sundays, or to dress the escarole salad for the next family gathering.

These seem silly things to dread in the scope of adjusting to the new reality without her in it. But, perhaps because food is so entwined in our daily joys, it too gets wrapped up in our grief. Feelings like mine are not uncommon, said Pat Beeman, a bereavement minister for Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Daytona Beach who has been assisting my family since Barbara Kelly died unexpectedly July 26.

"A lot of time people will say 'I have the same recipe but it doesn't taste the same as when Mom made it.' Or 'My dad loved pickles, but I just can't get the seasoning correct,'" said Beeman, a certified Christian counselor.

The relationship between food and grief tends to be especially apparent at holiday times, she said. She thought of a recently widowed man who did not think he could bear to make lasagna and ravioli for the family Christmas dinner, something he and his wife had always done together. He relented at the urging of his grown children: "I remember how Mom loved it. Please do it," they requested.

"They all came from their different parts of Florida and from out of state and they did come and enjoy that, but it was very difficult for them because Mom wasn't there. For him that was extremely difficult," Beeman recalled, adding that the family intends to do the same this year, their second Christmas without their wife and mother. "When someone you loves dies it leaves a hole in the heart and that's the best way I can describe it. That hole doesn't seem quite as large as it did in the very beginning. Does it get better? It gets different. Over time things do get better in some respects, but that hole will always be there. You make the choice for life to go on."

Beeman expressed concern, though, that the children do not have the family recipes and may regret that deeply when their father is gone as well.

"Remember to give your recipe to someone in the family, because those things get lost," she advised.

I know the components of Barbara's seasoning salt, but I don't know the amounts. There will be a lot of trial and error on the way to recreating something close to the right combination -- if I dare to try at all.

In the meantime, I've noticed something that never struck me before about the shape of the clear plastic spice bottle; it's wider at the top and bottom than in the middle -- kind of like an hourglass. For fear of the day it goes empty, I'm using it more sparingly -- barely enough to elicit a sneeze.

News-Journal Food Editor Denise O'Toole Kelly can be reached at 386-681-2214 or [denise.kelly@news-jml.com](mailto:denise.kelly@news-jml.com). Send mail to her at The News-Journal, P.O. Box 2831, Daytona Beach, FL 32120-2831.