

The Family that Cooks Together at Christmas Time

In 2008, my family started what is today a much-anticipated year-end tradition: a Christmas Holiday Cook-Off!

12/20/2021

ILOILO CITY (Philippines). The idea came from the children. They wanted to have some activity at home between Christmas and New Year's Eve. Why not a cooking contest, similar to the TV series "Iron

Chef America”? They would cook and we (my husband and I) would judge.

Jerry and I have four grown-up children nicknamed Dodge, Chevy, Royce and Kia. They call themselves “The Cars”, a play of words on the name of the Irish siblings’ band “The Corrs”.

When we started this family tradition, there were only four contestants. After Chevy got married, he and wife Tiff teamed up, but the following year they decided to participate individually. Royce and Karla decided to do likewise after their marriage in 2018.

All our children work in Manila and they come home for Christmas and the New Year. We have always spent the holidays together in our home in Iloilo City. The cook-off is held in the evening of December 31. Due to the pandemic which restricted travel and mass gatherings, we were

unable to hold it last year. But the children are determined to revive it. This year, it will be held in Manila. Jerry and I will fly there.

The Cook-Off Mechanics

The contestants agree beforehand what the main ingredient or theme will be. On the day of the contest they go to the supermarket to buy all the ingredients. When the time to start cooking comes, they shoo off Jerry and I from the kitchen so that we would not know who is preparing which dish. There is a time limit within which to finish and they think of a catchy name for their dish.

The finished products are plated and numbered. Then Dad and Mom are called in to do their job. The decision criteria and allocation of points are agreed upon in advance, consisting of taste, presentation, and one other criterion depending on the main ingredient or the theme.

The cook-off is a healthy competition but a competition nonetheless. So, no favoritism and no consideration as to age, gender, birth order or marital ties! In 2017, the judges' verdict was a tie but the children decided that henceforth, there should be only one winner. The announcement of the runners-up and the champion is a truly exciting moment – boisterous cheers, laughter, and shouts of protest. But after each gets to taste the concoctions of their siblings, 99 per cent of the time they agree with the verdict.

In 2019, Kia was the cook-off winner with her entry: *carne asada tacos with chimichurri and salsa roja*. Coming a close second was our daughter-in-law, Karla, a first-timer to the contest with her Japanese dish, crispy salmon cream cheese roll. As the winner, Kia gets to keep the chopping board trophy and have her name etched on it. The trophy

contains the names of the champions listed by year.

Anyone Can Cook

Our children did not know how to cook when they were young and living with us in Iloilo. But when one by one they left the comforts of home to study or work in Manila, they had to learn how to survive. I gave them a crash course on the basics of cooking and by sheer necessity they learned home cooking.

After some time, the kitchen no longer intimidated them and once in a while they would try something new, with the help of the Internet. All of us in the family, with the exception of my husband, subscribe to Chef Gusteau's famous line in the movie Ratatouille, "Anyone can cook!"

Aside from developing the children's confidence, competence and

creativity in the kitchen, this family tradition fosters appreciation for the ordinary work in the home. As they learn the rudiments and the art of cooking, they acquire respect for the work of our helpers, reflecting what St. Josemaria Escriva said of domestic work: “Housework is something of primary importance. Besides, all work can have the same supernatural quality. There are no great or mean tasks. All are great if they are done with love.” (Conversations with Msgr. Escriva, 109)

Family Bonding

The holiday cook-off is a fun family activity and a conversation piece. It is good content for each one’s social media platform. Right after the awarding ceremonies, the children are already talking about the best ingredient and theme for next year. But clearly there is room for

improvement, like staying within the budget, preparing things in advance, and cleaning up the kitchen. Year after year we incorporate rules to improve. My dream is that this family tradition will be handed down to the next generations.

It is heartwarming to know that a number of our friends in social media have been monitoring our cook-off. Just a few days ago, I was at the bank and our sons' friend who works there remarked: "Tita, every year I check out who the winner of your cook-off is." Moreover, I was happy to learn that in the past years some families have started their own Christmas holiday bonding activities, after viewing our social media posts.

On special occasions when the family is together, it is not unusual for someone to volunteer to do the cooking and to surprise everyone with a delicious home-cooked meal.

This desire to prepare meals for the family definitely contributes to the “bright and cheerful homes” that St. Josemaria wanted all families to have.

Ma. Elena Opinion

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