

Articles

[My Food Experiences]

Grandma and Gjetost Cheese



My maternal grandma died too young. We lost her just after my nineteenth birthday (which was a long time ago) and at times, I find myself missing her terribly. As I learn more about myself, I realize I am more like her than I ever knew. She did things, that in her day, were probably considered pretty liberal. She was a very proactive woman who was active in politics and held several leadership positions in her community. She was instrumental in the founding of one of the first drug rehab centers in her city, and most importantly, she was really passionate about health, nutrition and cooking. I think if it weren't for her, I would have never started my food business, and in fact, dedicated my first cookbook to her.

When I was little, she often took my mom and I to a little food counter haphazardly set in the corner of a tiny mom and pop health food store. The shop was tiny and dimly lit and jammed full of dried

leaves and flowers and alternative health products. Of course, you can imagine the smell: potent yet earthy herbs, spices that opened your nose with their sharp and far-away scents, and fresh, healthy food smells coming from the mini kitchen in the back. We'd sit on the tall bar stools at the counter and we always ordered the same thing. Maybe it's because it was the only main dish they offered, but I'll never forget it: Bible Bread Sandwiches. Bible Bread is what they called pitas and they filled these "bread pockets" with a mixture of sprouts, sunflower seeds, tomatoes, onions, avocados and mayo. Their secret ingredient was Spike, a very distinctive spice blend still available today in health food stores. The great thing about these sandwiches was that they didn't just put all that stuff in the pita and serve it. They chopped everything very very finely, mixed it together with the mayo and then filled the pita with it. I remember sitting at the counter, eating that vegetable salad sandwich, feeling so special because my grandma and my mom had taken me out.

I also have this distinct memory of eating a certain kind of cheese with my grandma at that same lunch counter. I remember it being the color of caramel and also tasting like caramel. Many years after my grandma died, I started looking for it. I remembered her saying that it was from a goat, but all the goat cheeses I ever found were white and didn't taste like caramel. After years of looking for

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it with no luck, I started thinking I had just made up the memory. After all, a cheese that tastes and looks like caramel? I was just a kid, of course I made it up! Well, one week when I had been thinking a lot about my grandma, I happened to be shopping at this specialty food shop in Salt Lake City. It's a wonderful local gourmet grocery dedicated to giving its customers sensual food experiences. It makes me so happy to just stand in there! They have a wall of cheeses from all over the world, and while I've been in there before, I had never thought to ask about the caramel cheese because I had given up on ever finding it. For some reason, this day, I walked over to the cheese counter and told the cheese monger there my story. I thought I sounded pretty foolish starting out my inquiry with, "When I was a little girl..." but to my utter dismay, when I finished my description, he smiled at me, walked over to the top shelf, grabbed a hard cube of brown cheese and placed it in my hands. I looked down and read the label: Ekte Gjetost, Goat Cheese, Cooked until Caramelized, Norway. I looked up at him with my mouth open, looked down at the cheese, and looked back up at him. "This is it!" I said. "This is it!" I looked back down at the cheese, tears started flowing and the label blurred. I couldn't help it. I tried to hold back, but tears ran out of my eyes and down my cheeks. "I'm sorry," I said. "I can't believe I'm crying. I don't know why I'm crying. It's just that I've been looking for this for so long." He smiled and said, "It's okay, people cry over cheese a lot more often than you'd think." I

wiped my tears, thanked him and went to the check out counter to pay for my items: an apple, a Delicata squash, a yam, a loaf of just baked German Pumpernickel, and my block of EkteGjetost, Goat Cheese, Cooked until Caramelized, Norway.

Later, when I tasted the cheese for the first time, I stood in my friend's tiny red brick loft kitchen. I opened the package and we tore off pieces of the brown bread. I carved off a tiny sliver, put it into my mouth, and there it was, Taste Memory, a term that means exactly what it says. Thoughts of my grandma flooded back to me and I started crying again. I felt so silly, crying over a hunk of cheese, but then I realized, it wasn't about the caramel cheese, it was about my grandma. Maybe she was reaching out to me (through food no less!) or maybe not, maybe it was just one big coincidence. Either way, I needed that reconnection so badly, and that day will forever remain one of the most memorable experiences of my life because a humble block of cheese enabled that reconnection by bringing my past to my present, if only for a moment.

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