

FALL HARVEST

A personal essay

by Julianna Thibodeaux

Each fall our garden demands that we harvest all of the remaining basil, and there is usually quite a lot; and making pesto is the most obvious, and delicious, answer to this dilemma of abundance. Although I love the annual ritual, this year I am too much in demand by our three children who won't accept stand-ins at certain junctures of need and then, of course, there's breastfeeding, which neither my 1-year-old nor I is ready to give up. So we've bucked tradition. My husband is now chief pesto chef.

I come from a long line of pesto makers, or at least I make that brazen assumption: I don't know for a fact that my Italian grandmother Giuseppina made pesto. Her son did not like garlic and it is likely she adjusted her concoctions accordingly. But pesto is as quintessentially Italian as pizza (although American pizza has long left its ethnic shores for blander lands). I stake my claim on these grounds.

If my grandmother did make pesto, it is unlikely that my grandfather stepped in, even when the demands of two children were at their peak. The Italian side of my family lived out its gender roles traditionally and stiflingly: this I know from my mother's experience as the young American bride of an Italian whose gender expectations followed them across the Atlantic after their marriage in Florence and settling in Minnesota.

Pesto: A few cloves of fresh garlic, a palmful of pine nuts, salt. Grind these together, add half a cup of olive oil, two cups of loosely packed, cleaned and dried basil leaves without stems, generous shavings of Parmesan or Romano, or both, and grind again. This is the basic outline—there are variations.

This year, in addition to our own bounty, my husband, Stefan, comes home one Friday evening with armfuls—I'm not kidding—armfuls of fresh basil picked from a friend's garden, a widowed friend who has no use for so much of it, grown into bushes and nearly taking over his garden.

I am overwhelmed. I see the possibilities, sure; I imagine the containers of pesto loading down the freezer to be enjoyed even as the snow falls, some to be bestowed upon grateful friends and relatives—but also I see the jungle now consuming our kitchen: long, leafy stalks in piles on the counter and overflowing a roasting tin, shedding leaves and no doubt other nameless stowaways from Bill's garden.

Stefan has already begun to pull the leaves from the stalks, depositing them in a large stainless bowl, dismembering the branches like an embalmer extracting organs from a body. These limbs, though, still shiver with life: their sweet peppery smell fills the air, dulling my initial sense of unease. We work around the inconvenience, going about our routine of feeding and cleaning, putting children to bed, the basil leaves now fully limbless and silent in the great shimmering bowl.

The next day Stefan resumes his work, transferring fistfuls of leaves into the salad spinner to be cleaned in preparation for the ritual grinding. I walk in at intervals, and at one of these, I can't help but observe, I see that even the browned basil leaves are going into the spinner.

"These will make the pesto bitter," I say. He looks at me, but barely, turning his back without comment to continue his thankless labor. I am called to duty in the next room—toddler, preschooler, teenager; I can't recall which child, which duty.

I return later, ready to take up my complaint once again. But Stefan has progressed past any potential disputes. He tilts the now-emptied bowl towards me, a furry black spider darting around its shiny bottom. "I've found five or six of these," he says, a grin on his face as he walks out the back door to liberate the spider into the garden.

I'm beyond the threat of bruised or gone-bad leaves. All I can think of now, as I watch Stefan dump the ingredients into the food processor, is the prospect of what else might be ground up. I want to take charge but I can't: too much is at stake—not just the kids, of course, but that delicate dance of trust and license between partners. Oh, my husband of the hearty constitution, I moan inwardly; he who is fond of saying he'll eat anything that won't eat him first. Undoubtedly, he isn't the least concerned about the possibility of ingesting an arachnid along with his basil, garlic, pine nuts, olive oil and Parmesan.

Later that afternoon Stefan offers me a mouthful of his first batch: the pesto fresh and falling off the cracker as he eases it into my wary mouth. It is delicious, I have

to confess; I'm momentarily subdued by the tingle of flavors, the salty edge of the cheese complementing the roundness of the basil.

After the celebratory first tastes are over, I am back to wondering, as I gaze into my plate of fusili drenched in pesto that same evening: Do I spy the eyes of a spider nestled in the folds of semolina? Is that the vein of a leaf or a tiny hairy leg on the tine of my fork? I close my eyes and will these images away. There's nothing for it now. If there are creatures in the mix, I have eaten them. And I am, by all outward appearances, unharmed—as are the rest of us, the children happily munching, Stefan, too, enjoying the fruits of his drawn-out labor.

I think of my grandmother in her Italian garden in Bari, before she and my grandfather eloped north to Florence. Was she concerned about stowaways? Did she judiciously wash and pick? Did she even like basil, let alone pesto? Did she and my grandfather have similar quality control disputes, not to mention other romantic tensions (this one, of course, being relatively minor)? This ritual, the making of pesto, is one of the few loose threads connecting me to my Italian roots, however imperfect, and even damaging, the gender traditions associated with them. This tug of tradition makes me both wary and curious: my birthright challenged and yet realized within the confines, real and imagined, of the kitchen—a gender-divided birthright that is, at its heart, faulty to begin with.

Even as I come to terms with the evolution of the gender dynamic in my own marriage, I will never know, truly, what challenges my grandmother faced, just as the mystery ingredients in my pesto will remain unidentified. The prospect of uninvited

guests is tolerable, though, as long I maintain my equilibrium, as far as that is possible,
and as long as they're gone before I feel the brunt of their presence.

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