

## Rosie's Blintzes

*Myra Bellin*

Rosie materialized in my family's kitchen every few weeks as if by magic—a short, stout, cherry-checked version of Mary Poppins. No suitcase with magic tricks, though, just two plaid, plastic shopping bags filled with parcels of cooking ingredients, plus a stick of celery with fresh, green leaves poking from the top. One minute the kitchen was empty, dark, and quiet. The next it was filled with Rosie's incessant chatter. "I never eat that crrrrap they serve in restaurants," she muttered to no one in particular, emphasizing the beginning of the word "crap" as she stood at the sink, peeling the hard-boiled eggs she brought along for lunch. "Not me. I never understood how people eat that stuff," she railed, enjoying the singular virtue of having never set foot in a restaurant. "You never know what they do in those places, what they put in their food." Her nose wrinkled beneath the wire frames of her glasses at the very thought of it. "Why eat that garbage when you can always have some hard-boiled eggs and a stick of celery? What better lunch could I have?"

Her Spartan meal fueled her energies for cooking all of the Ashkenazi Jewish dishes that my father and grandfather knew and loved from the shtetls of eastern Russia and Poland—cholent (slow-cooked meat and lima beans), prokas (stuffed cabbage), borscht (cabbage or beet soup), and pschav (jellied calves' feet). My child's palate relished all of these dishes except for the pschav—I found its cooking odor repulsive because the dish involved great quantities of bay leaves, and their bitter odor wafted through the first floor of the house like a sullen breeze. I liked looking at the finished product though—bowls of soft, green aspic with slices of hard-boiled egg floating on the jelled surface like big yellow-and-white polka dots.

Rosie became part of my life as soon as it began, for she was the practical nurse who took charge of my first few weeks. She and my mother were first cousins, which made her, in the family-centric world of first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants, a perfect choice for the job. I knew her well, a knowledge which led to mixed reactions the days she appeared—a large part of me wanted to run outside to play because she talked nonstop and I was the perfect audience for her riffs—a quiet, polite little girl who never fidgeted or interrupted her. "You were a hard baby," she would reminisce. "Not like you are now. You grew up to be just like your grandmother, a g'inta n 'eshima (good soul). But when you were a baby, mamanu [oh my God]. Were you hard. You just screamed and screamed all the time. I walked the floor with you all night. And every time I tried to put you down, you just screamed."

But my wish to avoid her was usually trumped by my desire to know what she was cooking. Perhaps she would work her magic and make prokas, a dish which fascinated me because of the rich, red gravy that covered the rolled, stuffed cabbage leaves. My mother never cooked anything with gravy; my parents owned a butcher shop, and our dinners usually involved very fresh steaks or chops broiled to the consistency of shoe leather. Gravies and sauces were culinary miracles as far as I was concerned—unusual flavors with mysterious origins.

But if I was really, really lucky, Rosie would dedicate the afternoon to making cheese blintzes.

Cheese blintzes are the Jewish version of Chinese wontons, Italian manicotti, Indian samosas, Russian blinis (from which they probably originated), and French crepes. Like their culinary cousins, they begin with a skin or wrapper made from batter. The skin is then filled, folded, and boiled (wontons), fried (samosas and blintzes), or baked (manicotti).

The process of broiling a raw steak or creating a salad from sliced wedges of

iceberg lettuce never captured my imagination. There was nothing transformative in these preparations. But blintzes were something else—eggs and milk and flour magically blended into a bletlach—crepe-like wrappers that in no way resembled its components. Now there was something impressive, well worth taking the time to observe and even worth the trouble of feigning interest in stories I'd heard a thousand times.

"Farmer's cheese," Rosie stated with certainty, unwrapping the wax paper keeping the cheese moist. "Never use anything but farmer's cheese when you make blintzes." Only this dense, dry cousin of cottage cheese would do. She used to travel some distance to buy the cheese, making a 45-minute trip by bus to "the old neighborhood," South Philadelphia, the area where the Jewish immigrants of the early part of the 20th century had settled. Rosie was raised in that neighborhood; she knew all of the shops and the days of the week that their merchandise was sure to be freshest.

I never went shopping with Rosie in South Philly, but I sometimes went along when my mother took her father—my zaida—to visit his siblings who still lived there. The narrow, one-way streets were lined with row houses that had little to distinguish one from the other. We always visited the house on Mifflin Street, where my Great-Aunt Bess shared lodgings with her twin half-brothers, Ike and Shike. Their house was filled with dark, heavy, velvet armchairs that were supported by ornately carved wooden legs. The light from the lamps in the living room blanketed the maroon sofa with a soft glow. I loved visiting Aunt Bess, for she struck me as serenely beautiful (even though she seemed quite old) and always took a gentle interest in my five-year-old world. Her graying hair was twisted into a thick bun at the nape of her neck that reminded me of a cruller; my mother told me that when it was undone, Aunt Bess's hair hung far below her waist. I longed to see it that way but never did. It was impossible for me to tell Uncle Ike from Uncle Shike, but one of them had the annoying habit of showing his affection by pinching my cheek really hard, which everyone but Aunt Bess and me seemed to find quite amusing. Rosie's mother, my Aunt Fanny, lived in a house a few blocks away on Tasker Street. She seemed an ancient version of Rosie—her face so heavily lined that her well-defined jowls reminded me of a marionette, like Howdy Doody.

Rosie commenced making blintzes by banging cabinet doors open in the kitchen and pulling out the equipment she needed—some large bowls, a half-dozen clean kitchen towels, and the six-inch frying pan, the smallest one we had. First Rosie mixed the farmer's cheese with egg yolks and a bit of sugar, then set the bowls of filling aside while she prepared the bletlach. A seamless monologue accompanied her work. It included tales about an assortment of relations, only some of whom we shared—my grandmother, whom Rosie revered, and my grandfather, whom she did not. Her loud, piercing voice announced she was a bit hard of hearing. It sounded not just a single note but an entire chord, raspy at the low end and shrill at the high. On and on she prattled, floating from one subject to another, interrupting herself only to discuss the fine points of her cooking.

Dampening the kitchen towels under running water, Rosie began one of her favorite riffs. In spite of Rosie's skills at the most traditional of women's chores, cooking, her opinions about the roles assigned to men and women in the immigrant community of Orthodox Jews where she was raised were radical. And, like a true feminist, she had no trouble expressing them.

"Study, study, study. That's all they knew how to do. Study and daven (pray). And make babies." Her voice grew even sharper, flooded with indignation at the thought of the bearded, yarmulked figures davening the day away. "And who did all the work?" she asked rhetorically. "The women, that's who. They did all the work. They worked like dogs while all the men did was study and daven. Never lifted a finger. Harummmph. How do you like

that?" No need to ask Rosie what she thought of this arrangement.

Rosie's own father did not number among the Orthodox scholars. He was a tailor who, according to my mother, was neither generous nor kind. Rosie's mother took in laundry to make ends meet. I don't know for certain why Rosie never married as a young woman; my mother claims it was because she had neither money nor looks. I wonder now, though, if her opinions may have interfered with matrimony. It's hard to know if she would have developed radical views had she been wealthy and beautiful—a desirable catch—or if her perspective was born of feeling sidelined by her culture.

But one thing is quite certain—she was indignant at the Orthodox men who devoted their lives to study, a “filthy dirty” lot that “smelled because they never bathed or changed their clothes.” If this was the group churning out eligible suitors, I think a mutual aversion probably existed between its members and Rosie. So Rosie trained as a licensed practical nurse and supported herself, both before and after a brief late-middle-aged marriage. She was a “career woman” in a world where they had no status. But her independence was fueled by necessity, not choice.

After wetting the towels under running water and wringing them out, Rosie spread the damp fabric over the kitchen table and the counters, for the bletlach she was about to prepare would stick to the hard surfaces and be ruined without the damp towels to cushion them. Rosie quickly whisked together the batter for the skins using milk, eggs, flour, and just a spoonful of oil.

Bletlach make the blintz. While the most difficult part of the filling is finding the fresh farmer's cheese, the skins require the intuitive skills of a seasoned cook. They must be light, yet strong enough to hold a generous dollop of the farmer's cheese mixture. The small frying pan used to cook the batter must be hot, but not so hot that the batter will burn. Just the right amount of batter must be ladled into the pan to make a solid skin—too little and the skin will tear, too much and it will be heavy and doughy. And the skin must be removed from the frying pan at just the right moment, all in one piece, or else its function as a wrapper is useless.

Rosie was a pro. Once a pat of butter melted into sizzling bubbles in the frying pan, Rosie quickly ladled in a spoonful of batter, swirling it so it would spread evenly over the bottom. I watched in amazement as the liquid batter turned before my very eyes into a bletlach, a solid circle of dough whose edges ruffled at the circumference from the heat. At that point Rosie grabbed the pan from the burner and zipped to the counter, turning the pan over with a quick flick of her wrist and banging the inverted edge on the covered, flat surface. The skin fell out in one piece, steaming and crumpled. Once it cooled, Rosie smoothed the crumples and laid it flat. By this time, though, she was already frying another bletlach, for she made at least 150 blintzes in an afternoon.

Pour, fry, zip, and bang. Rosie waddled around the kitchen at warp speed in her formless flowered dress and low, stack-heeled shoes, removing her wire-rimmed bifocals every now and then to wipe them clean. Her black curls bobbed as she moved, and the iron-gray strands that threaded through them sparkled, reflecting the light from the overhead fixture in the kitchen. All this activity, though, didn't stop Rosie's stories.

“Did I ever tell you about the cat?” she asked in the voice that was both raspy and rich. The story was one of her favorites. “Once I worked for a family that had a cat,” Rosie said. “And do you know what that cat did?” The pitch went up a note or two as she remembered. She paused midway between the stove and the kitchen table with the frying pan in her hand, daring me to guess the cat's misdeed. “It tried to smother the baby. Yes, it did.” She nodded at the audacity of the murderous feline, “Just jumped right in the crib and laid down

on that baby's face. I near had a heart attack when I saw it. I screamed so loud the father came running, picked up that cat, and threw it out of the crib, right against the wall." Rosie shuddered at the memory. "He was so angry. He threw it so hard that he killed it." I always found this result somewhat harsh and very gruesome, my sympathies definitely aligned with the cat who was, I feared, the victim of false accusations. I pictured the poor cat slumping down the wall, dead, but I never dared say anything, since Rosie clearly felt the cat more than deserved its fate. "Don't ever keep a cat around a baby," she cautioned. "Why would you need a cat anyway? But if you have one, get rid of it if you're going to have a baby. Cats get too jealous."

All the while I sat, transfixed, at the kitchen table, watching bletlach multiply as quickly as the brooms in Disney's animated segment "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" in *Fantasia*. In a couple of hours the counters and table were covered with bletlach, neatly arranged in rows, and Rosie rested with a cup of tea. She pulled a kitchen chair away from the table and sat down; her generous torso filled out the billows of her loose dress, and her feet barely touched the floor. "All of my babies are growing up," she said. "You were all my babies. Your brother and your sister and all your cousins—Jerry, Bibbi, Irwin"—she began to name them. "And you, too. Did you know that you were one of my babies?" She chuckled a bit at the thought of all the babies whose diapers she changed and whose bottles she prepared, enjoying the fact that it was she who started them all out so well in life.

Once she finished her tea and rinsed the cup, Rosie filled the skins. This was easy—she plopped a generous spoonful of the cheese mixture on each one, patted it into a small rectangle, then folded the bletlach around the filling as if wrapping a gift. When she was finished, she cut wax paper from the roll and counted off blintzes in groups of three or four to distribute among her many relations, expertly wrapping each group to keep them fresh. "Let's see," she said very seriously, "a dozen for Jeannette, a dozen for Selma, and I think I'll take a few home for myself." The neat little packages were squirreled away in the refrigerator until it was time for her to leave, when they quickly disappeared into her plaid, plastic shopping bags for transport.

Rosie knew I loved blintzes so she would fry some for me as soon as they were folded and counted out. "Never fry blintzes in oil," she cautioned. "Do you know why my blintzes turn out so good? Because I never fry them in oil. I only use Crisco, solid Crisco, not oil." She knew what she was talking about too. Each blintz was a golden brown masterpiece—a crisp, light wrapper cradling a creamy, delicious filling. I had my own private late-afternoon feast—fresh, hot blintzes dressed with sour cream.

"When I was a girl," she told me, going off to the powder room as I enjoyed the fruits of her labor, "we didn't have bathrooms like they do today. We had to go outside to use an outhouse. Even in the winter. Do you know how cold it used to get? I used to freeze my tuchas off. You don't know how lucky you are." I contemplated my good fortune at stumbling into a life with indoor plumbing, a blessing I would have totally overlooked had Rosie not pointed it out so adamantly. I couldn't even picture an outhouse, but I tried to imagine a ramshackle wooden structure in our minuscule back yard as I savored the texture of the cold, smooth sour cream against the crispy golden skin and creamy filling of the steaming blintz.

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Rosie died in 1987, but her forthright style survives in my head, and her distinct voice pierces my thoughts when I attend lavishly catered bar mitzvahs and weddings. I can picture her dressed for these events in her long, navy, silk dress with a small, dark hat perched on her black curls. A gauzy piece of ultra-fine netting sprinkled lightly with sparkles is sewn to the front of the hat and covers her eyes, cheeks, and nose, but does not hide them.

“Ooh, these meatballs are good, but not as good as mine,” Rosie coos in her strange, raspy tones as I spear a small, round goodie from a silver chafing dish and pop it into my mouth. “Someone should teach these people how to make a good kugel!” she hisses after I sample a small square of noodle pudding.

But her voice became loudest the day I decided to make cheese blintzes on my own. It wasn't easy to locate a cheese shop that sold the dry, flaky farmer's cheese she insisted upon, but I finally did. I mixed it with a couple of egg yolks, sprinkled in a tiny bit of sugar, and set it aside to tackle the challenge of frying bletlach. The task presented me with a huge dilemma—which of my frying pans to use—the one lined with a nonstick surface, or the plain stainless-steel version. By the time nonstick pans were in vogue, Rosie was no longer making blintzes, and I wondered how she would react to this newfangled product.

I pulled both pans from the cupboard and held one in each hand. “Is this cheating?” I wondered, staring at the nonstick pan, knowing that its surface would make frying bletlach easier because the nonstick material left me with a greater margin of error.

“What would Rosie do?” I stared at the nonstick pan, its surface born of the magic of science, and it was then that the answer came to me like magic. I imagined Rosie har-rumphing around the kitchen, muttering nonstick, of course. How could I even question the choice? Choosing a regular pan would be like choosing a cold, uncomfortable outhouse when a warm, clean, indoor facility was available.

The texture and taste of the bletlach should not be affected, as long as they were still fried in butter. So if a nonstick pan would make my job easier, why not use it? What, Rosie muttered, could ever be wrong with that?