

pass the history

with the gravy

If our old dishes could talk, they would tell quite a story about the lives of the women who came before us.

by Jennifer Allford

I don't remember seeing the gravy boat much when I was a kid. It was stashed away in a sideboard with the "good dishes" and, like the jolly old fellow in the red suit, it made a mysterious appearance once a year. I remember being a little bit afraid of the good dishes (and the guy in the red suit). They were kind of weird looking, with slightly off-kilter shapes, little specks and strange atomic stars.

The Franciscan Starburst line, from California, was introduced in 1954 and manufactured until 1957, the year my parents got married. It wasn't a big wedding (she wore a smashing blue wool suit and a huge smile), but I imagine my mom got a pretty good start to that set on her wedding day.

A few years after she died, I somehow ended up with boxes of the stuff. A newlywed myself, I sat on my kitchen floor and unwrapped it all, stopping to read the occasional story in the packaging, copies of the Edmonton Journal from 10 years earlier. The funny little starbursts reminded me of my mom, which I liked, but mainly it just seemed practical to use the good dishes instead of going and buying more. My mom would approve. So, I threw it all in the dishwasher and have used it for a couple of decades now, serving quesadillas, various pastas and other mundane daily fare.

The dishes don't scare me anymore (although sometimes my pasta does) and the occasional dinner guest has told me that my mid-century dishes are in huge demand by collectors. Indeed, a Starburst butter dish on eBay goes for \$150. But the value in the dishes for me is the family history. Hauling out one of the more obscure pieces, like the gravy boat or the three-section condiment tray, always starts the home movies in my

head: Big dinners with glamorous aunts and long-dead uncles—the one who gave great airplane rides, the one who told me his Adam's apple was a yo-yo he had swallowed (I believed him for years).

My dad making cross-eyes at the camera. My mom throwing her head back, laughing. I wonder what they talked about at those dinners. JFK's assassination. Then Bobby's. My grandfather dying. My aunt leaving my uncle.

Debbie Dalen wonders about the people who used to own her dishes too. In her case, the women who cared for them

A STARBURST IS BORN

"With the prosperity that came after the war, consumers were ready for something new. And the futuristic starry design on Franciscan Starburst fit in well with a new chrome kitchen and advanced appliances."

starburst-dinnerware.com



are usually a complete mystery, so she has to make up her own movies. The owner of Pretty Little Things consignment store in Inglewood and a life-long collector of pretty little dishes, Dalen says the sense of story is served up with every vintage dish. "I picture what they were doing, especially with tea cups and saucers, because they were always reserved for special occasions. I picture why they chose to use their china that day," she muses. "What was the emotional side of her getting out her prized china? Was it a dinner party? Was it the boss coming over? Was it a holiday?"

China used to be a very big deal. Young women, girls even, would pick their favourite pattern and start collecting it, piece by piece, long before they'd even met the man of their dreams, or the guy who proposed to them. "Outside of getting married, the second thing a young girl would want in life is a set of china," says Dalen. "We aspire to a little more now."

If only our old dishes could talk, they would tell quite a story about the



The three-section condiment tray always starts the home movies in my head.

lives of the women who came before us, says Dawn Johnston, an instructor in communications and culture at the University of Calgary. “There is that sense of dishes belonging to the home and being part of a tradition of women within the family, it’s definitely something that people connect to,” Johnston says. “Food has a pretty strongly gendered history, and for a very long time there has been this strict divide between food prepared at home, which was the woman’s domain, and food prepared professionally, which was a male domain.”

Many brides-to-be still pick out china patterns but women have moved well beyond the kitchen (however, most of us still have to get back in there to cook dinner). And, while we don’t have to wash diapers anymore, we don’t want to hand-wash dishes.

“You can’t put most of the china in the dishwasher, so that right there is a show-stopper,” says Dalen. “Our lives are much more fast-paced and busier than they were. We don’t sit around and knit anymore and the kids don’t just play board games and go to bed when they’re told.”

And if we want (dishwasher-safe) dishes, we just go buy them. We don’t need a wedding and we don’t need a spouse’s money. We don’t even need a need. “There are people who feel like every three years they need to entirely renovate their kitchen and that includes new dishes,” notes Johnston.

A new set of dishes can represent a new start, a type of reinvention, she says. “I have seen friends go through a traumatic family event or they’ve had divorce or something like that, and they have a desire to distance themselves from the past by recreating the way they’re cooking and eating and that central space of their house, which is the kitchen.”

Meanwhile, there are boxes and boxes of china sitting in basements. I have my mother’s mother’s Royal Albert Val D’or—I used the gilt-edged white bone china teapot once—and an unopened crate of something that belongs to a long-lost friend’s aunt. I gather they aren’t missing it.

Dalen sees people all the time wanting to consign their delicate family china, but she has to be very selective. “In my store I would love nothing else than to have stacks and stacks of dishes, but nobody wants full sets of china anymore,” she says. “They want individual pieces and mix-matched pieces which all come from someone else’s house and all have their own story.”

Take Johnston’s cherished devilled-egg dish, one of the “quirky” pieces she kept after her grandmother died. “I had never in my life served devilled eggs at a party. But I saw the dish and thought that’s awesome,” she says. “And there was that sense that I would be keeping a piece of family history and memories of her alive in my daily life.”

I don’t know what memories the gravy boat poured out for my mom. But I think my kids will remember that infamous Christmas when I didn’t make enough gravy—the story gets passed around with the potatoes every year.

Somewhere along the way, we managed to put a chip in the gravy boat (likely in the dishwasher). I was disappointed when I noticed it a few years ago. But I don’t think my mom would care—there were more than a few chips in the dishes I unpacked all those years ago. Still, I always take extra-special care when I use the two crescent side plates that look like giant apostrophes. I hope that my daughter will, too. **S**

THIS WEEK'S MUST-HAVE: sugar lip treatment



It's Da Balm

Lip-balm aficionados know it's hard to beat the moisturizing goodness that is Aquaphor's Lip Repair. But unless you smuggle a year's supply across the U.S.-Canada border, you inevitably will need a locally available product to keep your lips supple during Calgary's moisture-sucking winter. Enter Sugar Lip Treatment by fresh. Available in natural, as well as six lightly tinted formulas, the texture of this pocket-sized gem is sheer perfection. And the SPF 15 keeps the snow-reflected UV rays at bay. No matter how cold the rest of you gets, this balm keeps your lips looking hot. **Find it at Sephora, Chinook Centre and two other Calgary locations. sephora.com, \$26.—Meghan Jessiman**