

Knowing how to make 'hnutka' stirs ethnic echoes



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I'm standing in front of my stove. One hand is exhausted from nearly an hour of moving the wooden spoon through the pale yellow liquid, and the other hand clutches the phone receiver.

"Are you sure it's supposed to take this long?"

My mother's laugh travels over the wires.

"I've been at it for half an hour."

"Just keep stirring."

I stare at the mixture of a dozen eggs and a quart of milk, willing it to "gather." To start looking a little like cottage cheese. To start turning into what it's supposed to be: *hnutka*. The food I've been eating every Easter since I was old enough to chew.

I learned about *hnutka* as soon as I could say the word — pronounce the "h" and roll the "r." I learned about it in my mother's kitchen and have carried that knowledge to every kitchen in every apartment and house of my adult life. Stirring the eggs and milk while 30, 45, 60 minutes tick by. Pouring the lumpy mass into cheesecloth so the liquid drains out. Hanging the bundle on the door of the cupboard so it sol-

idifies into a ball that slices like cheese.

I've struggled with *hnutka* on my own, trying to master the art of twisting a cheesecloth filled with steaming liquid without getting burned. I've laughed my way through the process during visits from my sister, when we learned that four semi-experienced hands sometimes work better than two. And I've made it with my husband, a novice who pitches in willingly but voices an opinion shared by Dad:

"It sure is a lot of work to go to for something that tastes like cold scrambled eggs."

There's no question that I need to have *hnutka* on Easter morning, served alongside the kielbasa I buy in my an-

nual bout of throwing cholesterol caution to the wind. As much as marshmallow chicks and jelly beans, *hnutka* is the taste of Easter no matter where I am.

Although I grew up with my father's Irish last name and acquired another Irish name by marriage, I don't look a bit like a native of County Cork. On a quick business trip to Prague several years ago, I stared at the faces passing us on the street, commenting:

"That woman looks just like Grandma," and "Look over there — doesn't she look exactly like Mom?"

After a dozen of these exclamations, John smiled and said, "I've got news for you. Everyone here looks exactly like you." It was like being at

a citywide family reunion where I didn't know a soul but felt an immediate kinship with every single one of them.

The realization that we're all part of a family that's bigger and older than the one in which we grew up manifests itself differently for everyone. Some people have letters and diaries that connect them to their pasts. Others remember hearing stories about life in the old country. For some, it takes traveling to ancestral homes in faraway places to connect with their roots. For me, having the face of a Kinsinko and knowing how to make *hnutka* are all I've ever needed.

This year, we're going home to Pennsylvania to celebrate the holiday. When my sister reports that the *hnutka*-making responsibility will be in the hands of our undisputed "*hnutka*-master," I look forward to relinquishing the wooden spoon to the person who taught me how long to stir.

And when I share my mother's finished product with nieces and nephews who agree that "*hnutka* is the taste of Easter," I'll be grateful for tradition that keeps all of us bound to the family tree ... as long as someone with patience and a very strong arm is willing to stand at the stove.

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