

The busted egg of a mother hen

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

I was frying two eggs the other day, one for me and one for Sharon, when I felt like a manly man and cracked one of the eggs too roughly, producing what is known as a hard-fried egg with a broken yolk.

That left us with two different egg dishes. One was a perfect egg, sunny-side up, steamed in a covered skillet until just the right amount of hot, runny yolk.

The other was a broken egg with yolk running all over the skillet, instantly solidifying and turning into something like a hard-boiled yolk, only flatter.

That was my mistake. So I did what any honorable cook would do: I served that egg to myself and served the perfect egg to a perfect mate. Sometimes a rooster must, as a matter of integrity, be there for the hen.

Sharon tried to be equally generous, saying she didn't mind the flat, hardened yellow yolk cooked into something like a drunken Picasso painting.

I fibbed that I would enjoy a battered egg. I like a change of pace, and that vulcanized egg interested me.

That made me into a fried egg yolk breaker, a role reserved historically in my family for women. As the cooks, they were expected to avoid the sin of throwing food away just because it wasn't pretty any more. You break, you eat it.

But these are different times. Most moms today, like their husbands, have a job outside the home. So fairness, justice and the occasional angry female shriek have persuaded most of us manly men that we need to pitch in on some of the cooking. In today's world, the you-break-it-you-eat-it rule also applies to men.

So I looked at that mangled egg and realized I had just joined the ways of my own mother by following her lead and insisting that I was glad to have a go at that slob egg. The new family pecking order called "gender equality" applied fully to me and what is expected of me in a democratic kitchen.

I sometimes hear women, who differed angrily with their mothers as teen-agers, now reach a point of maturity when they realize that, like it or not, they have a large helping of their mother's genes. I have heard those women go into shock and declare, "Oh, no, I'm becoming my mother!" I gather from their attitude that they do not welcome becoming the mother they quarreled with.

When I realized the other day that I have a few Chef Mama genes in my nature, I was briefly startled but far from rattled. By some lucky break, my parents and I escaped most of the last century's generation wars that afflicted so many other families.

I never quarreled much with my mother - partly because of the power she held over me. She was one of the supreme fried chicken cooks on the face of the planet, and I was a fried chicken addict. My pusher was my own mother and I would never rock that gravy boat by turning teenage surly.

However, even if I did slip into lying about wanting a broken egg the other morning, I was never so deep into showy unselfishness as my fibbing mother. In fact, she had a long list of kitchen mistakes she pretended to adore rather than serve her family something second best.

Burned toast, for instance. If she accidentally burned my toast, she would grab it from me and toast another piece of bread insisting she really liked toast that way.

"Carbon gives a depth of flavor to toast," she fibbed.

Then there was the back of the chicken, that boney little rack of chicken fat.

"My favorite piece," she would declare.

That freed the rest of us from what should have been guilt over her maternal scam. We would immediately seize the prime pieces - the drumsticks, the thighs, the breasts - leaving her the back of the bird.

After some years of singing the praises of a chicken back, she sort of became serious about it. Oh, it wasn't so much that she loved that pathetic part of the chicken. She loved it as a symbol of her pride in serving her family well.

Some great actresses receive an Academy Award. Some receive the back of a chicken fried in love.

But sometimes I sit eating a busted fried egg and catch myself thinking that it wouldn't have killed us to let her eat a drumstick on her birthday.

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