

## Pionono Unraveled: Longing and Memory in My Mother's Kitchen

My mother, who insists she's 'not a baker'—and she's not, but I've found there's really nothing she can't make—has made my father an Argentine birthday cake every year for as long as I can remember. The roll cake, called *pionono*, comes from an Italian dish, as many Argentine recipes do.

It's one of those classic desserts, bound to impress but easy to make. Piononos can also be salty, or *salados*, but she was only ever interested in the sweet ones, despite her fear of baking. *It's too rigid*, she'll say, averse to precise measurements and cook times. She cooks like her father—intuitively, by smell, with the wind, unable to replicate the same dish twice.

My parents met in 1982 as the military dictatorship in Argentina rose to peak power. The secrets of the junta's dirty war prevailed but remained clandestine. In every Argentine was a fear so acute they were shaken into silence. What came to light almost immediately after emigrating confirmed what she, as a teenager, told herself were only nightmares: the house behind theirs was quietly converted to a detention and torture center. In her sleep she could hear the screams of the disappeared. Leftists, scholars, students, Jews like her.

When she saw my father for the first time she was disinterested, and he was in love. A Brooklyn-raised foreign correspondent, he flew to Buenos Aires to cover the Falklands War, known to Argentines as *la guerra de las Malvinas*—a frivolous quest of Margaret Thatcher's and welcome diversion for the junta.

It took some time for my father to grow on her, but he did. Eventually she found his effervescence endearing and she moved, less than a year later, to Atlanta to be with him. It was in that linoleum kitchen where she perfected her pionono. The annual cake represented a semblance of routine and ritual in the inconsistent life they began to build together. He was mostly away on assignment while she waited in Marietta, unable to work until her permits were processed. The people in Atlanta didn't know what to call her—she wasn't quite white, she certainly wasn't Black, and when they assumed Native American, they bewildered when she corrected. Along the continuum of 'exotic,' from familiar to strange, she stood, somewhat alone, on the end of unfamiliar. For them, her olive skin betrayed her British English that was coated in Latin American inflection. She was exceptionally different and therefore alone. So, she wrote home and read Freud and cooked constantly.

The cake is simple. Pionono has a light and fluffy sponge base that's spread about a quarter inch thick on a sheet pan. While preheating the oven, egg whites are gingerly

separated from the yolks and beaten with vanilla until stiff. When I was young, and my mother would flip the bowl upside down to test their readiness, I thought she was made of magic. The inverted opaque peaks hung suspended in the air, unmoving, fundamentally transformed from the clear liquid they once were. In another bowl, the yolks get mixed with sugar—*never too much or it will taste empalagoso*, saccharine—until they wondrously change in color from sun gold to a thick and pale yellow. Sprinkles of flour are gradually folded in along with the airy egg whites, using a spatula. I remember watching her effortlessly scrape the sides of the metal bowl with the tool's silicone edge, scooping all the ingredients in one swift movement.

Outside of the kitchen, my mother is reserved and often fearful, careful to hold together the protective layer she's built over the years. The other mothers at school, on the rare occasions she could come to retrieve us, were unwelcoming and alienated her. In response, she kept a distance and held us close.

But when my mother cooks, she is transformed, or rather, she returns to herself. She dances between the sink and refrigerator, glowing. She hums and sways and improvises, borrowing a pinch of this from Yotam Ottolenghi and a dash of that from Claudia Roden. This is the version of her that my father knows, that we get to know. I can close my eyes and see her standing at the stove in her waxy apron, a wedding gift, with one knee bent, the other hyperextended. She's holding a wooden spoon in her left

hand and has the right one resting on her hip in a loose fist. I know she is thinking of her father and smells him in the room.

The batter for the pionono's base is poured evenly across a sheet pan with parchment paper and baked for just a short time until that sweet smell of vanilla fills the kitchen. Once removed, it's covered in a damp dishcloth and flipped upside down. The paper is carefully peeled off, and while the base cools, fruit for the filling is washed and the whipped cream prepared. Often berries or stone fruit, my mother will look for the freshest produce possible. Sometimes, she'll grate lemon zest into the cream.

The whipped cream is then spread from edge to edge of the sponge cake, and fruit about halfway across lengthwise, save for the first inch or so. This portion is the first to get tucked into itself and create the quintessential spiral that represents the pionono. The dish towel, here, becomes an implement: as it's lifted, the sponge cake is rolled and fruit gets laid along the remaining empty spaces covered only in cool cream. At this point the cake is near complete, and rolled one last time, using the towel, onto a platter. Naked, the sponge is porous and fluffy, begging to be pressed. Front-facing, the spiral is visible, hugging itself in layers of yellow and white and red. The outside of the cake is finally covered with the remaining whipped cream and topped with what's left of the fresh fruit. When it's all finished, the cake looks like something of the '80s, and in many ways it is, suspended in time.

This recipe comes from Doña Lola, a cookbook many Argentines own, particularly those of a certain generation. It was published in 1974, under the rule of President Juan Domingo Perón. My grandfather gifted it to his daughter when she left for the States nine years later. He inscribed it, a feat and profoundly touching gesture from a semi-literate man who didn't make it past the second grade. He never learned to write, so he passed his recipes along through performance and demonstration. When my mother moves through the kitchen, she embodies him, mirroring the way he reached for the salt that lived next to the stove, letting it fall between her fingers through the steam.

Piononos show their colors when they're sliced carefully and slowly so as not to disassemble. Seemingly unsuspecting from the outside, their complexities lie within, each layer building upon itself cyclically. When she cuts into the cake each year, looking over the flickering candle flames at my father's beaming face, she celebrates the new life she sought and built so tenderly with him. It is also an outstretched arm reaching for another continent, another home, a past self at another table.

In my mind's eye, I have two moms: my mother in English, and my mother in Spanish. Sometimes they show up in the same sentence, speaking in unison. But sometimes they're fragmented and need to be coaxed or led back home. When a culture is silenced, it speaks through art. Food, both as a craft and as sustenance, allows us to

transport ourselves to another moment time, one behind us or ahead. Sometimes the meal we reach for is couched in grief, and sometimes it's a reminder of who we are when that starts to feel thin and disparate.