

# Spaghetti Sauce

By Carl Brown

Last week it was marshmallows. This week, spaghetti.

Sunday dinner at Mom and Dad's. Sauce from homegrown tomatoes, simmered all day. Homemade meatballs. Spaghetti el dente. Fresh grated cheese. Hot chill peppers for Dad. Mom would go on about how long she'd worked on the sauce. Her arms were tired from stirring. Her hands were sore from shaping meatballs. And she had prevailed. She would serve me first, a large heaping plate. And pass me the cheese. Then she would serve Dad. And my brothers. She would serve herself last.

And then she would taste the sauce, and make a face, and say, "Oh, the sauce tastes terrible!"

"Mom! The sauce tastes delicious!" I would say.

She would rebuke me. "What do you know about cooking?" she said. "There's too much basil."

Or not enough salt.

Or too much pepper.

Or too many bay leaves.

It was always something. And no matter how hard I tried, I would fail to convince her that she had done well, and that the meal was fine. I lost, every time.

I went to see a psychiatrist about this.

He said, "This is a game."

I pondered the meaning.

Games have names. Let's call this one, "I'm a Bad Cook". What are the rules?

1. Mom prepares a sumptuous dinner
2. Mom proclaims the meal tainted
3. Carl argues that the meal is fine
4. Mom invokes her rank and Carl loses

Nobody questions the rules.

What if I change the rules?

The following Sunday I went to Mom and Dad's for dinner.

1. Mom prepared a sumptuous dinner
2. Mom proclaimed the meal tainted
3. I looked at her with mock concern. I cautiously dipped my spoon in the sauce, brought it to my lips, wrinkled my nose, and said, "This sauce tastes terrible, Mom! What happened?"
4. Mom invoked her rank. "What do you know about cooking?" she said. "This sauce tastes fine."

And I won.

Sometimes when you feel like you just can't win, the secret is in the sauce.