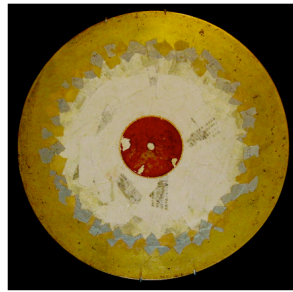


Continuous Improvement
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Improving Mom's Spaghetti Sauce

by Steve O'Keefe

My mother just celebrated her 87th birthday. She is Italian-American, but not just any Italian-American. My mother is full-on Sicilian, she raised nine children, and she arguably makes the best spaghetti sauce in the world. This newsletter is about making that sauce better.

Before I proceed, I should mention that the Sicilian people as a rule are not very big and have survived the centuries by making *this face* that deters others from messing with them. I can feel my mother making *this face* right now. She has a meathook for an eyebrow, which she used to suspend small children in a distant corner of her kitchen as though they were curing hams. It is said the Sicilian Stare can take 25 minutes off your lifespan. I'd better get on with the story.



Annoying readers of this newsletter have pointed out that some things do not need "continuous improvement." Sometimes it's wise to leave well enough alone. Sometimes the goal is sustainability, rather than growth. These hecklers cite "Mom's spaghetti sauce" as an example of something so perfect that it is blasphemy to try to improve it. They are wrong.

It's a good test, however, of the theory of continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is not about growth or profit; it's about making things better. That's a subjective term, and it should be. Each of us defines our own *better*. We know it when it happens. And I can show you how to make Mom's spaghetti sauce better—by your own subjective standards.

Mom's spaghetti sauce is the pinnacle of perfection because it illustrates the roll that expectations play in satisfaction and delight. Your mom's spaghetti sauce will always taste better to you than any other mom's spaghetti sauce because it's familiar to you. Your mother's sauce probably tastes better to you, even, than my mother's sauce. I'm about to show you how to make *your mother's* sauce even better than he or she does.



Smell and taste result in much stronger mental imprints that most of us credit. We are designed by nature to remember when and where we found good things to eat. We also remember horrible tastes and their origins all too well. In fact, according to Dr. Robert Pretlow, a client and pediatrician who has developed a smartphone app for clinically obese children, one of the most effective appetite suppressants is a little vial

of rancid smells opened at the moment willpower fails.

Conversely, the smell of onions, garlic, and bell pepper sautéing in a pan brings a tear to the eye of all Sicilians (the salt of tears being a major ingredient in Italian women's sauces for centuries). The taste of your mother's sauce is intertwined with some of your best childhood memories: those involving eating.

As a result of your childhood programming, there is no way for my spaghetti sauce to break through the tapestry of your memories and displace your mother's sauce as the zenith of culinary achievement. But I *can* show you how to make *your* mother's sauce even better.



Here are the ingredients for my spaghetti sauce. It doesn't look like anything special.

1 lb. ground beef
4 16-oz cans of tomato sauce
1 6-oz can of tomato paste
1/2 cup tap water
1/4 cup red wine
1 onion
2 cloves garlic
Spices:
1 bay leaf
1-1/2 tsp oregano
2 tsp sweet basil
sugar
salt
pepper

The reason these ingredients can go from supermarket to sublime in just a few hours is centuries of *continuous improvement*. At one time the tomato was considered by Europeans to be poisonous. Enough brains remembered enough unpleasant experiences with tomatoes that Europeans did not cultivate them until the late 1700s, when someone in Naples, just up the boot from Sicily, first figured out that if you cook the tomato, it loses its acidity and transforms into a food of the gods.

Today, I'll show you how to make your mother's spaghetti sauce better than ever. It is a recipe you will want to share with your children and hand down, improving future generations.



The first thing I do is brown the ground beef on medium-high heat, stirring constantly until the hamburger breaks down into very small, granular pieces. For chili, you want big chunks of browned burger, but for this sauce, you want it very dry and very fine. Drain all the fat off and add the salt and pepper and brown a few seconds longer. I like to add the salt and pepper here, to infuse the meat with flavor, rather than later. Turn the heat down to medium. Starting with the tomato sauce, add all the other ingredients, stirring all the time, then turn the heat to low for an hour. That's my sauce.

My wife, collage artist Deborah O'Keeffe, would immediately improve my recipe by specifying 93% fat-free ground beef. My mother would one-up her. She would say, "Find the best looking piece of beef on sale and hand it to the butcher to grind. But watch them. Never let your beef leave your line of sight until it hits the dinner table." So the

first way to improve your sauce is to upgrade the ingredients.

When I make my Mom's sauce, I prefer the Great Value tomato sauce and paste from Wal-Mart. It is noticeably thicker than even the premium grocery store brands. It has a better flavor, better texture, and goes further than other tomato sauces. Wal-Mart's suppliers have definitely applied continuous improvement techniques to get a better product at a lower price. That's how continuous improvement is supposed to work.

My mother's sauce is different than most because she does not sauté the garlic or the onion, but peels them and puts them in whole, then removes them before serving. You get the flavor of the onion and garlic, but not any tasty bits. Supposedly she did this because my Dad didn't like garlic or onions. But my Dad didn't like spaghetti sauce, so it would have made no difference to him.

Isn't it amazing that an Italian woman who makes the world's best spaghetti sauce would marry an Irish man who hates spaghetti sauce? The only food they had in common was the host.

Here's a suggestion for my Mom: if you use a sweet onion instead of a yellow onion, you can cut down on the amount of refined sugar or honey you use to sweeten the sauce. There, I said it! It won't make your sauce better, Mom, but it will make it different, and you might like it.

So how do you make *your* mother's spaghetti sauce even better? Here's the secret.



You can make your mom's spaghetti sauce better by trying something different. It doesn't matter what you try. Anything works. I've

tried sautéed mushrooms: eh. Green pepper adds some zing. Sometimes I add a tablespoon of Allegro marinade. It really makes no difference because, no matter what you try, there really is no way of making spaghetti sauce better than your mom. She's got history on her side and you cannot unprogram childhood memories attached to that sauce.

You cannot make spaghetti sauce better than your mom. But you made your mom's sauce better by trying something new.

You see, after a while, mom's sauce starts losing its power due to familiarity. After a while, mom's sauce becomes routine—nothing special, ordinary to the palate, taken for granted. When we try to improve something and fail, we return to the original with renewed respect. Dare I call it awe? This renewed appreciation makes the same sauce suddenly taste better.

The way you improve your mom's spaghetti sauce is to try to make it better. Even if you fail, the same sauce will now taste better. It's a psychological trick of expectations.

The only thing our brains enjoy more than a deviation from expectations is a satisfying return to the fold. This is what gives music its drama and food its flavor: the emotional punch from the deviation from—and return to—expectations.

That's why we pursue continuous improvement even when it's impossible: because even if you fail, you make the best better.

Can you make your mother's spaghetti sauce better? Yes you can! And you can do it without supplanting her sauce as the best in the world. How's that, Mom? Can I get down now?

