



Empanadas

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“No! Never!” she asserted obstinately.

“Oh *Mamá!*” her exasperated daughter groaned. Then, turning to me, said, “You just have to talk some sense into her.”

I sighed silently, crossed my legs and turned on my stool to face the mother and daughter, wondering how in the world my medical school education qualified me to lead this conversation. The encounter started innocuously enough. My sweet, 95-year-old patient, Guadalupe, one of my favorites, was on my schedule for “food issues” according to the notation from my scheduler.

“Easy enough,” I thought to myself entering the room, thinking we’d likely be discussing a change in appetite, the need for nutritional supplements or meal replacement shakes, or perhaps a referral to a dietician. It turns out I was way off in my predictions and was unprepared for the impending discussion.

“She makes the best empanadas,” her daughter started. When I nodded, she held out her hand and firmly said, “No. You have no idea. They aren’t just *any* empanadas. They are special. They are amazing and unlike anything you’ve ever tasted. She makes them for every family gathering. Our celebrations just wouldn’t be the same without them. They are what her grandkids want when they’re sick. When word gets out that she’s making her empanadas for church luncheon, attendance at the service skyrockets and they run out of seats. People are only there because of the empanadas!”

“Wow,” I said, impressed. “I had no idea I knew such a remarkable cook! So, what exactly is the problem then?” I asked, perplexed.

Throwing her hands up in the air, the daughter said with urgency, “She won’t tell anyone the recipe! And she’s 95! She’s not going to live forever, and our family needs that recipe!”

With understanding sinking in, I realized that my patient was brought to the clinic that day not with a change in appetite or with nutritional concerns. The “food issue” was her unwillingness to share her treasured secret empanada recipe. Her daughter and family were desperate for me to convince their stubborn mother to reveal the secret before she died.

The daughter went on, “We try to spy on her in the kitchen but she makes us leave. She won’t tell the recipe to me or any of my sisters. She won’t tell my *tías*. She won’t tell any of her nieces or granddaughters. She won’t even tell our priest...and we had him ask.”

Guadalupe sat with her arms crossed and brow furrowed, staring at the ground. She reminded me of my darling, yet strong-willed daughter, whenever I announced it was bedtime.

“Do you understand why your daughter brought you here today, Lupe?” I asked gently, my hand on top of hers.

She lifted her eyes and flatly said, “They want my empanada secret before I die.” Her eyes darted back to the ground again.

“I love empanadas,” I shared with her in earnest. While they weren’t a food I ever ate growing up, I told her how I had discovered a great little Puerto Rican restaurant near my apartment when I was in medical school. I shared my fond memories of those warm little pockets of gooey, spicy meat, beans, and cheese that got me through long nights of studying while on a strict budget. I told her about the kind restaurant owner, Ernestina, who, once she found out I was studying to be a doctor, would kindly wish me blessings and give me extra food for free. “Guadalupe,” I told my patient, “those empanadas helped get me through medical school.”

She met my gaze now, smiling. “You’ve never had empanadas, *Doctora*, until you’ve had *my* empanadas.” She then took my hand in her wrinkled one, patted it, and whispered, “Tell my daughter not to worry. I’ll give you my recipe when I see you next. You’ll guard it. Use it to cook for your family. Then, when I die, you can give the recipe to my family. For now,” she said with a wink, “they’ll just have to wait.”

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