The Pot Pie Saga

Before we married, my husband was the only boy in a house full of Hispanic women that included three sisters, a maid and an overly doting mother. If you’re familiar with the culture, it will be no surprise that cooking for himself in any shape or form was never an option. If he expressed the desire for so much as a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, it was on a plate in front of him before the words finished coming out of his mouth. His familiarity with all things culinary was limited to whatever magically appeared at the dining room table. I learned all this during our four-year dating and engagement period, so when we married in 1970, I logically and cheerfully assumed all kitchen duties without hesitation. I love to cook, the kitchen has always been one of my happy places, and with his lack of experience in that arena, it was a no-brainer.

About a year into our marriage, we found out our first child was on her way. A few weeks before she was due, I realized he was going to be on his own while I went through the 70’s era perfunctory three-to-four-day hospital convalescence after the baby came. One evening, our conversation went something like this:

(Him, as he chowed down on a pot pie): “This is great, hon! Can you pack one of these in my lunch tomorrow?”

(Me, almost choking as I stifled a laugh): “Um, well, that could be tricky unless you think you’d like a pot pie sandwich?”

(Him, with a sigh): “Yeah, you’re right. Guess my usual bologna will have to do tomorrow.”

(Him again, with a grin): “Pot pies again tomorrow, then? I sure do like these things!”

(Me, saying a silent prayer of thanks for his limited palate): “Sure. Speaking of future dinners, what would you like to do about that while I’m in the hospital after the baby? My mom said she could bring some casseroles by, or you could go to your mom’s I guess?”

(Him, with a frown): “Neither of those options sound appealing. I’ll figure something out. Maybe you can just leave some pot pies in the freezer?”

(Me, not believing what I’m hearing): “Really? I mean, they *are* pretty easy. Just preheat the oven, pop them in and wait about 40 minutes. I can show you tomorrow if you really want to have pot pies again?”

(Him, with a proud and happy smile): “Yeah! I think that will work great. It can’t be that hard, right?”

In my very pregnant state of mind, I was not thinking clearly about this, but the next evening, he watched me preheat the oven, place the pot pies on a baking sheet and pull them out after the prescribed cooking time. He assured me it was “no problem!” In the days before microwaves and Door Dash, these little frozen savory pastries seemed to be the answer to our dilemma of how the spousal unit would survive while I was out of commission.

So, the big day came, and I successfully delivered our beautiful daughter in the early morning hours of a dreary Thursday after a grueling 28-hour labor. Shortly after she arrived, he kissed us both goodbye and went home for a well-deserved nap. I also slept most of that day, but around dinner time, while eating my lovely hospital meal, the phone by my bed rang.

“Hi, hon,” he began. “How are you?”

“Well, not too bad,” I offered, “considering I basically pushed an 8-pound bowling ball out of my body this morning!”

He chuckled. “Well, you did great and she’s beautiful. What are you doing right now?”

“Eating my lovely dinner,” I responded with a touch of uncharacteristic sarcasm. “How ‘bout you?”

“Me too!” he said proudly. “I’m eating a couple of pot pies.”

“Pot pies! Good for you! How did they turn out?”

“Well,” he began, “they look okay, but they’re still frozen in the middle.”

While spooning my lovely green hospital Jello, I pondered his response. “Hmm...I guess you didn’t leave them in the oven long enough. Did you set it at the right temperature and let it warm up?”

“Um, well, uh – I didn’t use the oven.”

It my post-partum grogginess, it took a minute to process what I was hearing. I pushed the green Jello aside and poked at the Salisbury steak which was getting cold. How do you cook frozen pot pies without an oven? The silent question began to gather like a storm cloud on the horizon. I couldn’t envision how he might have cooked frozen pot pies without an oven. I finally formed the words.

“So, how did you cook them then?” I asked. There was a pregnant pause. Finally, he took a breath and piped:

“I fried them!” He seemed inordinately proud of himself.

I sat silent. The Salisbury steak glared at me. After a minute, I managed to speak, “You fried them?” My roommate looked at me from across the room with a puzzled frown on her face.

“He FRIED them.” It was more of a comment to me than to her. Where had I failed? We had planned this so carefully. Turn on oven, set to 400 degrees, place pot pie in there and wait 40 minutes! It was so simple. “You fried them,” I repeated while I stabbed my glazed carrots with a fork. My roommate shook her head, stifling a laugh.

He got defensive. “Well did you know it takes at least 15 minutes for the oven to heat up and then 40 minutes to cook them and well - I just didn’t want to wait. So, I put them into a frying pan with some oil and let them cook. The crust looked really nice and brown, but the insides are still kinda frozen.” His voice was getting sadder. “I guess my experiment didn’t really work too well. And I guess tomorrow I’ll have to go to Mom’s.” He ended with a large heavy sigh.

His dejection softened my reaction. “Fried pot pies,” I murmured with a smile. I pictured him heating the oil and dropping that frozen pot pie into the pan, then proudly digging into it on his plate, only to find ice-encrusted chicken, carrots, celery and sauce beneath the nicely browned crust. I began to chuckle with my roommate, and as he started chanting “fried pot pies, fried pot pies!” on the other end of the phone, my chuckle turned into a full-fledged belly laugh.

“Oh,” I groaned. “Don’t make me laugh – I’m still sore from stitches!!” As I caught my breath, I told him, “I will give you an A-minus for thinking outside the pot pie box. But don’t get any ideas. I still retain all rights to the kitchen, the cooking and all meals once I get home! And you know what? Right now, I’d take that fried pot pie and its pretty crust over this pitiful Salisbury steak, rubber carrots and green Jello.”

He laughed. “You have full rights to the kitchen for the rest of our married life, dear! And no worries, I’ll be happy to bring you one of my famous frozen pot pies for dinner – or maybe you’d really rather have a Whataburger?” I could have kissed him. Which is one of the many reasons we have managed to stick together for almost fifty-four years!

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