

# Thirty-Two Place Settings

By: Jean E. Muccini

Recently, as I was carefully packing my china for our move to Florida, I found myself remembering a PTA meeting I attended many years ago. Discussions centered on fund raising activities. A formal dinner was one consideration, when the question came up, "Wouldn't it be great to have matching china, silver, and glasses to make the dinner more elegant?"

Someone suggested, "Should we rent?" I raised my hand and said, "I have service for 32 people." Seeing the need for an explanation to the sea of quizzical faces, I stated; "I married into an Italian family and was outfitted to entertain the immediate family."

As I continued to sort through the cupboards, I realized that Americans generally think of immediate family as two parents, grandparents and 1.5 children. Immediate Italian families consist of parents, grandparents, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, friends, and even carolers at Christmas. Everyone is genuinely welcome.

My initial experience with the concept of an extended family began with my first official date with Ric for the junior prom. Imagine my surprise when I learned we had to go to his house before the prom, as his mother wanted to take pictures. Arriving at the three-story home, or as they say in Boston "triple decka," we were greeted by Ric's mother, first floor; grandmother and grandfather, second floor; and Aunt Rosa and Uncle Frank and their three children, third floor. A few neighbors also showed up to see us in our finery. It was amazing.

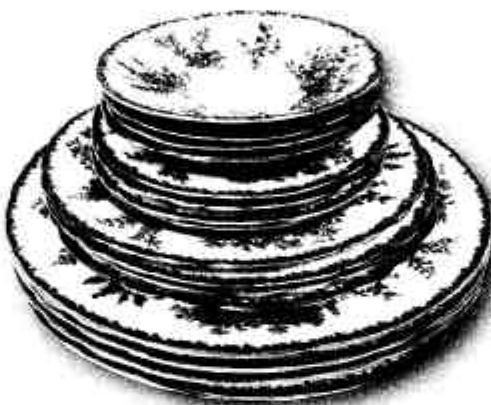
As time went by, Ric and I continued dating. Then, surprisingly, his sister asked me to be in her wedding party. Preparations for the big day were overwhelming. I viewed her trousseau acquired, I believe, since the day she was born. Her hope chest and closet overflowed with towels of all sizes, sets of dishes for every occasion, beautiful hand-embroidered linens and tablecloths for special events. The wedding, in an elegant hotel ballroom with an orchestra, singer, hors d'oeuvres, and 300 close family members, was a magical event. Up to that time, my experience, with the weddings of my family and friends, was the very best the Irish-American club could offer in their newly renovated hall.

Then the day came when I received my hope chest. The "family" came to my home bringing gifts for my trousseau. They stared into the empty chest, astonished I didn't have anything of my own to put into it. As my mother was convinced I was going to marry a rich man, she never started collecting items for my

trousseau. In addition, I never learned to cook, clean or do any other housewifely chores.

Why this was the case, I do not know, as it was unlikely there would ever be a chance for me to meet a rich man. I grew up in a poor working class suburb of Boston. My prince charming was unlikely to come rolling down my street in a limo, whisking me away to a life of luxury. After that visit, at family occasions, members of Ric's family would discretely give me a dishtowel, kitchen tool or something to add substance to my meager collection.

My fondest memories though were of holiday celebrations, especially Christmas. The festivities started



on Christmas Eve with the dinner of seven fishes. Attendance was mandatory. The dining room table, with additional tables added, stretched from the kitchen all the way through the dining room, and living room.

Best practice was to attend to basic needs before taking your seat, as, once down, it was impossible to get away from the table without everyone moving. Preteens sat at card tables in the hall for their meal. Exemplary manners were expected. No excuse accepted to miss this event.

The first time my parents came to join the "family" for this celebration, my mother was overwhelmed with all the food—she was done after the first course. The dinner went on for hours, followed by espresso, dessert, freely flowing cordials, and great conversations.

The next day, everyone convened again for the Christmas Day dinner of lasagna, lamb, etc. If someone had to visit "the other in-laws," expectations were they would still come for dessert. The three kitchens in the

"triple decka" were bustling with activity—all burners and ovens at full steam.

We spent summer weekends on Cape Cod. Ric's father, grandfather, uncles, and a couple of close friends jointly purchased a block of land and built simple cottages with a common backyard. We shared communal meals, but best of all was the Sunday tradition of spaghetti. The outdoor grill had pots boiling with pasta, sauce, meatballs, and Italian cookout!

Ric's mother hosted dinner every Sunday. If on occasion we were going to my parents for dinner, we always were always expected to stop by to see his family. They would feed my children meatballs, afraid they would not be well fed at my mother's. Having inherited my cooking skills from my mother, it was probably a good thing they did.

Years passed and with it, a transfer to Chicago. The dynamics of our family relationship changed. We still made every effort to get home for Christmas, but now all the noise and food left us feeling overwhelmed. Another transfer to Connecticut brought us within driving distance for major events, but the loss of loved ones had ended the compound down the Cape.

Other changes occurred. Ric and I parted ways with the unwritten understanding that our sons would spend Christmas with his family. One Christmas a few years later, Sam (my partner) and I dropped off my sons to spend Christmas with Ric's family. When we came back later to pick them up, it was just like the first date with Ric. Everyone poured out of the house, still occupied by old and new generations of family. Everyone insisted we come in for dessert. After he passed close inspection, the family welcomed Sam.

When we took the next step and moved in together, some of Ric's family paid a visit to our new home in Connecticut. I swear they just wanted to make sure I was okay. Ric's mother even crocheted us an afghan. I think she was afraid my trousseau was still lacking.

Today I often look back with gratitude to this amazing family, genuinely thankful for the warmth and generosity shown to me and my family. I am convinced my sons turned out so well, because they were afraid to disappoint so many loving people with such high expectations for their success and happiness.

*P.S. As a foundation for my sons to build their own memories, I divided the service for thirty-two.*

