

The New Kitchen

Don't save something for a special occasion. Every day of your life is a special occasion.

~Thomas S. Monson

I started dating my now-husband, Tony, in 1985. We grew up in the same neighborhood. He wasn't quite the boy next door, but more like the boy two blocks over. It was back in the days when people sat on front porches and kids spent summers playing outside. While my family was the typical mom, dad, and two kids, Tony lived in a multi-generational Italian household with his two brothers, his mother, his grandmother, and his mother's bachelor identical twin brothers known collectively as "the uncles." I thought his family was a bit unconventional.

"Show her the new kitchen," Tony's mom said during my first meet-the-family visit. She was obviously proud of their latest home improvement project. We were in a basement TV room, so Tony led the way upstairs to the main level of the house. "Did she say new kitchen?" I asked myself as I surveyed the harvest gold appliances, wood-paneled walls, dark cabinets, and wall-to-wall commercial carpeting. It was in pristine condition but screamed of the early 1970s.

I suppose kitchens are not a common topic among young couples just getting to know each other, but when you are considering the possibility of a long-term relationship with someone, knowing why his family calls a ten-year-old kitchen "new" could influence your decision.

"It was remodeled around 1971, after my dad died, and we never used it after that," Tony told me later, when I finally mustered up the courage to ask about it. He went on to say, matter-of-factly, they didn't cook or eat in the new kitchen. I recalled seeing a small makeshift kitchen area with an enormous green oil furnace as the focal point in the basement next to the TV room. That kitchen, I learned, served the household of seven while the new kitchen upstairs enjoyed a museum-like distinction. Still a boy when the new kitchen got its facelift, Tony never questioned its off-limits status, nor could he offer an explanation for it.

Well, new kitchen or not, something told me to give our relationship a chance. At least there was no red velvet rope strung across the new kitchen's doorway. That could have been a dealbreaker.

Holiday dinners in this large Italian household were major food events with fifteen to twenty people on hand. Like an army of ants following a trail to the nest, family members dutifully carried prepared food up the steps to the dining room, and later, in similar fashion, carried dishes down to the basement sink to be washed by hand. The stove and dishwasher in the new kitchen sat untouched.

Even relatives, friends, and neighbors seemed to be on board with this arrangement. Was I the only one who thought the whole concept of the new kitchen was a bit bizarre? Or, like me, were they simply too polite to say anything?

Tony and I married, and eventually moved 500 miles away from our hometown, returning for visits only a few times a year. As we settled into our new surroundings, the new kitchen story became an anecdote for me, something I could use to amuse friends or co-workers.

As the years passed, we got older, but the kitchen stayed new. Keeping with its museum-like status, the table and counters began to double as display shelves for the

many knickknacks and dolls Tony's mom collected.

One Thanksgiving, after Tony's grandmother had passed on and his mom could no longer host holiday meals, we carted an entire precooked meal back home with us. "Thanksgiving in a cooler," I called it. When we arrived, there was so much food to reheat that the basement stove and microwave oven were insufficient. "Let's use the oven in the new kitchen," Tony suggested. "There's an oven up there?" asked one of the uncles. Out of sight, out of mind, I suppose. After thirty years sitting idle, the stove fired up and helped warm our meal.

Later, stuffed and contemplating the cleanup task, Tony smugly proposed, "Let's use the dishwasher." After all, we were the next generation of adults. Couldn't we change the rules? As we positioned buckets in the basement to catch the water pouring through the ceiling, we realized it's probably best not to try to change the rules.

These days, the uncles, now in their late eighties, are the lone members of the household. We made the long trek home for a visit this past winter. One of the uncles greeted us with concern. "You can't use the sink in the new kitchen," he warned us, which seemed odd since we never did use that sink. "I tried to let the faucet drip to make sure the pipes don't freeze, but nothing comes out," he said.

The new kitchen had finally gotten old.

When I sat down to write the story of the "new" kitchen and attempt to decode its significance, I had an epiphany. When I was about ten years old, my dad returned home from a weekend religious retreat with a small gift for me—a black and silver Cross pen. Unlike the plastic BIC pens with chewed caps found in various drawers around our house, this pen came in its own box with little elastic bands holding it in place. At that point in my life, it was the nicest pen I ever had, and I wanted it to stay that way. I kept the pen strapped in its box for more than two decades, confirming once every few years that it still worked by scribbling a few lines. I don't think that pen ever wrote a complete sentence.

So there it was, an insight that had been with me all the time: The new kitchen, like my pen, was the nicest one they ever had, and they simply wanted it to stay that way. Perhaps they weren't so unconventional after all.

~Barbara A. Page