

I just cooked to say I love you

By Ruth Ostrow

THE table is filled with food. There are baskets of bagels, slices of meat, plates of fetta cheese, artichoke hearts, pickled cucumbers, rye bread, pasta salads, dolmades, cold cuts, warm spinach tarts straight from the oven, there is roast chicken being cut by someone on the kitchen bench.

But wait, there's more. Someone is carrying out smoked salmon, someone is walking around with a moussaka. Someone is desperately searching for space on the huge, wooden table for the rice salad.

"Welcome home," says my mother, as I drag my suitcase into the centre of the room and glare at the spread.

"Mum ... who's coming for lunch?" I marvel, gazing at the table laden for a party of hundreds.

"Oh just us," she smiles, referring to my husband, child and my immediate relatives. At best there would be eight to 10 of us.

But to my mother, who has spent days shopping and chopping, dicing and slicing, strategising her early morning dash to the bagel shop to get the freshest and the best, this is not about numbers.

It is about pure, unadulterated love. It's her way of showing me how important I am to her. How happy she is that I'm in Melbourne for a visit.

"Come," she beckons, leading me into the kitchen, where she brings a spoon of wine-coloured soup to my lips. "I've been cooking all day," she says, which is "I love you" in Mother-talk.

I never saw it until recently. The strange languages of love. I have complained bitterly over the years about not being validated by this person or that, only to discover that the love was there, but expressed in a foreign language. For instance, I experience love through French, but my mother speaks Japanese.

My late father spoke a Zulu dialect. Growing up I rarely experienced any compliments or direct words of love, for he was simply unable to verbalise such feelings.

Instead, when he saw me, he would wrap an arm around my neck in a stranglehold from behind, and attempt to drag me backwards a few feet while rocking me from side to side, thus almost dislocating my neck from the top of my spine. A move taught in self-defence classes to crush your opponent.

It took me years to work out this meant "I am overjoyed to see you" in his native tongue.

My husband and I spoke our words of love in different tongues for years, too, until I read linguist Deborah Tannen's 1990's classic *You Just Don't Understand*, which was instrumental in helping me translate his intent.

For example, one night we had a fight. I was in tears. My husband barricaded himself in my office for hours. When he finally emerged, I expected him to gush forth words of remorse. Instead, he proudly led me to my bookshelf where he'd organised all my books by author, from A to Z.

I grew even angrier: "You're shutting down. You don't care about my feelings," I insisted until I remembered Tannen's book. He was expressing true love in his language. The language of a book-loving intellectual. As my mother expressed love through food, and my bearish father through rough play.

We've all had fallings out because of the language of love. If someone experiences love as sex - which is very common - and the partner won't make love daily, then that person can unconsciously feel unloved and invalidated, even though their partner may be speaking fluent Cantonese, providing care for the family, or time and emotional support.

Not that these other gifts are not appreciated, but they are seen as second-rate displays of love.

If a person experiences love as being listened to and verbally validated with: "Oh really ... that is so interesting," but instead they're given a plate of moussaka, well, you can see where the discrepancy lies. Which makes the giver feel hurt, confused, taken for granted.

Predictably, I experience love through deep communication. I once had a girlfriend who would rarely talk to me about anything significant but often sent me miniature tubes of beauty products through the mail. Samples of night creams, cleansers, nail polish, eye creams.

I broke off the friendship before I realised that she was telling me she loved me in Latin. I guess she never understood why I had insensitively asked her about her soul, rather than whipping out a toning lotion.

So I sit down with my family and break bread. There isn't a huge amount of verbal communication going on but lots of slurping, munching and gobbling. It's the sounds of love, of a family telling me they care. And I lap it up through my internal translator, which has learned, through patience and pain, to become multilingual.

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