

The Quest for the Perfect Lasagna



Shiv's homemade lasagna in the oven

Text by Lye Ting Yin

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So much of our lives are built on the environment around us. Familiar sights and sounds. Loved ones who populate the spaces around us. The specific route from home to the MRT station, that coffee shop auntie who has known you since primary school. What happens to all of these when you move thousands of miles away?

Members of the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom spend long periods away from home and often find themselves building new routines and rituals while settling into their new life. In this letter, Shiv explores how moving to Glasgow to read medicine has disrupted a long-standing birthday tradition and shares with us his journey to find something new.

Text and photos by Shiv Dewan

Shiv is a second-year medical student at the University of Glasgow.



Once, when I was eight years old, I happened to go to an Italian restaurant for a family dinner. Its name was Lafiandra Ristorante. As a cheese-loving child, I ordered the lasagna and absolutely demolished it. When my next birthday came around and my parents asked where I wanted to celebrate, I chose to revisit Lafiandra. This repeated year on year, and so a tradition was formed!

The *trattoria* is run by a couple; Cataldo runs the kitchen and Brenda manages the front of house, and the space is adorned with cozy wooden furniture, warm ambient lighting and

elegant concrete and glass. Our order became routine over time: we would start with bread, burrata and a pizza to share. Everyone's main courses varied over the years, but I never strayed from lasagna. We always tried each other's food. The lasagna would come in a round clay dish prepared-to-order, and the most striking detail was a moat of cheesy, tomatoey goodness between the square slab and the round perimeter – this molten gold was piping hot, delicious and unique to this restaurant. The ingredients were fresh – a perfect symphony of tomato, meat and cheese, exactly the right portion, and delicious



Shiv and his friends
enjoying Christmas dinner
in matching pyjamas

without being egregiously rich or decadent. After this, the only right way to end the meal was with tiramisu. I have visited almost exclusively annually on my birthday with my family, and I have accumulated so many fond memories over the years.

Last September, I began studying medicine at the University of Glasgow. As I would be turning 22 in a few months, one of my first thoughts was how I would continue my birthday tradition away from home. I initially tried a few Glaswegian restaurants in search of a “replacement” but none held a candle to Lafiandra. More importantly, I realised that no restaurant could replicate the years of memories attached to it. I needed a more organic solution and settled on the idea of cooking the best possible lasagna for myself.

On a different note, I have been trying to take better care of my well-being in recent years while navigating some difficult events and a new phase of life. One issue I struggle with is perfectionism, and when I set this challenge for my birthday, I knew I wanted to plan properly and give it my best effort.

A twist on an old tradition

There were several moving parts to align and details to iron out: I wanted to perfect the ragu and bechamel, experiment with homemade and store-bought pasta and different cheeses, source the best ingredients and plan the entire operation. My “North Star” was the memory of the Lafiandra lasagna. I also decided to cook for my nine flatmates

– friendship and good company is of course invaluable, but I cannot say this made my task any easier. I had to confirm attendance, make a second ragu for a few vegetarians, find single-serve baking dishes to recreate the “moat” effect, and somehow manage ten dishes at once. The silver lining was that it gave me more opportunities to practise, experiment and figure out what worked.

I initially devised a comprehensive plan, including a fixed research period and a scheduled test cook. However, I fell into an all-too-familiar trap: I got caught up in small details, became overwhelmed, stressed and anxious, and avoided preparation almost entirely. My preparation ended up consisting mostly of watching lasagna recipes on Instagram reels until my eyeballs burned and creating a rough plan with ChatGPT. It was not a terrible effort overall, but I was still nervous and underprepared by the time cooking day arrived.

The plan sprang into action at around 8 pm the night before, starting strong by meandering through multiple supermarkets for hours. I only started cooking at midnight, slept at 3 am and got up at dawn to check that neither the bolognese nor the kitchen had burned down. I was stressed, unhappy with the progress, uncertain it was any good at all and terrified I had done something wrong: too little tomato, too much beef stock and cooking wine, vegetables not diced small or evenly enough and so on. Six hours flew past quickly as I was occupied with adjusting the bolognese, making bechamel and fresh pasta, grating cheese, cleaning up and assembling ten individual dishes. I

also had an apartment viewing at 3 pm, while simultaneously picking up a cake my sister ordered for me. Coincidentally, it was the last day of the semester, so I cooked lunch for two flatmates before their evening departures home, then invited other friends for dinner as well at the last minute.

At some point amid the afternoon chaos, I realised that how the lasagna tasted no longer mattered to me. No matter how good it was, it would not be “worth” the stress, lack of sleep and total focus it had sapped from me over the previous 24 hours. And yet, that thought was quite freeing – I let go of any expectation of the outcome and all that was left was to have fun. Frankly, my lasagna was delicious, though not as good as Lafiandra’s – who would be surprised? Of course I would enjoy food more when it is served in a fancy restaurant on a platter, perfectly hot and steaming with me barely raising a finger.



Closing thoughts

When I was younger, I dreaded birthdays because I thought they involved calling unnecessary attention to myself. I intentionally kept celebrations to the bare minimum: a simple family meal at my favourite restaurant with my favourite lasagna. Not that I did not enjoy myself then, but it felt like too much pressure to have a good time on a specific day. It was easier to manage my expectations than risk trying to make it something more.

This year, I gave myself permission to try something, put sincere effort into it and accepted that it might not work out. It was incredibly stressful and yet it was genuinely the most memorable day of my year, not just because it was my birthday. I genuinely enjoyed learning how to make my favourite dish, figuring things out on the fly, putting in my own effort and sharing it with people I care about. For once, the possibility of imperfection did not stop me from trying and the fact that it was difficult did not make it any less worthwhile. All of this aside though, it was just good fun to give it a shot and have good people around. Next year though, I will try to start cooking before midnight. ♦

