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**Feathering the Nest
with Food and Magic:
Meet Rita Jakobschuk**





Resident Feature

Feathering the Nest With Food and Magic: Meet Rita Jakobschuk

By Claire Bickley | Photograph by Melissa Shearer Photography

est anyone doubt her magical powers, let it be known that Rita Jakobschuk's vintage sandwich maker speaks to her.

The battered and beloved 1960s tool tells a tale of food and family that spans two continents and three generations. Because this story begins, as the best stories often do, long ago and far away.

In the years following WWII, life was not easy in the pretty farming town of Sora southeast of Rome and so, in 1954, the tight-knit Pasquarelli and Vitale families decided to seek a better life in Canada.

All of them: Rita's father Paulo, his six siblings and his parents, Rita's mother Brigida, her five sisters and her parents.

Settling close to each other in Toronto's Little Italy near Bathurst and College Streets, the families kept their old world traditions alive.

"We did everything together, celebrated all the holidays, shared all our food," Rita remembers. "Our extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins would get together on Sundays, squeezed around a long kitchen table where we shared homemade pasta, sauces, bread and wine."

The food was always fresh and everything was made from scratch – high standards that became hallmarks of the meals Rita would one day create for her husband Andy and their daughters Laura and Melanie.

Oakville has been the couple's home for 30 years – the first 17 in South Oakville and the

past 13 in Glen Abbey. Moving to their current home was motivated by a desire to live where Rita had found a warm, welcoming community from the time she joined a moms and babies group at the Glen Abbey Recreation Centre when Laura was an infant. When they finally relocated, the family got the best housewarming surprise.

"People started knocking on our door and welcoming us," Rita



says. "We found out that we already knew a few neighbours from school and hockey and soccer. It was amazing."

Through all of those years, Rita was devoted to cooking, honouring a heritage that views the creation of delicious food as both love and art.

Determined to please Melanie, who was vegan for a time and is now vegetarian, as well as Andy, who favours meat dishes, Rita tested and tweaked her recipes, often making alternate versions of the same meal.

As she stirred and measured and revised and perfected, she dreamed of becoming a cookbook author but saw that the digital world was rapidly growing so decided that focusing on an online blog was the better way to go.

The Kitchen Fairy launched as an online food blog in March of last year, designed as a Christmas gift from eldest daughter Laura, a digital communications and marketing specialist.

"Boom! I'm out there," Rita says of the exciting experience of going live online. More milestones quickly followed. She became a member of Food Bloggers of Canada and by this past winter, was hosting other bloggers in her beautiful kitchen.

Laura and Melanie can take equal credit for naming the venture.

Like so many well-loved children, the young women didn't quite grasp how good they had it at home until they left.

"They realized what a luxury home-cooked meals were. They started realizing how magical our kitchen was – every day it's replenished with healthy and homemade food," Rita says with some well-deserved satisfaction. "This never happened in their student apartments."

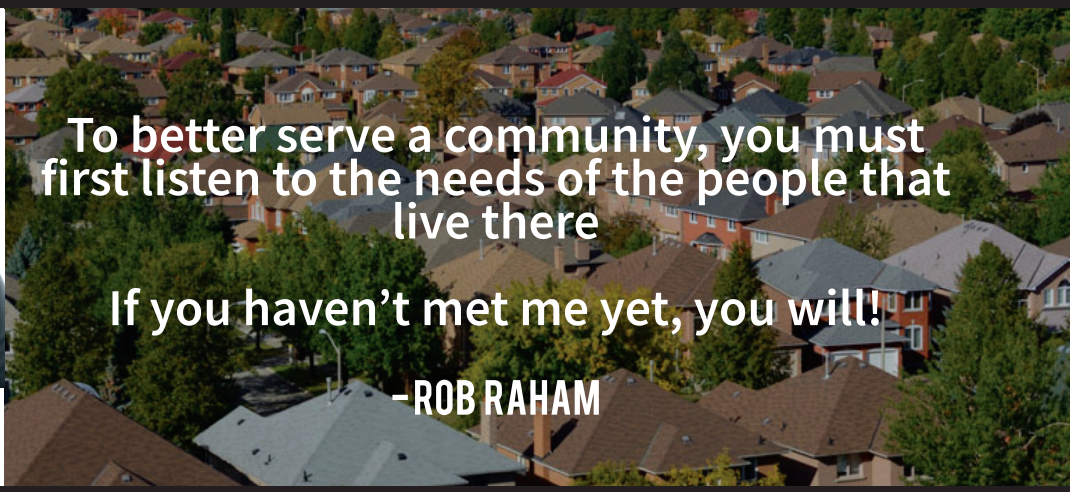
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The sisters nicknamed their mom “The Kitchen Fairy” and the name stuck.

The blog has grown to more than 70 recipes, each with an accompanying personal story and her meticulously styled photographs. Her most popular, the Mexican Buddha Bowl, is our June Recipe of the Month.

Laura, now 26, still handles the technical side of the blog and is well paid with tasty care packages. Melanie, 24, is out of Mom’s kitchen and on the other side of the ocean working as a First Grade French immersion teacher in London, England.

Andy, semi-retired from his career in consumer products sales and marketing, burns off the calories that come with being one of the best-fed husbands in town. He’s an avid golfer and plays recreational hockey year-round. In summer months, he attends many classic car events, including Tuesday Cruze Night at Dorval Crossing showing off his pride and joy, the 1966 Buick Wildcat he inherited from his uncle.

Touchstones from her youth continue to be part of Rita’s daily life as well. She collects vintage kitchenware, much of it gifts passed down from her mother, including that treasured sandwich maker.

She has begun compiling the recipes of her childhood - many are in Italian, some are a few hastily written lines on scraps of paper – and translating them into understandable measurements and methods.

“An example of my mother’s recipes is: ‘Use 3 or sometimes 4 bicchiere (glass) of farina (flour).’ She literally has a special glass in her kitchen that she uses to measure flour and liquids. The actual measurement of her bicchiere is irrelevant since she cooks and bakes from her memory and intuition of how things should look and feel, rarely using a cookbook, and it’s not the same every time she makes something.”

Her mother, now 86 and living in Mississauga, isn’t much for the digital world. When Rita shows her the blog, she simply nods and asks how and why her daughter does it.

“Deep inside I know she’s proud to have a daughter who cares about our family’s food traditions and preserving them for the next generations to come,” Rita says. “I’ve heard her with friends or her hairdresser passing around my business card and telling them: ‘My daughter is on the internet. You must look for her there!’”

Mothers and daughters never stop surprising each other.

This Mother’s Day, Rita celebrated in London with Melanie with a new recipe for Lemon Madeleines and a blog post recalling a trip they made to Paris together.

From generation to generation, a mother’s love is food for the body, heart and soul.

Hungry for more of Rita’s story and recipes? Visit www.kitchenfairy.ca

Do you have a story to share? Know an interesting neighbor you’d like to nominate for a cover story? Contact Claire Bickley at cbickley@bestversionmedia.com.