



ALL HAIL THE KING OF SAUSAGEDOM

WHILE I AM CERTAIN my father was a complex man with deep dreams and desires, on the surface his greatest love appeared to be sausage. Even my mother admits one of the most exciting things that ever happened to my father was the day the corner meat market started selling a selection of Bruce Aidells' hot links.

Listening to my father talk about sausage was difficult. As part of his work for a large computer corporation, he traveled around the world. When he returned, he'd get all choked up reminiscing about happier days cuddling saucy boudin blancs in France and a Polish or two in Chicago. It was like he had a mistress and children in every port. And unlike two tubby little girls who often did the wrong thing, those plump little sausages never questioned my father's wisdom or let him down.

I ignored most of what my father said about sausage, as I'm sure you do too whenever your own father blathers on about his own interests. Indeed, most of what my father said moved me in exactly the opposite direction, and he suffered ten humiliating years of a daughter's vegetarianism. But somewhere along the line my father's passionate ponderings on pork hit their mark: I am now hopelessly, head over heels in love with the link.

And I worry that some sausage, just like some men, might be bad for a girl.

EVER SINCE MY FATHER DIED, I haven't known where to turn for advice. Are nitrates bad? Was Upton Sinclair's writing fiction or fact? Most importantly, what is it about sausage that is so consuming? People love sausage intensely, even in the passionate "*I really shouldn't do this*" kind of way normally reserved for designs toward someone else's wife.

Without the help of my father, finding answers to these questions required research. On the Internet, I discovered the National Center for Home Food Preservation's site which reassured me that the, "controversy [surrounding] the use of

nitrite ... has been settled and all sausage products produced using nitrite have been shown to be free of the known carcinogens." However, I also discovered a *Reuters Health* report about a study linking an increased risk of developing Multiple Sclerosis in people who ate certain types of smoked sausage in childhood.

The nitrites, a preservative, are not the problem -- but rather how the nitrates react with the phenols produced when sausage is smoked. So it's a good thing I prefer fresh, undried sausage to cured. I can eat all I want and just forget about the nitrate issue.

I've also decided to stop thinking about Upton Sinclair and his book, *The Jungle*, by reasoning that anything written in 1906 can only be viewed as historical documentation. So who cares if Sinclair's Chicago meat workers "tramped and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs," and "thousands of rats would race about" on piles of sausage. I choose to believe clean white tiles and hair nets are the reality of today's sausage producing factories. If not, let's just say that much like infidelity, when it comes to sausage, ignorance is bliss.

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, I found a copy of Jane Grigson's 1967 classic, *The Art of Charcuterie*, in a thrift store. I flipped to chapter six: *Sausages and White Puddings*.

Grigson records Romans as the first sausage makers, and notes that although it is "unwise to say so in a Frenchman's hearing, the Italians are still the supreme producers of dried and smoked sausages. They use beef as well as pork, but not usually donkey as some Frenchmen firmly believe."

Speaking about French sausage, Grigson says the country "produces a variety of sausages that an English or American traveler going through France for the first time may find bewildering." Grigson continues with the assurance that, "Often there will be local names, so point and don't lose heart. French patience is endless in matters of food, even in busy shops." But what about the butcher boy at Lunardi's? Somehow I doubt he'll have patience with my silly questions about links when a queue ten-deep waits for rib roasts and tenderloin.

Reading and research wasn't enough, so I decided to go right to the top: I sent a note to 'The King of Sausagedom' himself, Bruce Aidells, asking for advice.

Unbelievably, he called me.

Talking to the King was a bit like talking to my dad. I felt silly, dumb and dizzy, and decidedly out of my league. But Bruce put up with me, resisting what I'm certain was a strong urge to spit, "*nut ball*," and hang up the phone. He patiently explained what my dad surely understood: "Sausage appeals to lots of the senses. They are easy to eat. There's no high faluting cutlery needed, and they come in a broad range of profiles." Bruce also added the following advice just in case I was tempted to run out and buy a pack of Ball Park franks: "I'm talking about well made sausage here that has *texture*. It's juicy, firm, and *snaps* when you take a bite. It's a very satisfying thing to eat, and the good stuff smells really inviting."

"Yes," I gingerly inquired, "but what about the *romance* of sausage?"

"I can honestly say I never think of romance and sausage together," Bruce snapped. "Unless you're talking about this at a crass level?"

I prayed he wouldn't hang up, and I contemplated newspaper headlines reading, "Link-Obsessed Stalker Sentenced for Harassing Calls to Sausage King." But my father snapped at me fairly frequently, and Bruce proved he has the patience of a loving daddy with a precocious four-year-old whose favorite question is, "*Why?*"

"There *is*," he continued, "what I call the romance language of the labels."

"Oh, *yes*," I squealed, "please go on!"

"The romance language is the terminology used to describe the product on the package."

BRUCE'S WISE ADVICE TO CHECK OUT "the romance language of the labels" proved to be a fascinating and informative tip, and since I was hungry, I ran to the store.

The Aidells company's label language wraps from one side of the package to the other, includes serving ideas, nutrition facts, and the warm suggestion to "get together with family and friends to feast, talk, drink wine and live the good life." And by reading the small print, it became clear that Aidells' sausage tastes so good because it contains no filler. The sun-dried tomato links' pork casings are packed with only turkey, chicken, tomato, salt, spices, garlic, basil and -- *geeze Louise* -- sodium nitrite.

But it's not smoked, so I tossed a package in my cart.

Moving down the refrigerated case, I found Saag's, in business since 1933, whose sweet talk includes suggesting the addition of Marzenbier Brats to scalloped potatoes and rumors of liaisons with Gordon Biersch. But I was turned off by the ingredient list which included corn syrup solids and sodiums phosphate and citrate.

A tastier brand, Napa Valley's Gerhard's, uses no preservatives. In fact, the ingredient list on the Chicken Sausage with sweet basil, pine nuts, ginger and lemon -- all stuffed into "hog casings" -- sounded so yummy I bought a pack right then and there. And Gerhard's label truly romanticizes its product by stating, "as a 15 year-old sausage maker's apprentice in Germany's Rhine Valley, years of study earned Gerhard Twele the distinguished title of Master Sausage Maker."

Down the road at Saratoga, California's organic Farmer's Market, I picked up a pound of frozen mild-Italian sausage from Mary Scalise. Scalise Family Specialties also offers hot-Italian, garlic basil and chicken sausage as well as ricotta-spinach ravioli and pasta sauce -- sold out of the family's beat-up old picnic coolers. Each of the family's recipes are inspired by Southern Italian ancestors who lived in the Calabrese region and "everything is made with love and care." With the Scalises, there's no attempt to bewitch. The label reads, quite simply: pork, salt, black pepper, fennel, water, fine red pepper.

My Portuguese-American best friend, Dorie, pointed me in the direction of the Neto Sausage Company, Inc., run by the Costa Family since 1948 in downtown Santa

Clara. In Dorie's sausage-loving family, Neto's Linguica is as basic a staple as bread and milk, or perhaps even wine. The smoked Portuguese sausage is used -- as Neto's label language suggests -- "for breakfast, lunch and dinner." And in Dorie's home, chunks of Linguica are always available for ample between meal snacks. Yes, Neto's Linguica has nitrates *and* it's smoked. But as Dorie says, "none of that stuff [you're worried about] applies to the Portuguese."

THE NEXT MORNING, I was driving past Los Gatos' Happy Hound and felt the steering wheel pull to the right on its own accord. Suddenly I was in the empty parking lot, out of my car, and heading toward the takeout window.

It was 10:30am and I ordered a Polish with sauerkraut to go.

A man drove up, parked in a dark space out back, slunk into his seat and tugged his baseball cap down low over his forehead.

Another man pulled in the lot, looked around furtively, then rushed up to the window and concealed himself in the shade of a wind break.

These men were obviously on a sausage mission from god: sneaking out of the house with the excuse of a carton of milk for the kids or a loaf of bread for their lunch boxes. Their wives had no idea they were at Happy Hound and would have been equally appalled to find their husbands at The Pink Poodle picking out porn.

These piggy perverts were quite possibly acquaintances of my father.

WHILE I WORKED AT U.C. BERKELEY in the early 1990s, my father and I didn't speak for almost a year. We'd fought about something I can't recall, but certainly something as basic, yet mixed up, as sausage. And I imagine the truce was called as much by our deep love for each other as my father's desire for a pilgrimage to Zachary's with an order of deep-dish sausage pizza.

When the spat was over, and the pizza had been eaten, we never discussed it again.

So my study of sausage -- and the mysterious ways men deal with women -- continues.

And as for the loss of my father as sausage mentor, the wise and wonderful Mr. Bruce Aidells has given me his phone number so I can call him back in times of crisis.

Until then, I'll have to follow the advice in his *Complete Meat Cookbook*: "All you can do," Bruce says, "is lick your fingers and cherish the memory."

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Aidells, www.aidells.com, 1625 Alvarado Street, San Leandro, CA 94577,
info@aidells.com or 1-877-AIDELLS

Happy Hound Old Fashion Hot Dogs and Hamburgers, 15899 Los Gatos Blvd.,
Los Gatos CA, 408/358-2444

Neto Sausage Company, Inc., www.netosausage.com, 3499 The Alameda, Santa Clara, CA 95050, 408/296-0818 or 1-888-482-NETO (6386)

Saratoga Organic Farmer's Market, Saturdays, 8:30am-noon, Highway 9 and Big Basin Way (Saratoga High School parking lot)

Scalise Family Specialties, 408-395-2602

Zachary's Pizza, www.zacharys.com, 5801 College Avenue, Oakland, CA, 510-655-6385 and 1853 Solano Avenue, Berkeley, CA, 510-525-5950

CAPELLINI WITH SAUSAGE, LEMON & BASIL

Reprinted from Flying Sausages by Bruce Aidells & Denis Kelly, 1995, Chronicle Books

1 pound dried capellini or other thin pasta	5 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil	20 fresh basil leaves, shredded
1/2 pound Aidells' Italian Turkey & Sun-dried Tomato Sausage or other good quality Italian sausage	Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
Zest of 2 lemons, cut into fine julienne strips	Freshly grated parmesan cheese (optional)

Cook the capellini in a large pot of salted boiling water to the al dente stage, about 5 to 6 minutes, and drain. Meanwhile, in a large skillet saute the sausage in the olive oil over medium heat for 4 to 6 minutes, breaking it up as it cooks. Add the lemon zest, lemon juice, basil, and parsley. Cook 1 minute more. When the pasta is done, drain and toss with the sausage mixture until well coated. Season with salt and pepper and, if you like, sprinkle with Parmesan.

Serves 4 to 6.