

Chapter 1: That's Amore



Clyde and Milton Flinn at my parents' restaurant (1960)

“Hey Milt!” Uncle Clyde said, calling long-distance, “What do you know about pizza?”

With that, my parents sold all their furniture and stuffed the rest of their belongings and three toddlers into the back of their 1954 Chevy Bel-Air and headed to my Irish uncle's Italian restaurant in San Francisco.

Dad was Irish-American. Mom was Swedish-American. Neither of them knew anything about Italian cuisine. They didn't care. “So what if we didn't know anything about the food?” Mom says. “We both believed that life should always be an adventure.”

My mother, Irene Henderson Flinn, just twenty-four, was a pretty, shy brunette with a klutzy streak who favored those bat-wing glasses so popular in the 1950s. She was heavily pregnant, nearly five months along with her fourth child.

My father, Milton, was a 27-year-old recent college grad and Korean War veteran who had sold life insurance until a major recession swept the country.

Before they met, Mom worked her way through secretarial school and scored a well-paying position with the Michigan Council of Churches. A Marine home from Korea, Dad held multiple jobs while juggling a full-time load at Michigan State yet found time to date a half dozen attractive coeds.

At least, until the night he picked Mom up at a roller skating rink in Lansing.

“...Now reverse,” the rink's announcer instructed a sea of circling skaters in a bored voice.

Dad turned in unison with the young crowd—and slammed directly into my Mom, knocking her to the concrete floor.

As he knelt to help her up, Mom took his hands, struck by his chiseled good looks and solid build. “A bit like Charleton Heston,” she thought.

Then they both noticed they were wearing matching outfits. He wore a butter yellow cotton shirt and gray wool trousers; she was clad in a soft yellow sweater and a similar gray skirt.

“It looks like we came together!” he joked, still holding her hands in his as they stood on the rink. “What are the odds?” Dad skated backwards with fluid elegance while she clung to a side wall for support as the hit song “Kisses Sweeter than Wine” by The Weavers played over the loud speakers.

After a few minutes, she implored him, “You’re such a great skater. You should really go skate without me.”

He gently guided her into the brightly lit concession area and bought her a Coke instead. They talked until the staff started mopping up and they realized the place had closed. She was surprised when he offered to take her home, and even more caught off guard when he asked her on a proper date. Mom couldn’t believe her luck that such a smart, handsome college guy wanted to date her. As she confided the story to a co-worker her age attending his college, the woman just shook her head and put up a hand to silence her.

“Listen, I wouldn’t get my hopes up,” she said flatly to my mom as she fixed the circle pin on her shirt. “Don’t you know he’s dating the Water Carnival Queen? They’re the big item around campus. I heard they’re getting engaged.”

The Queen was a leggy, glamorous blonde. Her beauty was legend around Lansing.

Mom decided to check out her competition. She learned the beauty queen frequented a certain hair salon on Saturday mornings. With the deft nonchalance of a detective, she feigned waiting for a bus across the street until the blonde turned up. Mom watched her walk with the practiced poise of someone comfortable with being on display. Her dimpled smile showed off perfect, brilliant white teeth that matched her perfect, delicate gloves.

Mom felt beaten. She got on the next bus that arrived, even though she had no idea where it was going. As she took a seat, she gulped back tears. “How could I be so stupid?” she thought as the bus pulled away leaving the blonde in the distance. “She’s like a movie star. I don’t stand a chance.”

After a few dates, Dad pulled into the drive-in movie theater. They’d brought along their own popcorn. He asked Mom to hold the paper bag, and when he took it back he spilled it all over them. “Irene, I’ve got something to say,” he started nervously.

Here it comes, Mom thought. He’s going to dump me.

“I’ve been trying to figure out a way to ask you to...,” he paused and took a deep breath, “Will you marry me?” he blurted.

“But what about the Water Carnival Queen?” Mom asked, incredulous.

“Are you kidding me?” he responded, dumb-founded. He took her hands gently in his. “You’re the brightest, most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. I knew you were the one for me the minute I picked you up off that rink.”

Just a few months after getting knocked down, Mom was happily knocked up after getting married in a town named Hope. First on the scene was Milton Jr., whom they called “Miltie.” Douglas “Dougie” arrived almost to the day the following year, making them what relatives called “Irish twins.” My sister Sandy came along just two years later.

Sandy's birth coincided with the so-called "Eisenhower Recession" that began in 1958, a bleak reminder that the post-war boom years couldn't last forever. Michigan always feels economic turndowns harder than other parts of the country. After all, a new car is the last thing someone orders when times get tough. Unemployment hit twenty-five percent in the state, Great Depression numbers. Every night after they put the kids to bed, they stayed up late, figuring out bills, worrying.

On one of these nights, the phone rang.

Uncle Clyde had a successful Italian eatery in San Francisco. Would Milt be interested in coming out to California to learn the restaurant business?

Within two weeks, they were on the road. They sold everything except their clothes, the rocking chair and a baby carriage. "We really didn't think twice about it," Mom says. "We just decided to go."

In Illinois, when they saw the first sign for the famous highway, Mom and Dad burst out singing "Get Your Kicks on Route 66" as the kids cheered. "We felt like those people who went west in covered wagons," she says. Which made sense, since part of Route 66 follows a wagon trail blazed in 1857 by the U.S. Department of War as a way to access the western frontier. By 1926, the government joined other roads to patch together the nation's first cross-country highway.

Mom and Dad drove for seven days. Each morning, they scooped still-sleeping children off the hard beds of cheap roadside motels. They stopped to see a few sites to let the kids run around. They took in a big Paul Bunyan statute in Illinois, the world's largest rocking chair in Missouri, a blue whale in Oklahoma, and a ghost town in California. To save money, they mostly ate sandwiches for lunch and dinner, but they had breakfast out. In Amarillo, Texas, my Midwest parents discovered people outside the movies actually say "Y'all" when a waitress asked, "Y'all happy with your cheese grits?" They had never had them before. They marveled at the flavor of the chorizo that came with their eggs at a diner in Arizona and were enchanted at the sight of tortillas in place of toast in New Mexico.

By the end of the week the novelty of the drive wore off. My parents were exhausted. Dad's left forearm was thoroughly sunburned, the result of hanging it out the window while he smoked his Kent cigarettes. Days of tuneless kids singing "Get Your Kicks on Route 66" over and over again grated on their nerves. The restless toddlers argued in the back seat over insignificant infractions ("He looked at me!") as they trudged north in California along small highways. My brothers stopped fighting long enough to take in the sweeping view of San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate against the setting sun and commenced swatting each other again.

They found their way to 2335 Mission Street. Uncle Clyde was outside smoking when they pulled up. "Hey kid brother!" he yelled, waving at Dad, tossing the butt to the ground.

In his younger days, Clyde was devilishly handsome with a solid jawline and piercing blue eyes topped off with a certain "star" quality. Women stopped in the street and stared at him as he greeted the family, slapping my dad on the back and assuring him that "pizza was the future." He led them up to the simple apartment above the restaurant where they would live rent free until they settled in.

The oldest boy in a family of eight, Clyde took on the sense of quasi-parental responsibility that older children often internalize in a large family. That's why he invited my Dad to California. He could have hired someone locally to work in the kitchen and he could have rented the apartment for cash. But that wasn't Clyde. He knew things were bad in Michigan and he'd always been willing to do anything for his youngest brother. When he was twelve, Clyde saved my father's life by pushing

him out of the way of an oncoming car. Clyde was hit instead. He spent months in the hospital recuperating. As an adult, his limp was barely noticeable.

While pizzerias existed in Italian-American immigrant communities on the East Coast, it was still an “ethnic” food in the rest of the country in the 1950s. In Michigan, it wasn’t easy to come by. “Pizza was really new then,” Mom says. She and Dad had been to a pizza place only once in their lives, at a brand new place called Shakeys in Lansing¹ just after they got married. They bit into the crispy crust blanketed with sweet tomato sauce, gooey with cheese and spiked with the bite of garlic and the unexpected spice of sliced pepperoni. They ate the entire pizza within minutes stopping only long enough to breathe and exclaim how great it tasted. They had never experienced anything like it.

That was while Dad was still in college and they had their first baby on the way. As much as they loved it, they couldn’t afford to go back to Shakeys.

So imagine their delight when they discovered a local grocery carried the new “pizza kit” from Chef Boyardee. The box contained “all the ingredients for a traditional Sicilian-style pizza:” a package of add-water-only pizza dough, a small can of tomato sauce and a packet of dried parmesan cheese. Following the directions, they spread the dough with oily fingers into an inexpensive pizza pan, spooned the thin sauce over the top and then sprinkled it with the powdered cheese. Inspired by the pizza they’d had at Shakeys, they added mozzarella and sliced Kielbasa sausage on top.

They found it lacking compared to the one they’d had at the pizza parlor. Yet they considered it enough of a success to get two boxes to share with Dad’s brother, Uncle Bob, who lived in a small, immaculately kept worker’s bungalow in Flint. From their meager budget, Mom and Dad bought a second cheap pan for the occasion. They excitedly served the two pizzas to Bob, his wife, Lillian, and their young children, my cousins Larry, Gary and DeeDee. Lillian took a dubious bite of the tip of one wedge and then dropped it to her plate.

“I don’t care for it,” she said primly.

Bob had a similar reaction. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep if I eat this. What’s this called again? Pizza? I can’t see this catching on.”

That was their sole experience with Italian cuisine when they arrived in San Francisco. That one of his brothers didn’t see pizza catching on and another thought it was the future didn’t worry my Dad. They’d been raised to be independent thinkers.

Clyde’s restaurant had been christened That’s Amore after the song made famous by Dean Martin. Outside on Mission Street, it didn’t look like much. Once inside, the bony arms of a real oak tree trunk reached up to the ceiling to a hidden grid that held faux leaves and grapes artfully assembled to create the feel of a canopy over the room. Woven through the vines were hundreds of tiny lights. Oil paintings of Tuscan landscapes adorned the walls, while an all Italian lineup drifted from the jukebox. Chianti bottles fitted with dripping candles adorned the tables, each draped with red-and-white checkered cotton tablecloths. With the lights low, the place felt romantic. “It sounds so cliché now, but honestly it was so lovely,” Mom says. “It felt as if you had walked into an Italian outdoor café on a cool evening.”

Clyde had a knack for the restaurant business. The food was fairly priced and plentiful, the service fast and the date-night feel insured they sold a lot of wine. Every night, he positioned a worker flipping dough near the front window to lure in customers, an innovative marketing move at the time. The pizzas were created in 20-inch wide new heavy-gauge steel garbage cans lids that Clyde had come across cheap at a surplus sale at The Presidio military base nearby. He removed the

handles, turned them over and voila! Pizza pans. Back then, you could get one of these huge pizzas—which could feed six to eight—for two bucks.

As soon as patrons sat down, a server brought warm garlic bread. Every dinner came with a salad, so those arrived automatically. The place delivered pizzas using three Volkswagon vans, inexpensive to buy and simple to fix. On Sundays, they offered a special family dinner menu designed for church goers and weekend drivers. The Sunday menu included more American-style favorites such as Clyde's mother's recipe for chicken and biscuits for those who considered pizza too "exotic," Like his brother, Bob. Plus they kicked in a discount for seniors and veterans. The combination proved so appealing that people would stand in line down the block, hoping to get a seat.

That's Amore sold other entrees, but most people came in for the pizza, spaghetti and the minestrone soup. The night they arrived, Clyde led the family past patrons chowing on their hot bread and iceberg salads to a giant round table. From the kitchen, he retrieved a pot of the hot soup, stoked with chunks of beef, white beans and vegetables in a hearty tomato broth. Mom dunked the garlic bread into the minestrone. After a long cross-country drive fueled by cheap sandwiches made on their Bel Air's tailgate out of a second-hand cooler, it struck her as the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted.

Dad began training as a cook the next day. First he learned how to make the "concentrate," by mincing pounds of celery, onion, carrots, dried oregano and garlic with a heavy grinder. This he cooked in a low, slow simmer in a massive commercial sauté pan with a small amount of ground beef for more than an hour until it softened and mellowed into its own flavor. Once cooled, this concentrate would be frozen into chunks. When the staff of That's Amore made spaghetti and pizza sauce fresh each day, the cooks simply added the concentrate to cans of diced tomatoes to add in an earthy and "meaty" texture. Even in a sudden rush of business, they could make fresh sauce quickly thanks to the blocks of concentrate.

Then Dad learned to form meatballs, craft ravioli, sear steaks and dozens of other culinary techniques. Finally, he got a lesson in tossing dough. He was so good that Clyde stationed him in the window. That he looked a bit like Charleston Heston didn't hurt business.

Meanwhile, Mom took care of the kids upstairs. She collected random pieces of furniture from thrift stores: a rose-colored loveseat, a green plaid sofa and a beat-up laminated dining room table that she covered in a second-hand tablecloth. The apartment opened onto a flat roof lined with a parapet wall. While the roof afforded no view other than industrial rooftops along the street, it gave the kids a safe place to play without disturbing anyone and a nook to hang her clotheslines. The Mission District had some rough spots in the late 1950s. A wave of Central American immigrants was pouring into the largely Hispanic area, prompting a fresh crime wave thanks to a series of violent "turf wars." Mom saw none of this, and instead just noticed the area seemed to have a lovely "Latin flavor" to it as she ran errands and walked the short blocks to Mission Dolores Park where she took the children to play on the swings.

Clyde was great to the family. Almost every night, the staff would bring up big pizzas for mom and the kids' dinner while dad worked downstairs. The pies made mom feel embarrassed for the pizzas she and Dad had made from a box. After dinner, Mom made a huge lemon meringue pie in the pan and sent it back down the next day. Clyde loved it. The arrangement worked well until Mom's doctor told her that even for a pregnant woman, she was gaining too much weight. So Clyde alternated their pizzas with salads and lighter roast chicken dinners.

My folks felt a great deal of gratitude. Before my brother was born in September, they decided to name him “Clyde Michael.” Dad’s brother was overjoyed. But Mom found herself staring at the newborn. All she could think of was Clyde Barrow, the male half of the famed criminal team, Bonnie and Clyde. When the birth certificate arrived to confirm its information, she couldn’t hold back. “I just can’t look at this baby and call him *Clyde!*” Dad agreed. His name was changed to Michael Clyde and they never told my uncle.

While they had a good thing going at *That’s Amore*, after a year, urban restaurant life started to wear on my parents. The place opened at four in the afternoon and served until well past two in the morning. The din from the dining room made it tough to put the kids to bed. Dad frequently worked twelve to fourteen-hour shifts and had only Mondays off. It was hard for Mom to get the baby buggy up and down the stairs. The list went on.

Clyde understood.

So they packed up and headed to Marysville, a small town about eighty miles north in central California, not far from Sacramento. The town developed in the mid-1800s as little more than a stop for gold rush era travelers seeking out supplies. Later it became known as one of the towns settled by members of the infamous Donner Party, the tragic wagon train expedition that left its members to resort to cannibalism when they got trapped in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the winter of 1846. The townspeople named it “Marysville” after Mary Murphy, one of the expedition’s survivors who settled there.

Mom’s Aunt Peggy had moved to the pleasant town from Michigan years earlier. She found them a house and introduced Dad to someone at a fruit packing company. He got hired as a manager on the spot. But after a few months, apparently forgetting all the reasons the restaurant business had not been right for them, they decided to use all their savings to start their own.

Uncle Clyde gave them his recipes and plenty of advice. He made frequent trips up to Marysville to help them get started. He even helped Dad pick out a commercial pizza oven. Dad was a history buff, so instead of the charming Chianti bottles and Italian countryside inn look carefully nurtured at *That’s Amore*, Mom and Dad transformed a small storefront into a room vaguely reminiscent of a castle from the latter days of the Roman Empire and dubbed the place *The Roman Knight*.

Mom found chef uniforms at a local Goodwill. Dad got the tables cheap off a Greek deli that had shut down. They found two pretty waitresses to work the tables and a guy to work in the kitchen. A local printer laminated their menus. They were ready.

Business boomed at first. Mom’s older brother, Uncle Clarence, drove out for an extended visit to see if it made sense to move his own family there. Clarence had learned his way around the kitchen from their father, a former Army cook. He offered to work in exchange for room and board. They put Clarence in charge of the daily special. One Tuesday, he made a paprika-spiked fried chicken that was so popular, they began to offer it once a week. People began asking for it *every* day. Although the place was a pizzeria, a review in a local paper heralded the chicken. Dad put “Clarence’s Fried Chicken” on the regular menu in his honor, right next to the spaghetti and pizza recipes from Clyde.

Mom worked as a waitress for two weeks. Apparently, she was terrible. She won’t even discuss how bad it got before my father gently suggested that perhaps she work in the kitchen. She didn’t get on well there, either. Easily flustered when it got busy, she tended to make mistakes. Once, she forgot to add yeast to a batch of pizza dough. Diners promptly sent the pizzas back. When she tried to cut into one to see what was wrong, it nearly broke the knife.

Everyone agreed that it would be best if Mom used her secretarial training to get a job outside the restaurant. She got hired onto an Air Force project installing air conditioning into the western missile silos. At that job, she made enough to pay all their bills while she sat in the relative splendor of an air-conditioned government office. After much prodding, Mom convinced her younger sister, my Aunt Mel, to move out to California after she finished up business school. Aunt Mel found work nearby with Western Electric as a secretary.

Life seemed good. The restaurant broke even. Thanks to the Cold War, Mom had a secure job. The kids had a yard to play in. Mom had both her sister and one of her brothers with her in California. She had a place to hang her clothes line. Dad managed the kids during the day until Mom got home and then headed to the restaurant.

Then came June.

By lunchtime, it grew gruelingly hot in the dining room. The restaurant had no air conditioning. To cool the place, they brought in fans but they couldn't compete with the pizza oven. Day in and day out, they watched their savings dwindle as they paid staff to look out over an empty dining room. By August, they decided to just shut the place down. Uncle Clarence headed back to Michigan.

Looking for less stressful work, dad applied to become a police officer.

More than 60 men applied for two positions in San Bruno, an upscale bedroom community just south of San Francisco. Dad was hired along with an Irishman named Brendan Maguire who was straight off the boat from Dublin, where he'd already worked as a cop. San Bruno required officers to live in the city, so Mom and Dad rented a cute house in a pleasant section of town. By now, they were used to moving.

The drive to her government job proved too much, so Mom quit and stayed home with the kids. They planted a small vegetable garden and lined the fences with roses. From their back patio, Mom could see the lights of San Francisco. Aunt Mel found a secretary job in nearby San Mateo and lived with them for a couple of months. The children loved Aunt Mel, then single and in her early 20s. Mel enjoyed playing with them, plus she had remarkable patience. She could listen to four kids tell different stories and keep track of every word. One night, Doug even made a special request in his nightly prayers as Aunt Mel waited to tuck him into bed.

"...And please God, let Aunt Mel never get married and just live with us forever. Amen."

Aunt Mel looked up toward the sky. "God, maybe you could just disregard that last part."

All of them spent weekends playing tourist around the city. They visited the waterfront, Chinatown and picnicked in Golden Gate Park. They went fishing almost every weekend and camped at Half Moon Bay. Mom missed her parents, but Dad's mother, Della, was able to make the trip out. They were young, their kids were healthy and they loved living in the Bay Area. Everything was wonderful.

Until one day, when the phone rang.



UNCLE CLARENCE'S OVEN-FRIED CHICKEN

Uncle Clarence deep-fried his popular chicken at my parents' restaurant. Mom adapted it to an "oven-fried" version to capture the same flavors but with an easier and (marginally) healthier variation for

home cooks. The key is to lightly glaze the top with some kind of fat over the chicken before it's put into the oven. Mom used margarine; you can use butter or a mixture of equal parts olive oil and melted butter. I'm not talking a token drizzle; every inch of the top of the chicken should be moistened. Mom says: "Sometimes I add cinnamon to the flour instead of sage or poultry season, just for a little different flavor." This works best with fresh paprika; if yours is vintage, use extra. You can use whatever pieces you want for it if you purchase pre-cut chicken, but if your chicken includes extra-large breasts, cut each one (ribs and all) into two portions. This will make them appropriate serving sizes and assure they'll cook more evenly.

Note: If you don't have buttermilk, you can make your own by adding a tablespoon (15ml) white vinegar or lemon juice to 1 cup (240ml) milk and let it sit for about five minutes. No poultry seasoning? Check out the recipe for a salt-free homemade version in "Extra Recipes." Makes four to six servings.

6 tablespoons (90g) margarine or butter, melted
About 1 1/2 cups (375ml) buttermilk
1 1/2 cups (200 g) all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons (10g) coarse salt
1 teaspoon (5g) ground black pepper
1 cup (125 g) crushed corn flakes
1/2 teaspoon (2.5ml) poultry seasoning, or dried thyme and/or sage
3 1/2 lb. chicken, cut into 8 to 10 pieces (about 1.5kg)
1 tablespoon (8g) paprika, for dusting

Preheat the oven to 375°F/190°C. Using about 2 tablespoons (30ml) of the margarine, coat the bottom of a roasting pan or a baking dish large enough to hold the chicken pieces in one layer without touching.

Place the buttermilk in a shallow bowl or dish. In another bowl, mix the flour, salt, pepper, corn flakes, and poultry seasoning. Dip each chicken piece into the buttermilk. Shake off excess and roll in the flour mixture to coat. Place the chicken pieces in the prepared roasting pan, skin side up.

Drizzle the rest of the margarine evenly over the chicken. Dust the chicken liberally with paprika. Put the roasting pan on the middle rack of the oven, uncovered.

Bake for about an hour, until the chicken is golden and cooked through. (Small pieces may be done at 45 minutes, so check.) To confirm, push an instant-read thermometer into a meaty section; it should register at least 165°F (74°C). Serve warm. Leftovers reheat nicely in a toaster oven.