

Steak on Saturday a memory to savor

BY JAMES A. MARTIN

It took me 35 years to cook a 10-minute steak for my father. He barely ate it, but who could have blamed him under the circumstances?

Nearly every Saturday night, my father, the late Carol W. Martin of Greensboro's Martin's Studio, grilled filet mignons in the back yard of our home in Starmount Forest. About 6:30, he'd mosey into the yard with his bourbon and water and light the grill. Fifteen minutes later, he'd return with the filets, a flashlight, spatula and his trusted "60 Minutes"-style stopwatch. As a professional photographer, Carol Martin understood the importance of timing, and his steak grilling was as precisely planned as a photograph shoot at sunset. He liked his filet medium rare, cooked five minutes each side. My steak was grilled six minutes per side (medium well); my mother's was what he called "burnt to ashes" (well done, or seven minutes each side); my sister's was somewhere in between.

During the last few months of his life, exhaustion and unsteadiness from cancer kept my 82-year-old father from indulging in his one luxury. So my mother, Ruth Martin, bravely volunteered to grill steaks one Saturday night.

Cooking has always been beyond her zone of interest, however. For years, my mother's spice cabinet contained only salt, pepper, a bottle of Kaopectate and a can of Quaker State motor oil. A passionate flea-market collector, her kitchen windowsills are crowded with ceramic pie birds and wood-handle potato mashers, though she's not baked a pie in 25 years and gets her mashed potatoes from Betty Crocker.

Nonetheless, Saturday in late winter 1993, she returned from the Harris-Teeter with two filets. While she was on the phone, my father crept outdoors to fire up the grill. When she called for him and received no answer, she discovered him "rolling around on the ground" beside the grill. He had fallen and was too thin and weak to pick himself up, and his voice — reduced to a whisper because of a tumor pressing against his vocal cords — was too diminished to carry his call for help. Later, she managed to get their steaks on the grill but, distracted and inexperienced, ended up with what looked like two lava rocks.

And so, during a visit that April, I decided to try where my mother had failed. At age 35, I had only recently acquired a taste for steak and wasn't confident I could grill a steak for my father. But I was motivated by guilt, as I lived in San Francisco and had been unable to spend much time in Greensboro as my father's condition slowly worsened. I wanted to please him, to give him back at least one thing he had lost. I wanted to give him steak on Saturday night.

After buying three beautiful filets, I found my father staring at the den TV and informed him of my intentions. He looked at me dubiously, shrugged and gave me his precise instructions.

I gathered the flashlight, spatula and stopwatch and ventured into the yard with the kind of terror a flying trapeze artist feels the second he realizes he's missed the swing. Once the grill was ready, I slapped my mother's steak on first and started my father's stopwatch. After exactly one minute, I added my filet. I was attempting to lay the stopwatch on the grill's sideboard when, misjudging the distance, the timepiece plummeted to the brick below. I picked it up as if it were a wounded sparrow. Its motionless hands mocked me; it's silence filled me with dread.

At this outrageously inopportune moment, the back door creaked open and my father emerged. He inched toward me with the aid of a mallard duck-head walking cane he'd inherited from his father. I imagined him falling and held my breath as he stepped off the back porch.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Fine," I lied.

"How long's your steak been on?"

I had no idea. "One minute," I answered. "Mom's has been on for two."



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James A. Martin with his father, the late Carol W. Martin of Greensboro's Martin's Studio.

"Better throw mine on, then," he advised.

I carefully lay his filet on the grill, pretended to check the stopped stopwatch, and quickly returned it to my pocket. For about a minute, we stood next to one another without speaking. My father borrowed the flashlight and moved its beam across the sizzling steaks like a prison searchlight.

"Maybe I should take a peek at the stopwatch," he suggested.

I swallowed. "Don't you trust me, Dad?" I asked in mock indignation.

He smiled sheepishly. "Like Reagan said, 'Trust but verify.'"

I put my hand in my pocket and felt the still timepiece. Briefly, I considered accepting my fate and handing him the watch. Instead, I returned my focus to the grill.

"You know what they say about too many cooks in the kitchen," I responded.

"This ain't the kitchen," he quipped.

I pretended to consult the stopwatch again. By this point, I had no idea how long the steaks had been cooking. The silence between us began to make me even more anxious, and I was about to say something — what, I didn't know — when my father said: "It's good to have you home, ol' boy."

The comment took me by surprise, not because he'd never said it, but but because he had said it at this particular moment. "It's good to be home, Dad," was all I could manage. I felt the urge to tell him I loved him and how much he meant to me. But I didn't, out of fear it would sound like I thought he was going to die soon. Also, I had to concentrate on the steaks. Nothing could have mattered to me more at that moment than grilling my father's steak precisely right.

I flipped his filet, then mine, then my mother's. For the next several minutes, my father whispered his opinions about the pros and cons of gas vs. charcoal grills. Finally, judging by color and guesses at the elapsed time, I declared the steaks ready. After another slow sweep of the prison searchlight, he concurred and turned to go inside.

At the table, I watched tensely as my father put a thin wedge of pinkish steak in his mouth and chewed.

At last he looked up from his plate and said the words I wanted to hear from him, then as always.

"Good job, ol' boy."

A few minutes later, he was suddenly seized by one of the many coughing fits he suffered during his long decline. The hacking verged on choking; I reached for the phone, prepared to dial 911. At last it stopped, but the attack had so weakened him, my mother and I put him to bed.

He had eaten two bites of steak.

I had to fly back to San Francisco the next morning. Three months later, on July 31, 1993, a few days before I was to return for another visit, my father died.

Not long after, it occurred to me my father might not have come outside that Saturday evening simply to supervise my cooking. I wondered if he had recognized that night as a rare, and probably final, opportunity to spend a few moments alone with his only son. If so, he was too proud to acknowledge the occasion, I was too preoccupied to recognize it, and soon those moments were gone. I've thought of that night many times since, and in my mind, I spend those last few minutes alone with my father talking and listening to him instead of trying to please him.

My mother gave me his stopwatch. I stored it in a shoe box, where it remained until recently.

Returning from a Greensboro visit this spring, I felt compelled to look at the stopwatch again. Out of curiosity, I clicked its timer button. The large second hand instantly began to move around the dial, the small, inset minute hand kept perfect time.

Had the watch been working all along and I had been too agitated that Saturday night seven years ago to realize it? Or had dropping the watch simply caused it to stop temporarily? Either way, it doesn't matter. Because now, when I'm grilling out on a Saturday night, I time the steaks with the stopwatch, and I have another opportunity to spend a few moments alone with my father.

James A. Martin is a San Francisco-based writer. An exhibit containing photos taken by his late father, "Martin's Studio: Greensboro's Storytelling Photographers," is on display at the Greensboro Historical Museum.