Hanging on to my Italian passport

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When the doctor said to me, 'I'm afraid you're a coeliac', I responded with 'My dad is going to be devastated'. He frowned, puzzled. I knew immediately I'd be ok with it. But my dad... my aunt... I was going to have to break it to them very gently.

I am from an Italian-Australian home. I have to stress the Australian part because I can only speak from this vantage point, and I know it's different to the one I'd have, say, in Rome. My father and his sister are both migrants, well over 70 years old, come from a rural upbringing and have maintained so many of their traditions from home.

So when I explained to them that being a coeliac meant no pasta, bread or pizza there was a collective gasp. Stunned, my pragmatic 84 year-old aunt's first words were, "what the [expletive] are you going to eat now?". None of the other food groups seem to appease her at all. The two of them just sat quietly for a while, glumly contemplating a life without bread, before even I had a chance to do the same.

The first few days of gluten free life were practical – I bought every brand of gluten free anything. I tasted pasta made of corn flour, rice flour, lentil flour and all those flours mixed together. I made a crostata (jam tart) and then I threw it away. I made risotto and beamed with joy. I bought frozen sliced bread, freshly baked French sticks and even vacuum-sealed foccaccia shipped from Italy. I toasted it, baked it and even turned it into bruschetta.

While the exploration of new food adventures was exciting, it was only in the weeks that followed that I realised what the real impact of being coeliac would be and perhaps why my dad and aunt had been so deeply affected. Being coeliac had the potential to seriously curtail my involvement in my family life, my heritage and traditions. I have dual citizenship, but someone joked that I'd have to give back my Italian passport as I couldn't really be Italian anymore.

I laughed of course, but there was a tiny sting in that comment. The wood-oven pizza, the zeppolas (dumplings), the pizza di riso (rice pie), and the pizza rustica (rustic pie) – I could never experience those in quite the same way again. Those little losses saddened me, not because I couldn't taste those foods any more, but because not consuming them would put me on the edge of the family circle; an outsider. It would exclude me from some traditions that I treasured dearly. I was unable to participate in some of the cultural functions that bound us together.

I was discovering that food, ritual and memory all walk hand in hand. Perhaps you don't notice it at the time, but the senses involved in preparing and consuming food are powerful mnemonic tools. I can't think of my auntie's house in a seaside Italian town without remembering her amazing tomato salad or the giant hot cinnamon donuts she would bring me from the bakery.

In terms of ritual, I thought of every one of our celebrations which started with antipasto. This always includes salamis and prosciuttos, artichoke hearts, pickled vegetables, cheeses, olives and anchovies – all scoffed with crunchy pieces of bread. Then we would inevitably, move on to a pasta dish – steaming ravioli in a rich tomato sauce, spinach and ricotta cannelloni or, more often than not, lasagna layered with crumbled boiled eggs, cheese and tiny meat balls. Unless I was organised and brought my own gluten free variety, I imagined myself just sitting there waiting for the next course, not fitting in any more, while everyone oohed and ahhed over the pasta.

Probably my greatest dismay and anxiety at being coeliac, however, revolves around Easter. My first as a coeliac is fast approaching and I know this will test my mettle. My mother passed away almost eight years ago and to honour her memory, every Easter I still make panzarotti.

We made these sweet vanilla and ricotta pastries together every Good Friday since I was a child. Panzarottis were 'our' thing. She never gave me the recipe, but one Easter, when she and my father were on holiday, I realised I knew exactly what to do and made them on my own. I've since written the recipe down but I always hesitate when someone asks me for it. In fact, I often say no. I can't let go of it.

I remember her combining the flour and sugar to make the dough, stirring eggs and vanilla into the ricotta mixture and I recall proudly my role as the folder and sealer of pastry. We always had the radio tuned to a local Italian language station and I remember rolling my eyes every time she sang along to a 1950's love song. I remember the tricky frying process; the fine balance between crispy and golden or brown and burnt and the anxiety that would surround the loss of a 'bad' one, precious as they were.

This food, this custom, still connects me to my mother, as do others. It also connects me to my cultural identity and my place in the family circle. So I will go ahead and make 'normal' panzarotti for all those family members that long for them at Easter, and maybe one or two gluten free versions for me. Though the taste in mine might be somewhat lacking, the ritual will be the same.

My family has been incredibly understanding, inclusive and accommodating. As a coeliac I understand that all future customs and celebrations will take a slightly extra effort or modification, but I'm starting to feel confident that I'll be able to maintain my sense of belonging and identity. It is, after all, unavoidably who I am.