FAMILY FARE

Four local chefs share recipes that have been passed down for generations.

By Kristin Lee Jensen | Photos by Jody Tiongco

For centuries, the dinner table has served as one of the focal points of the household, drawing members around its edges as a communal gathering place of consumption and conversation. Food and family, it seems, go hand in hand; ancestral recipes are bestowed upon children and cherished like antique heirlooms.

In fact, researchers in recent years have found a connection between nostalgia and culinary inclinations: Smell and taste are proven to trigger detailed, emotional memories. It's why a whiff of chocolate chip cake can evoke the comforts of a grandmother's kitchen, or the spiciness of miso on the tongue can serve as a reminder of a past birthday celebration. On the following pages, four Laguna Beach chefs share family recipes they've preserved for themselves or passed on to their own sons and daughters, letting us in on the memories that accompany them.

Marc Cohen and his daughter Sydney prepare a cake from a recipe that originated with his grandmother.

Five years after Marc Cohen opened 230 Forest Avenue in 1994, the chef found himself at the helm of a second Orange County restaurant, Opah Seafood Grill. It was a busy time, and the 80-hour workweek began taking a toll. But on his birthday that October, the Baltimore native received a package postmarked from the East Coast: It was a chocolate chip cake—baked by his sister, Lisa—shipped all the way from Maryland. "When you get that, you're like, 'Everything's OK,'" Marc recalls.

Made from a recipe that originated with his grandmother, the cake dates back more than 50 years, its chocolate swirls emblematic of comfort and special occasions. The chef remembers its cinnamon aroma wafting out of his grandmother's kitchen and today has brought the dessert into his own home. Marc's 15-year-old daughter, Sydney, heads into their kitchen on his birthday and Father's Day—or when he's had a bad day—to bake the confection.

Marc inherited his love of cooking from his grandmother and his work ethic from his grandfather, who grew a candy and tobacco business out of the back of his trunk in Baltimore in the mid-1950s. The chef has continued to bring the flavors of his past into his own family—he flies in Maryland crabs every year for a steamed feast at home—but he's passed on more than just an East Coast flavor profile. When Sydney, 18-year-old Jacob and 14-year-old Emma were young, Marc instituted a grocery store rule in which his kids had to pick out foods they'd never tried, from kiwi and kumquat to cactus and dragon fruit.

"It's important to me that they never say 'no' [and] be open-minded about what [they're] going to try," Marc says.

Though their meals together are limited each week, Marc and his family still bond over food—Sydney was a hostess at 230 Forest Avenue last summer, while Jacob has worked in prep at Watermarc. Since the age of 6, Sydney asked her father to describe daily problems at the restaurant so she could role-play handling them. Now she not only manages them herself, but she loves to cook alongside her father the dishes she first tried at a young age—rib-eye is among her favorites.

CHOCOLATE CHIP CAKE
Servings: 8 to 10

½ cup sugar, with 1 ½ teaspoons cinnamon
2 ½ squares unsweetened chocolate
2 cups sugar
1 cup Crisco
3 eggs
2 teaspoons vanilla
3 ½ cups cake flour
4 teaspoons baking powder
Pinch of salt
1 can (12 ounces) evaporated milk
1 cup chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a small bowl, mix ½ cup sugar with cinnamon and set aside. Melt chocolate squares.

Cream 2 cups sugar with Crisco, then add eggs and vanilla. Sift dry ingredients in a separate bowl. Add dry ingredients alternately with evaporated milk.

Pour half of the batter into a greased tube cake pan, then top with half of the chocolate chips/melted chocolate/cinnamon mixture; use a butter knife to lightly swirl. Repeat with the remaining batter and swirl, saving some cinnamon sugar for the top.

Bake for 1 hour, then turn off the oven and leave the cake inside with the oven, door open, for 30 minutes. Allow to fully cool before serving.

(Recipe from Marc Cohen)