

GRANDMOTHER'S GARBANZOS

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The eve of another feast day is upon us. Practice for the dances have been sung and preparation for the feast is in full effect. The adobe houses in the village buzz with families preparing for the big day; pounds and pounds of meat are diced, chiles are roasted, and gunny sacks of beans are poured on the table to be sorted. I take a moment to remember when I started helping make the heartwarming food that blesses and feeds the soul. Preparing for feast takes plenty of work and goes back many generations. I start thinking about what it takes to make a certain stew. It's a stew I recall my grandmother making and that she still makes today. This stew stirs memories through my senses of taste, hearing, and smell. It takes a lot of effort to make feast day stews just right; there are lots of preparations before it steeps to perfection in order to feed both familiar faces and new ones.

As I walk toward the back door, I can see that my grandmother's already moving around the kitchen through the storm door. We lock eyes and I meet her at the door. Soon I feel like I'm five years old again, chubby hands and short, but ready and willing to help. It's my year to help prepare for a long day of eating; I'm finally the age to learn the secrets to making the stew. Just not any stew—the boss of stews. While it is not everyone's favorite, it is definitely mine. There's a hidden secret to making this perfect stew and I am ready and at attention, so I can begin learning the steps.

I ask, "When will I know if the garbanzos are ready?"

Grandmother responds, "They will let you know when they're ready."

She hands me an apron. It's blue, my favorite color. She instructs me to start with the "garbz" as we call them. It feels so good to be home and ready for another Feast Day in Ohkay Owingeh.

Making stews are one of the most important elements to having feast; food connects with the blessings of the dancers and singers, and it helps us to think of everyone as one. Cooking the garbz are a big deal and someday, I will assume this responsibility. Today, I open the dried garbanzo beans to be cleaned and get them ready to soak. I help my grandmother prepare the stew meat by cutting it into smaller pieces as the garbanzos sit and soak in their bath. I recall soaking the beans in the same mint green mixing bowls they are sitting in since I was a kid. As we wait for them to expand and soften, I bring up the question once more as I have for some many years.

"When will the garbanzos be ready?"

Grandmother replies, "Just listen and they will tell you."

We attend to other preparations for the garbz and stew meat for this slow cooking night and I still listen for something to be said. As the night progresses, that amazing aroma feeds the entire house and our stomach growls in our sleep. As the next day arises and the sun hits the horizon, I lift the lid off the cooker and those little round beans are ready for this day of celebration.

Grandmother asks me, "Did you hear them talk to you?"

I'm frustrated because I think I'm not meant to understand when the garbanzos are speaking to me. I say, "I've listened all these years and I still don't hear them speak to me. All I ever hear is them popping when they are fully soaked."

She smiles and pats me on my shoulder and says, “That’s them telling you that they’re ready and it’s time to get them on the fire.”

I reply, “So this entire time I’ve heard them pop, they were already talking to me since the first time I helped when I was little kid.”

Grandmother gave a nod and assured me that I have been ready since the first day I started helping. Feast days are about gathering with family and friends around a good meal and memories. The most important thing about this experience is spending time with the ones you love and cherishing moments that are worth a lifetime. *Kuunda woha, Sayaa Mary.*

