



The worldwide appeal of chocolate brownies

A family tradition

By Savita Iyer-Ahrestani
July 2, 2012

There are certain important family moments, and this is one of them: the four of us — my husband, my two children, and me — sitting around a plate of homemade brownies fresh from the oven.

Tomorrow is our last day in Westfield, New Jersey, the town that has been our home for three years. Around us lie boxes and bags, suitcases and more, all prepared and ready to be moved up to State College, Pennsylvania, our fifth destination in seven years, where we shall be making our home for the next two years.

They say that children are resilient, that they adapt to new situations better than adults. I can attest to that; my children have moved from the United States to Switzerland to India to the Netherlands and then back to the United States, and they're fine.

It took a while to get used to each new place, of course — to get accustomed to new schools and new faces, to get in synch with different cultural mores. But overall, my children have done just great, and I remind them of this, as they munch on their brownies and voice their concerns about this next move.

They are the kinds of concerns best answered over a plate of brownies. These squares of comfort food are a kind of default go-to; they're a family staple that's been a constant for years. They have been a part of our lives wherever we have been in the world.

They made their way into my life sometime in the early 1970s, shortly after my mother purchased her very first baking book, *Home Baked Bread and Cakes*, by Mary Norwak. We were in London on a trip to buy Indian spices (not commonly available at the time in Geneva, Switzerland, *where I grew up*) and, of course, English books, for which we were simply starved. I still remember the bright lights of the bookshop and how delicious the pastries on the book jacket looked.

Through the years, my mother tried and mastered many of the simple, easy-to-make recipes in *Home Baked Bread and Cakes*. The book is still on her shelf, weathered and worn, and she refuses to part with it. She moved on to other, more complex cakes, cookies, and desserts, but the brownies stood out as her *pièce de résistance*.

At least a couple of times a week, they would be waiting for my brother and me on the kitchen table when we



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Bring your concerns to a plateful of brownies.

got home from school, and they brightened up many a dreary adolescent afternoon. My mother baked them for birthday parties and for friends — hers as well as ours. She even managed to conjure them up in India, at a time when it was tough to get good cocoa powder and frequent power outages intermittently shut off my grandmother's tiny toaster oven as the brownies baked. (In the south of India, ovens were and still are a rarity.)

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Chocolate Brownies

When my mother turned 60, I asked her friends all over the world to contribute a few thoughts about her to a scrapbook I was putting together. Almost everyone mentioned the brownies — the conversations that happened around them, the friendships that were born around them and that still live.

Wherever I've lived in the world, I have kept up the brownie-baking. By adding embellishments here and there — like a simple chocolate ganache icing — I've ensured that they remain a constant in our moving lives. They have helped me bring new people into my life and into my children's lives.

Will they make friends in Pennsylvania, my children want to know? Will the other kids like them? Will their new teachers be mean?

Soon enough, the pains of the move should ease. They always have done so in the past. But it will help, I know, to have a plate of those brownies ready and waiting on the first day of school.

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