

# Vodka, fond memories and a recipe for wedded bliss

*Gayle Nichol - September 2023*

It's been a long time since I've been party planning, but when my nephew announced that he was planning to wed, my sister-in-law and I jumped into bridal shower mode and began to plan.

We knew it would be in the summer.

We knew we wanted it to be sunny.

We knew that we wanted an abundance of good food, a casual afternoon to visit with family, and a chance to wish the young couple happy days in their married life.

I also knew I wanted a vat of vodka slush much like my mother and her sisters enjoyed at family gatherings in years gone by.

Mom is the last of her sibling group still with us. The youngest daughter of Bill and Velma, she held her grandson's arm as she made her way into the house and onto the back patio where the children and grandchildren – even one great grandchild -- of her sisters gathered. A tiny matriarch, representing all the Bendel kids.

Once settled, she thought she would enjoy a glass of slush -- the debate still swirls around whether she enjoyed a small or a large glass -- but either way she left the party with bright eyes and a little colour in her cheeks.

The slush became oddly important to me as the party approached.

I miss my aunts, and I miss the good times we shared. I really miss my much younger body with knees that don't snap, crackle and pop with each stair I climb, and I know sit with the stark reality that while I was having fun as a young party girl, they were the age I am now, doing all the planning.

So while I wanted to remember these amazing people that helped beautifully create the landscape of my life, I also wanted to share some of them with the young ones through this drink that I remember so well from warm summer afternoons on my Aunt Fern's patio.

I went searching for the recipe in the disaster that is my recipe box, almost immediately promising myself to bring the box to order when cold winter nights settle in.

I started thumbing through the tumble of contents, searching for one slushie treasure from the aunts, but I found so much more.

The recipe for baked custard that Aunt Fern had written in her elegant, slanted script, that she suggested I make once when I wasn't feeling well. It is now a staple when a nagging head cold takes away all desire to eat.

Grandma Bendel's butter tart recipe that our state-side relatives used to race to family reunions to enjoy.

Aunt Fern's never fail pastry recipe that fails every time for me due to poor execution on my part. And the story goes on as I flipped the cards.

The best rice pudding in the world written in my former mother-in-law's hand.

Apple knobby cake from my co-worker Janet, who found her way to retirement via the pandemic, but was always part mom and part cool big sister in the decades that we worked together.

Lemon drop cookies from Keeley who always knew how to hit the gas when I called out "Drive, Thelma, drive!"

Hamburger soup from my former grandfather-in-law, who cooked just this one dish with such gusto, you couldn't help but love it.

Yorkshire pudding, the way my dad always made it. Which was the same way his mother always made it -- burned to the bottom of a pan, but burned with love.

It's so much more efficient to have a digital file with favourites neatly logged in precise folders. But there is something about a recipe box jammed full of cards and papers with stains and dribbles over ingredient lists that speaks to the lives we live and the greater story that belongs to all those who come after us.

And so, after 30 plus years, the vodka slush was resurrected.

I stirred in all the warmth I carry with me from knowing Aunt Fern and Aunt Marlene, and I shared it with their kin.

It was my memory.

But the story belongs to us all.