

The Secret to Making the Perfect Lasagna

Alex Broun



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THE SECRET TO MAKING THE PERFECT LASAGNA

By

Alex Broun

CAST

MAX: Older man who is ready to date again.

WENDY: Met Max in a grocery store.

MARTHA: Max's recently deceased wife.

CAROL: Max's cousin.

CRESSIDA: Max's 'cousin.'

MAY: Max's cousin.

JENNIFER: Max's oldest daughter, a lawyer.

MONICA: Max's friend, also from an Italian family.

VIOLET: Max's daughter, a drama teacher.

JASMINE: Max's sister.

Setting: *A dark stage.*

At Rise: *A spotlight opens on MAX at Left Center.*

MAX: Bereavement. It's such a nice word for such an awful event. *(He holds a photo.)* Martha, my wife of thirty-two years, passed last year. A terrible disease that I'm not even going to dignify by naming. At the end...Well let's just say at the end...she wasn't herself. I don't like to remember that. I like to remember her just like this. *(indicates photo)* Tomorrow it will be three years, two months and eleven days. My friends and even my children say Max... Dad..."You need to get out. Mom wouldn't want you to

be sad.” At first I resisted. How could anyone take the place of Martha? My magical, mysterious, magnificent Martha. They persisted and I resisted until one day...

(Stage lights fade up. WENDY enters at Right, pushing a shopping cart. Behind MAX is another shopping cart with a few items in it. Stepping behind the second cart, MAX faces WENDY. She smiles.)

WENDY: I see you here a lot.

MAX: What can I say? I’m a big admirer of frozen peas.

WENDY: Not frozen carrots?

MAX: No, just peas.

WENDY: *(checking his cart)* Not much of a dinner. Frozen peas and instant lasagna.

MAX: Martha used to...

(His voice trails off. She gives him an inquiring glance.)

MAX: Cook. Martha...used to cook.

WENDY: Who’s Martha?

MAX: My wife. She’s...

WENDY: What?

(MAX points upwards.)

WENDY: I’m sorry to hear that. *(beat)* Well hopefully someone else will make you proper lasagna. One day. I love lasagna. *(She passes him. Then freezes at Left.)*

MAX: And then it happened. It was almost like Martha was tapping me on the shoulder. In the frozen pea aisle.

(MARTHA enters at Right.)

MARTHA: Ask her.

MAX: Martha?

MARTHA: Go on, ask her.

MAX: But how can I? She's not...you...

MARTHA: I'm quite sick and tired of watching you moping around all the time. Ask her.

MAX: What do I say?

MARTHA: You'll think of something. You thought of something to say to me.

MAX: But that was different. That was you. Everything was always so easy with you. I looked into your eyes and I knew everything would be alright.

MARTHA: Ask her. For me. *(She exits at Right.)*

MAX: *(over his shoulder to WENDY)* I could make it for you.

WENDY: *(over her shoulder to him)* Lasagna?

MAX: If you like.

WENDY: *(facing him)* I don't know. I'm pretty fussy with my lasagna. It has to be just right. It has to be perfect.

MAX: This will be perfect. The perfect lasagna.

WENDY: Okay. The perfect lasagna. Next Friday night. And don't buy it frozen and re-heat it. I'll know, and I won't be happy. And you don't want to make me unhappy.

(WENDY exits Left.)

MAX: She said yes. She said yes. Martha was right. Only problem now I had to cook lasagna. Lasagna! I don't even know how to spell it let alone cook it. I always get mixed up whether there's an `a' or an `e' on the end. But Wendy was coming to my house for dinner. And Martha approved. That's a positive and you've always got to focus on the positives. But LASAGNA! How do you make lasagna? And not just any lasagna. This has to be the perfect lasagna.

(CAROL enters)

CAROL: The secret to making the perfect lasagna...

MAX: So I decided to consult the experts. The women in my family. Luckily I have a very large family.

CAROL: Well if I told you, then it wouldn't be a secret. Ha, ha.

MAX: Firstly, I go to see cousin Carol. Her husband's Italian. Federico. She must know how to make lasagna.

CAROL: I suppose it wouldn't harm to share it with you ...

(MAX takes out a notepad)

CAROL: But only a little!

MAX: Did I mention we call her Crazy Cousin Carol?

CAROL: My mother, your Aunt, may God rest her eternal soul, never made lasagna when I was a little girl so I never learnt how to make it. So my secret to making the perfect lasagna is to go to Madame Chow's downtown—

MAX: Madame Chow's?

CAROL: Of course, Madame Chow's makes the best lasagna in town. Don't you know that?

MAX: But I'm not allowed to buy it. It has to be homemade.

CAROL: Why?

MAX: I'm trying to impress a girl. A woman.

CAROL: Max, are you dating again? Finally!

MAX: Well, Martha said...I mean...I think Martha would be okay with it.

CAROL: *Absoluto!* She doesn't want you to sit at home like a boring, sad old frog. You're even starting to look like a frog. A big, tired bullfrog with big fat cheeks. *(She grabs his cheeks. Beat.)*

MAX: The lasagna?

CAROL: Why does she want you to make lasagna? It's not something kinky?

MAX: No. I don't think so.

CAROL: Women are very strange these days. Okay, homemade lasagna. *(beat)* Got it! Go down to Madame Chow's, pick one up, remove it from the foil tray, decant it in to your own 'special' lasagna dish, pop a sprig of basil on top and voila! There it is. The perfect homemade lasagna, all served up and ready to go!!! She'll never know the difference!!

MAX: Carol?

CAROL: What, darling?

MAX: She'll know.

CAROL: Alright, if it really must be homemade, I will have to tell you about Massimo. Massimo, Massimo, Massimo. The delicious, darling Massimo.

MAX: What about Federico?

CAROL: This was before Federico. Long before Federico. But don't tell him, okay? Massimo was an absolute master in the kitchen. As well as elsewhere, I'm pleased to report.

MAX: Happy to hear it.

CAROL: A regular chef extraordinaire. And he made a lasagna that rivaled even Madame Chow's!

MAX: Can you remember the recipe?

CAROL: Write this down. First he would tell me it is important to have a lovely bottle of red wine on hand. To use as a reduction for the sauce, but also as a tippie for oneself. It always gets you in the mood for working up a storm in the kitchen. And other places.

MAX: (*writing*) Red wine.

CAROL: And nothing cheap. Or French. It must be Italian red wine. A good Chianti! Then Massimo would use his mother's gorgeous little pasta roller. So sweet. All the way from 1950's Napoli. To roll out the sheets on the thinnest setting possible. They would be transparent and melt in your mouth. But the hardest thing about the perfect lasagna... Massimo told me as we lay in bed one night, clasped in each other's arms...is that you should stop yourself from eating it as soon as it comes out of the oven. Let it cool, put it in the fridge, and let it sit for that first day. Only on the second day does it come into its own. Only then does it reveal its maximum flavor potential. Massimo would sing-a-long to old Dean Martin records while marinating the meat. (*sings*) When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore. Then we would dance, in the kitchen. (*She grabs MAX. They spin around.*) Sometimes he would stretch out his arm and spin me around and around, faster and faster and faster. (*She stops, now very dizzy.*) Did you get all that?

MAX: Red wine, 1950's Napoli pasta roller, Massimo, Massimo, Massimo...what did I miss ?

CAROL: Darling, my head is spinning. Go ask cousin Cressida. (*Carol exits.*)

MAX: I'm not sure why we called cousin Cressida... cousin.

(*Lights come up on CRESSIDA.*)

MAX: She wasn't my cousin. I don't think she was related to any one in the family but ever since I could remember she had always been "cousin" Cressida.

(*Lights come up on MAY.*)

MAX: She lived with cousin May. She wasn't my cousin either. But we called her "cousin," too. It was easier than...

(*MAX takes notes.*)

CRESSIDA: First and foremost:

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MAY: The difference between a good lasagna—

CRESSIDA: And a great lasagna—

MAY: Lies in the richness of the sauces.

CRESSIDA: And the subtle nuances of the herbs.

MAY: The bolognese sauce needs to be brimming with full tomato flavor.

CRESSIDA: And a rich red color that stains the plate.

MAY: To obtain this you have to use a lot of tomatoes.

CRESSIDA: By boiling down the liquid the flavor develops.

MAY: A bay leaf or two.

CRESSIDA: With a sprinkling of thyme.

MAY: Will also give the sauce –

CRESSIDA: A subtlety of aroma.

MAY: Attention to detail.

CRESSIDA: The tiniest things –

MAY: Make the biggest difference.

(CRESSIDA and MAY put their arms around each other's shoulders, lovingly)

MAX: Thanks, cousin Cressida. Cousin May.

MAY AND CRESSIDA: Our pleasure dear. And what's her name?

MAX: Wendy.

MAY AND CRESSIDA: Sounds lovely.

MAX: She looks a little bit like Martha. She has her eyes.

MAY AND CRESSIDA: Oh. That's sweet!

(Lights fade on CRESSIDA and MAY. JENNIFER enters.)

JENNIFER: I believe you're searching for the secret to making the perfect lasagna.

MAX: Yes, Jen.

JENNIFER: Why haven't you made an appointment to see me? I may be Senior Partner in one of the top legal firms in the city, but I can still make the best lasagna in town. Come into my office. Thursday. 9.45 A.M.

MAX: Yes, Jen. *(to audience)* Jennifer is my oldest daughter. My very successful oldest daughter. Well, Violet, my youngest daughter, she's also very successful. Just in a different way. But don't tell her I said that.

(Lights change. JENNIFER'S office. MONICA enters taking dictation.)

JENNIFER: Lasagna is an over-used and much abused dish. Way too often it is just a nasty runny sauce poured over layers of mushy pasta with cheddar cheese melted on top. I'm a lasagna aficionado, and the best one I have ever had is the one I cook myself, of course. What makes it so superb? Let me share with you my lasagna secret. The first and most critical step involves getting the bolognaise sauce just right. This requires premium quality minced beef mixed with some minced pork. Add to that oven roasted capsicum, fresh Roma tomatoes, bacon, onions, tomato paste. Enough garlic to flavor strongly without overpowering good quality beef stock. And a decent half bottle or so of a good quality red. A teaspoon of sugar and another of vinegar enhances the tomato flavors and rounds them off.

MAX: Sounds delicious. When did you last make it?

JENNIFER: Make it. Dad, are you kidding? When would I have time to do all that? Monica will type that up and fax it over to you this afternoon. I have to get to court. *(JENNIFER stands.)* What's all the interest in lasagna all of a sudden?

MAX: I've got a date.

JENNIFER: A date? Ewwww. What about Mom?

MAX: Three years Jen. It's been three years. Feels like the right time.

JENNIFER: Is it that long? Really? I still miss her.

MAX: Me, too. Every day.

(JENNIFER and MAX embrace.)

JENNIFER: Great. Now you got me crying. How's that going to look in court? *(She exits. MONICA enters.)*

MONICA: She's a very busy woman your daughter.

(MAX nods.)

MONICA: But she left out the most important ingredient. Love. I come from a big Italian family and we all get together to make the family lasagna. Everyone has to bring something. Their own special ingredient. Basil, cinnamon, parmigiano. Each item also adds the key ingredient: love. No good meal is without it. It's amazing to hear all the voices gathered together in our kitchen. Young and old. Laughter and wine. Making the family lasagna brings all the generations together. Did I hear you were dating again?

MAX: Date. Singular. I've got a date.

MONICA: Well, if it doesn't work out, maybe we could make it plural.

MAX: I don't...get it...

MONICA: You could ask me out? I like lasagna too.

MAX: Can I get back to you? I'll just see how this one goes first.

(MONICA kisses him on the cheek. She exits.)

MAX: Suddenly I was very popular! Next stop was Violet. She heard I'd been into see Jen so of course she needed to give me her recipe, too.

(VIOLET enters.)

VIOLET: So, it's serious. No, don't say a word. I can just tell. You have that look about you. This woman is special. The question is, what are you going to do about it? Does she know how you feel? Perhaps it's time for a romantic gesture.

MAX: Vi, we just met. In front of the frozen peas. I'd hardly call it romantic.

VIOLET: And where did you meet Mom?

MAX: In a gas station.

VIOLET: I'd hardly call that romantic either. No, this is special. I can feel it.

MAX: *(to audience)* Violet is a Drama Teacher. *(to VIOLET)* And you think your Mom would be okay with that?

VIOLET: Of course she would. In fact I know just what she'd say:

(MARTHA appears.)

VIOLET AND MARTHA: I'm quite sick and tired of watching you moping around all the time.

MAX: Well, actually, Violet—

VIOLET: Just Vi, please, Dad. You know I hate it when you call me Violet. Makes me sound so...old.

MAX: Well you're not—

VIOLET: Don't finish that sentence!

MAX: It's just all this talk of romance. It makes me...nervous...

VIOLET: Come on, Dad. If your generation isn't going to keep romance alive, then who will? The kids at school – well, they can't even spell romance. If you can't say it in a text message, you don't say it at all. You've got to show them how to do it. Up close and personal. Deep and from the heart. Show your beloved that she's the one.

MAX: It's just lasagna.

VIOLET: Lasagna! I hope its vegetarian.

MAX: She didn't say.

VIOLET: So cook for her then. A lavish feast. Lead her in blindfolded then when she opens her eyes, and your romantic gesture unfolds. A sumptuous Italian meal. The perfect Chianti, fresh crusty bread, crisp salad, and a gourmet vegetarian lasagna with eggplant and zucchini. Make this night special. Delectable. Like the lasagna, it should be rich and memorable, layered with romance and with the aroma of honesty and thoughtfulness. Sprinkle it with a hint of spice and devour it slowly. As you mean to devour her.

MAX: I gather you're not seeing Greg any more.

VIOLET: He moved to the Bahamas six months ago. To open a Diving School.

MAX: Oh, sweetie. Why didn't you tell me?

VIOLET: I don't know, Dad. We never seem to talk about that stuff.

MAX: Well, we should.

VIOLET: All you have to do is ask.

MAX: All right, I will.

(VIOLET exits.)

MAX: So, I'd been to see my cousins, Cressida, May and Carol. My daughter Vi. *(holding up fax)* Even got the fax from Jennifer. And Monica had told me about her family tradition of making the lasagna together. Before letting me know if it went wrong with Wendy, she was happy to step in. But now I was more confused than ever. Nine layers or ten, parmesan or ricotta, nutmeg or cinnamon? I needed to speak to someone who knows me better than anyone. Apart from Martha.

(JASMINE enters.)

MAX: My sister. Jasmine.

JASMINE: Why didn't you ask me before? Lasagna is my favorite dish. I make it for Bob all the time. At least I used to. He can't now. Bad for his cholesterol. How's your cholesterol by the way?

MAX: Okay, last time I checked.

JASMINE: And when was that? Max, just because Martha's not here to look after you anymore doesn't mean you can just let things slide.

MAX: I know, it's just she always organized all that.

JASMINE: Well, you need to start doing it. Or find someone who will. And that brings us back to lasagna. One of my best culinary achievements. The best thing about when I cook it is that it's different every time. I like to call it adventure cooking!

MAX: Adventure cooking?

JASMINE: Haven't you ever tried it? You know all the basic ingredients but you throw away the recipe books! I'm a mood cooker. If I feel like spice I'll put in chili. If I feel textural, I'll add extra cream and cheese.

MAX: No wonder Bob has a problem with his cholesterol.

JASMINE: Martha said that I should be banned from all kitchens. I've set fire to your oven more than once! But I just put all that down to a learning curve. You know the best thing about lasagna?

MAX: What?

JASMINE: Even the worst lasagna tastes good.

MAX: So what you're saying is I can't fail?

JASMINE: Wait one moment. I think I've got an Italian cookbook around here somewhere.

(JASMINE exits.)

MAX: So the big day arrived. The night before I sat up very late and made a list of all the ingredients I had to buy the next day. I worked my way through all my notes trying

to come up with my very own perfect lasagna. 8:00 P.M. became 10:00 P.M. 10:00 P.M. became midnight. (*He lies down on the kitchen table.*) At some point I fell asleep. (*He dozes. He goes to sleep. MARTHA enters. She strokes his hair. MAX smiles in his sleep.*)

(*The lights change. MAY and CRESSIDA enter carrying baskets of food.*)

MAY: Here he is.

CRESSIDA: Poor love.

(*JENNIFER enters, followed by MONICA carrying a shopping bag.*)

JENNIFER: (*to MAX*) come on Dad. Up you go. Food isn't going to cook itself.

(*MAX wakes up, rubs his eyes. CAROL and VIOLET enter.*)

CAROL: Let him sleep.

MAX: They were all there. Cressida, May, Jennifer, Carol and Vi – even Monica and Jasmine. I even felt that Martha was watching on, smiling.

(*MARTHA smiles*)

MAX: Jen heard about Monica's family lasagna-making tradition so she decided to instantly adopt it as one of our own.

JENNIFER: No point re-inventing the wheel.

MAX: Keeping up with the Guddicini's – so to speak. As soon as I was off the kitchen table they were cooking up a storm. Carol brought Massimo's 1950's pasta roller -

CAROL: (*dancing with pasta roller*) Massimo, Massimo, Massimo.

MAX: Jen brought the roma tomatoes, which Monica was sent to one of those fancy grocers to buy specially. Vi bought the red wine, though not a lot of it actually went into the sauce. (*VIOLET takes a big gulp of red wine*) –

VIOLET: Greg, where did we go wrong?!

MAX: Cressida bought the nutmeg and May bought lots and lots of garlic.

CAROL: He wants to kiss the girl, May, not suffocate her.

MAX: Hey, it's just a date.

CRESSIDA: It's okay, I'm pretty sure he's over eighteen.

MAX: Even Jasmine joined in.

JASMINE: Can't you at least try adventure cooking?

VIOLET: *(pointing at mince)* What's that?

JASMINE: What does it look like?

MAX: A potential controversy over vegetarian or non-vegetarian was avoided by Jen negotiating a settlement.

JENNIFER: Ladies, ladies. We'll make one of each.

MAX: All that was left for me was to sit back and watch.

VIOLET: *(to MAX)* Out of the way, Dad.

MAX: It wasn't really cheating. Wendy said it had to be homemade. She didn't say I had to make it. Standing in the corner, watching my daughters, my cousins and Monica working so hard I realized I finally knew the secret of making the perfect lasagna. It was just like Monica said: love.

MONICA: And remember if it doesn't work out with Wendy...

(They continue to make the lasagna.)

CAROL: *(singing)* When the moon hits your eyes like a big pizza pie

ALL: That's amore.

VIOLET: When the world seems to shine like you've had too much wine

ALL: That's amore....

CRESSIDA: Bells will ring ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling

MAY: And you'll sing veetabella...

CRESSIDA: Hearts will play tip-py-tip-py-tay,tip-py-tip-py-tay

MAY: Like a gay tarantella...

JENNIFER: When the stars make you drool

JASMINE: Just like pastafazool,

ALL: That's amore....

MONICA: When you dance down the street with a cloud at your feet –

CRESSIDA and MAY: You're in love....

MAX: When you walk in a dream

CAROL and VIOLET: But you know you're not dreaming

JENNIFER, JASMINE and MONICA: Signore,

Wendy enters.

MAX presents the finished lasagna to HER. EVERYONE ELSE GATHERS AROUND.

*WENDY TASTES IT AND SMILES. SHE GIVES MAX A KISS ON THE CHEEK.
SPOTLIGHT ON MARTHA, SMILING.*

ALL: Scuzza me but you see back in old Napoli that's amore...

THE END