

How a Freak House Fire Led to Tons of “Spinolata” and Gratitude

A fire took nearly everything. The spinach and parsley left in the car became a small act of control—then a way to say thank you.

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Spinolata—spinach gremolata—brings acid, garlic, and deep green flavor to almost anything.

On June 13, 2020, my daughter and I moved back to Jersey City from Manhattan after New York City was declared the pandemic's epicenter. As if that meant we would be much safer. But we were all just doing our best.

We were exhausted. I had just carried in the last box and tipped the movers. "We need to unload the spinach and parsley from the car," I told my daughter. I looked over at her lying across our sofa, still wrapped in moving plastic. Above her head was one of our sweet seven-pound Morkies, a Maltese-Yorkie mix, and curled in her arms was our second Morkie. "Okay," I smiled, "but just a short break." We had moved into a brownstone with a tiny garden, and I was excited to think that something green could grow.

But it took almost no time for our safe haven to fall apart around us.

Two hours later—yes, two hours—an electrical fire ripped through the apartment so fast that we had time only to grab the dogs, my laptop, and my phone to call 911. Standing in the street, we marveled as firefighters spilled out of the six trucks filling our block. With incredible synchronicity, teams assembled with hoses and pickaxes. A neighbor brought my daughter flip-flops as we stood in disbelief, watching smoke billow from the windows. We lost everything. My daughter had turned 22 only a few weeks earlier. I couldn't stop thinking about the new clothes I had just bought her for her birthday.

Then I thought about the spinach and parsley in the car. I know—I was surprised they popped into my mind at that moment, too. But finding a home for those greens became my mission. At a time when the world was crumbling beneath me, it gave me a sense of control.

Sometimes it takes losing everything to discover what you need.

Luckily, friends in Brooklyn invited us to stay with them—a brave invitation when COVID-19 had everyone confined to their homes. Their daughters, ages 10 and 12, loved calling my daughter and me "the Gilmore Girls" because, until recently, we had both been in college.

I used to think of parenting as an insular thing until I became part of this group. Overnight, I became part of the family and came to understand the value of a village. I took the girls to school, read *Rebel Girls* at bedtime, and cooked dinner for the whole crew. In turn, they included us in everything from Father's Day to birthdays, and they even helped us move when

we found a new home.

My friends' daughters often cooked with me, including the day I taught them to make "spinolata," a concoction I invented. Spinolata, or spinach gremolata, can make the difference between a bland dish and one alive with flavor. Best of all, it takes only five minutes to make, and you can use it on everything from omelets and salmon to soups.

Cooking allowed me to say thank you when words failed. It helped me work through the devastating aftermath of the fire by focusing on others. On the day I left, my friends gave us a key. Later, I texted to say I had left several jars of spinolata in their freezer. It comforted me to know that my salvaged greens brought some joy to the people who gave us a home.

Sometimes it takes losing everything to discover what you need. A year earlier, the people I now call family had been casual friends. My time "quarantaming" reminded me that relationships born from the most challenging situations can become a silver lining. While 2020 wreaked havoc on our lives and the lives of everyone around us, the measure of what I learned is so much greater than what I lost.

It seems wrong to say I'm happy the fire threw us together, but I am.

Spinach Gremolata

“Spinolata” · Makes about 1 cup · Active time: 5 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- 4 cups baby spinach
 - 3 garlic cloves, germs removed, finely minced
 - Zest of 1 lemon
 - 1 teaspoon lemon juice, plus more to taste
 - 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more as needed
 - 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
 - 1/4 teaspoon black pepper, plus more to taste
 - Pinch of chili flakes (optional)
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BY HAND

Combine the chopped spinach, garlic, lemon zest, lemon juice, olive oil, salt, and pepper in a small bowl. Stir well, then taste. Add more lemon juice for brightness or a little more oil for a looser consistency. Add chili flakes for heat, if desired.

USING A FOOD PROCESSOR

Add the garlic to a food processor and pulse until chopped. Add the olive oil, salt, pepper, and lemon juice; pulse until evenly combined but not completely smooth. Add the spinach and lemon zest and pulse again. Taste and adjust the salt, lemon juice, and oil. Add chili flakes, if desired. Do not overprocess: the spinolata should remain coarsely chopped.

STORAGE

Store in a sealed jar in the refrigerator for up to one week. Use the best olive oil you can—the recipe is simple enough that its flavor makes a noticeable difference.

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