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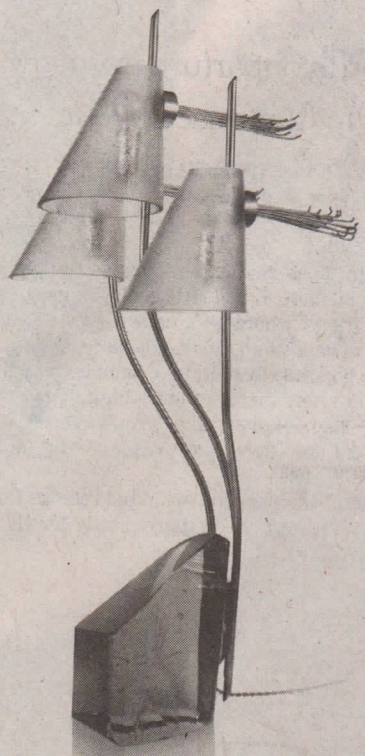
The Most Beautiful Things on Earth



Idra Light Sculpture by Roberto Rida, c. 2008

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Neighborly S

As Saturday morning dawned the other day, the sounds of the impending battle filled my neighborhood: The clanging of pots. The clatter of cans of whole tomatoes being arranged on Corian countertops. The steaming of the cabbages.

I had barely slept a wink the previous night. My husband and I had gone head to head before against the neighbors, of course, because we live on a very competitive block. It's not enough for people like us to settle for your typical progressive dinner. We have to have cook-offs, of ribs or salmon or chicken, for example. But this time, the stakes were much higher. No holds barred, winner take all. Tonight's entree: stuffed cabbage.

My reputation was really on the line. Tonight would be a test not only of me but also of my Polish ancestors who passed down a surname that means, roughly, "farmer of lettuces and cabbages."

I feel so strongly about this excellent source of dietary fiber and riboflavin that I married my husband, in part, for his Nana's top-secret stuffed cabbage recipe. He carried it around on a tiny index card that had a faded Kodachrome snapshot of the cook herself, which, like a hologram on expensive software, serves to authenticate it.

In the early years when we made [illegible] pe, our versions never came close. It was only one time after my mother-in-law visited, tasted a spoonful and said, thoughtfully, "You know, I think Nana's sauce was a little browner," that we got to the bottom of it. Nana had somehow "forgotten" to mention her secret ingredient. "She put ginger snaps in the bottom of the pot," my mother-in-law remembered. "That's why our sauce was ambrosia.