

A Recipe Is More Than That

November 2019

This time of year, when the drop in temperature and the chilling wind drive me inside and remind me that winter is, in this part of the country, interminable, I find comfort in a hot cup of tea, my recipe files, and my cookbooks. My recipe box and books are nestled in an alcove in the brick wall of my kitchen. My recipe box was built by my father-in-law, who as well carved a horse's head on the lid and, inside the lid, the date I married John. Over the years, my collection of recipes has grown, and I now have to pull out an entire section just to free a particular card. I tried once to get rid of some of the cards. I couldn't.

These cards are more than lists of ingredients and directions. They are memories; they are 3 by 5 stories in my long life as chief cook for the family. The "Chicken Crunch" card displays a hurried scribble, the source of the recipe Betty D, a dear friend who was Grandma to my sons. Betty was a ranch girl, and she held little tolerance for those who did not know all the ins and outs of making a tasty, filling meal. She fired off recipes to me while she was cooking them, and it was up to me to copy correctly. Nearly half of my recipes are from Betty D; I sometimes feel I owe my wedded bliss to her.

Recipes from my mother-in-law are written in her confident, looping cursive of younger years. Her recipes are the easy ones with simple ingredients and straightforward instructions. When I look at her cards, I see her delicate hands and long fingers, which were happier in turning pages of favorite books than in preparing meals. I hear her warning, "Oh, Pam, you don't want to spend all day in a kitchen."

On two pages of yellowed, lined note-paper, folded to fit into the recipe box, is a special recipe. Dave's bold, neat printing provide the directions that read like a narrative, with suggestions and asides and the animated style that was Dave's personality. Jackie was his wife, and the directions are for "Jackie Maye's Super Tacos". My sons and husband insist they've never had better tacos. Dave and Jackie took me in when I needed an anchor in my life and remained my friends until they died. Every time I make tacos, I still pull out the recipe, now fully memorized, just to read Dave's details, just to think of Jackie's laughter, just to recall the antics and anecdotes of these two special people as they together cooked up a taco feast.

The source of the hearty, large-size casseroles with the "fun" ingredients were fellow school moms and Scout leaders. The caterpillar cake, the dirt cake, the sweetcake breakfast are delightful reminders of my sons' childhood requests. The Tiramisu cheesecake, requiring my presence in the kitchen for nearly a full day, proved to me that love conquers all, thank heavens.

I love, in a quiet afternoon, to turn one card at a time, noting the variety of scripts and the many cooks' names, the arrows or asterisks indicating necessary changes, the original titles indicating pride in the final product—Rebecca's Best..., Sandy's Easiest. Some cards are dotted or smeared from cooking lessons with the boys. Some include reminders of who in the family likes a recipe best. On some, I've written "ok", but I can't bear to toss out any recipe offered by a dear friend.

The smallest section of my file box is labeled "Fish." It holds four cards, which are never drawn forth. The section remains, though. I, a lover of seafood, will not give up hope that someday, my husband or my sons will experience a monumental change of taste.

I haven't quite made the leap yet to all-recipes-dot-com. Granted, these online services are convenient, especially when you don't want to just throw away the lemonade concentrate that's been sitting for a year in the back of the freezer. I prefer, however, my cookbooks. They need not be scrolled or printed off. I do not have to drag my computer to the kitchen table. Instead, I fix a cup of tea, curl up in my overstuffed chair, wrap a shawl around my shoulders, and turn pages. I go forward, I go backwards, I study the index and the chapter headings. I dutifully refer to the pictures. I read the mouth-watering descriptions, with artful words like "dredge."

I am drawn to the pictures, especially those that feature candlelight and crumbs on a groaning board (*The Williamsburg Cookbook*), and soups bubbling with savory abandon from richly painted crocks (*Mexican Cooking*). These carefree sumptuous displays stir my senses as well as issue forth an uncharacteristic quixotic chef in me. Suddenly, I am Towanda (If you haven't read *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, please do so. It's a beautiful story, with included recipes), meeting every challenge and meal schedule!

I delight in the narratives, the explanations, the side comments, the stories that accompany the cookbooks' recipes. I enjoy learning the origin, the history, the culture behind a particular recipe (You can't beat *Joy of Cooking*). I enjoy discovering a real life behind the recipes (*The Muffin Lady*). I appreciate learning why my bread may not rise (*Laurel's Kitchen*) or why I can't use canned pineapples in jelled salads (*Betty Crocker's Cookbook*, bless her soul), although such warnings, I admit, deflate the Towanda power in my kitchen.

I also love the community that is established, especially in those cookbooks that are put together by a church or local organization. I feel that I have friends, that others are going to cook what I am going to cook. It is an established belief that there is safety in numbers. If I am in a lonely mood, I will pull out *Delville Country Cookin'* or *Soup's On! At St. Paul's United Church of Christ*. I smile when I recognize a name.

Recently, I bought two cookbooks online. Used and old, each cost me only \$6. The reason I bought the books was not because I was interested at the time in international or French cooking. It was because they were both edited by Charlotte Turgeon. Charlotte Turgeon was the mother of Thomas Turgeon. Thomas Turgeon was the college professor who taught me everything I know about acting, who opened the door for me to become a Theatre major and eventually a high school drama coach. The purchase had little to do with cooking. It had much to do with living.