



The Soul of a Cookbook

STORY AND PHOTO BY CAROL PENN-ROMINE

At first glance a cookbook says, "So this is what you want to eat? Well, here's what you need to make it, and here's how you do it." But beneath its surface is much more. For a cookbook, especially an old one, is also a history book. It tells us what people ate, how they prepared it, how they ate it and where they found their ingredients. Cultural and social bits of information slip in that are as revealing as a peek into an old diary.

Any cookbook you own that pre-dates the current fetish for self-aware food personalities and celebrity chefs is a treasure. The older it is, the more likely that it will include clues to your family's or your community's history. So, if you discover an old cookbook in the attic, regard it the way you would your great-granny if you were to find her

up there. Invite it downstairs, sit with it over a cup of tea and take pleasure in getting acquainted.

As I gently perused a handful of 19th-century cookbooks, I was delighted to find that the odor wafting from them was not one of mustiness, but rather of vanilla. It made for pleasant research, and by the time I'd finished, I was in an agreeable mood and eager to go bake something with vanilla in it.

In fact, I found some of the most interesting social commentary in the dessert sections. *Mrs. Porter's New Southern Cookery Book* of 1871 omits no occasion. Not only does it include recipes for engagement and wedding cakes, but also those for introduction, acquaintanceship, flirtation, love, rivalry and jealousy (but none, however, for divorce or

torrid affairs. If there were a modern edition, those two would surely be included!). It also provides recipes for both bachelor cake and ancient maiden cake, specifying for the latter: "If the A.M.'s matrimonial prospects are good, frost or ice with icing of proper flavor, otherwise serve plain." Ouch! Doesn't an old maid merit at least a little pleasure? *

One of my most treasured cookbooks came from my aunt, a 1932 edition of *New Orleans Recipes*. From it I learned that the production of "egg-nogg" is a community affair involving everyone present, all whipping egg whites and yolks while drizzling in sugar, until the host offers a splash of brandy or whiskey to give it some oomph. This book stresses the importance of using the proper ingredients, recalling a New Orleans host postponing an elegant dinner because his shipment of saffron hadn't arrived from Spain.

The most curious section in these old books tends to be the one devoted to meat. The 1904 *Blue Grass Cook Book* urges cooks not to bake any ham that is less than a year old. Instructions for curing ham begin, "Kill your hogs when the wind is from the northwest." It doesn't say why, but if your house sits northwest of your hog-killin' set-up, that would surely make sense. The Kentucky burgout recipe calls for boiling six squirrels and six birds (variety unspecified) until tender so that the bones slip out easily. This book also favors cooking with boiling lard.

Our forebears in the kitchen certainly weren't squeamish when it came to such chores as killing chickens and skinning and boning everything from squirrel to deer. A collection of traditional recipes, *A Good Heart and a Light Hand* explains how to prepare turtle. If you're the turtle, however, it's obvious that what's required to render you fit for consumption is neither a good heart nor a light hand: The first step is teasing the turtle with a stick until it bites down on it. Then you pull the stick to extend its neck and lop its head off. At that point

you still have to remove the shell and clean what's left before the cooking ever starts. This makes me want to hug my butcher.

Interestingly, cookbooks compiled by former slaves are decidedly Anglo-centric, suiting the tastes and backgrounds of the families for whom they cooked. Mrs. Fisher was a former slave whose cookbook was filled with recipes for roasts of all kinds, sauces, salads, croquettes, marmalades and pickles, along with a plentitude of desserts, including charlotte russe. Notably absent from her collection were vegetable dishes, aside from salads, all of which were topped with meat or seafood.

Reflecting a time before post-World War II prosperity, cookbooks containing recipes for haute cuisine also instruct on preparing the humblest of foods, including organ meats, offal and animals that are decidedly unpopular today. Possum casserole, anyone? They also include recipes for medicines and remedies (including those for lightning strike and drowning). One section on poultry first advises how to comport oneself on Sunday.

The 1872 *Mrs. Hill's Southern Practical Cookery and Receipt Book* reveals that common measures of the time were tumblers, teacups, wine glasses and dessert spoons. Other old cookbooks measure ingredients more colorfully, instructing cooks to "take a knob of butter the size of a walnut" or "a lump of lard the size of a pigeon's egg" while preparing a dish.

These tidbits are amusing, but more importantly, they're a glimpse into the past. History may be written by the victor, but the cookbook author has no regard for winners or losers — only for the business of living. This makes the old cookbook unselfconscious; history without agenda. It shows how people survive and what they hold as important. And in the process, the soul of a cookbook becomes the soul of its people. eM

Chicken Soup for the Sick

"Take an old chicken and put on with one gallon of water; boil down to half a gallon. Take the yelks of two eggs, tie them up in a clean cloth with a little thyme and put in the soup after you have strained the meat from it, and put back to boil till down to three pints. Dish up and send to table hot. Season with salt and pepper to taste."

— From *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Southern Cooking*, 1881