Cooking Corner: Heirloom recipes offer a slice of Americana

by Maria C. Hunt

In my family, Aunt Fannie's tea cake recipe is the one that got away. My friend Stephanie's mother had a way with cabbage and bacon that no one else can seem to duplicate.

LOST, BUT FOUND AGAIN - Cooks Illustrated food writer Jack Bishop describes the book 'America's Best Lost Recipes' as a 'preservation project.' CNS Photo. Every family has special dishes that an aunt or grandpa used to make according to a set of instructions kept only in their head. Over time, unless someone writes those recipes down, they become lost to memory.

"America's Best Lost Recipes," from the editors of Cook's Country magazine, records more than 100 cherished recipes - from World War II-era dishes, immigrant recipes and regional kitchens - that were in danger of being forgotten.

"We looked at this as a preservation project," said Jack Bishop, editorial director for America's Test Kitchen. "As a country, we're so concerned with what's new and hip and cool that we lose sight of a part of our history. As a culture, we're not holding onto these traditions."

The Boston-based America's Test Kitchen, which produces Cook's Illustrated and Cook's Country magazines, put out a call for family recipes that told a story about a bygone era. They received more than 2,800 entries, which were culled down to the recipes in the book. The recipes are just as charming as they are useful.

Savory dishes include Grandma's Pepper Pot Soup, inspired by a soup George Washington's cook created during the bad winter of 1778 at Valley Forge; and Brooklyn Cheese Puffs, sent in by a woman whose mother grew up in an Italian immigrant family in Brooklyn. The puffs are actually made from a simple mixture of butter, ricotta, cheddar cheese and flour that bakes up like an airy French gougere.

Most of the recipes are for baked goods, ranging from Waukau, a berry-studded cross between a pancake and a cobbler, to the Tennessee Stack Cake, layers of cookies and apple butter that soften into a layered cake.

"A lot of the recipes at first glance seem unlikely," Bishop said.

Desserts in the strange-but-good category include Wacky Cake, a dense chocolate cake that dates to World War II-era rationing, so it's made without butter, eggs or milk. The most provocatively named recipe is Naked Ladies With Their Legs Crossed, a fried cruller made with mashed potatoes. It was submitted by a woman from Mishawaka, Ind.

And just in case one of these recipes inspires readers to record some of their own family history, "America's Best Lost Recipes" includes lined pages and a pocket in the back of the book.

Before making it into the book, each recipe was put through the rigorous testing and refining that has earned America's Test Kitchen a loyal following. Some recipes were simplified, Bishop said; others were bolstered with black and white pictures to help readers get through complicated steps.

The goal is to help cooks be successful, so they're inspired to keep cooking.

Bishop said he and Cook's Illustrated editor Christopher Kimball know from the mail they receive that many people lack basic cooking skills. Readers write that they decided to leave ingredients out or substitute flounder for chicken and then wonder why a recipe didn't work. So the magazines are devoted to helping people learn the right way to make a flaky pie crust or roast a moist Thanksgiving turkey - as long as they follow the directions.

"Instead of talking about chefs or restaurant or trends, we're going to talk about everyday problems people have at home," Bishop said. "They need not just a recipe, they need an explanation."

HUNGARIAN CABBAGE NOODLES

2 tablespoons vegetable oil or rendered bacon fat

1/2 large head green cabbage, cored and sliced thin

Salt1 (16-ounce) bag wide egg noodles

1 tablespoon unsalted butter

Pepper

Yields 4 servings.

Bring 4 quarts of water to a boil in large pot for noodles.

Meanwhile, heat 1 tablespoon oil in large skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add 1/2 the cabbage, season with 1/4 teaspoon salt, and cook, tossing frequently, until golden brown, 5 to 8 minutes. Transfer cooked cabbage to plate. Repeat with remaining oil and cabbage.

Add 1 tablespoon salt and noodles to boiling water and cook until noodles are al dente. Drain noodles and transfer back to pot.

Add reserved cabbage and butter to noodles, toss to combine, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve.

GRANDMA SYLVIA SALT BUTTER COOKIES

2 large egg yolks

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 teaspoon whiskey

16 tablespoons (2 sticks) salted butter, softened

2/3 cup granulated sugar

2 1/4 cups all-purpose flour

Filling:

1 ounce unsweetened chocolate, chopped

1/4 cup water

2 cups confectioner's sugar

Yields 36 cookies.

Adjust oven rack to middle position; preheat oven to 350 F. Line baking sheet with parchment paper.

In measuring cup, whisk together egg yolks, vanilla and whiskey.

With electric mixer set at medium-high speed, beat butter and sugar until fluffy, about 2 minutes. Reduce speed to medium, add yolk mixture, and beat until combined. Add flour and beat until incorporated.

Shape dough into 3/4-inch balls and space 1/2 the balls 1 inch apart on prepared baking sheet. Bake until lightly browned around edges, 10 to 12 minutes. Cool cookies on baking sheet for 2 minutes, then transfer to wire rack to cool completely, about 30 minutes. Repeat with remaining dough balls.

To make filling: Combine chocolate and water in small saucepan and stir over low heat until smooth, 5 minutes. Remove from heat. Whisk in confectioner's sugar until smooth.

Turn cookie over and spread flat side with 1 teaspoon filling. Top with another cookie. Let filling set 20 minutes. (Cookies can be stored in an airtight container up to 3 days.)

- "America's Best Lost Recipes" by the editors of Cook's Country, America's Test Kitchen.

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