

10-25-95

Cookbooks

When she heard that Paul and I planned to be married, one reaction from my mother, who liked Paul a lot, was that she was sorry for him, since I had no aptitude for cooking. My acquiring some measure of cooking competence has been a long, moderately painful struggle that I view by means of cookbooks.

I started out with a Better Homes and Gardens cookbook, a gift from Mother. Into some of its blank pages, I copied a few of my favorite dishes from her battered *Secrets of a Good Housewife*, which was cluttered with her notes and recipes she had collected. This one cookbook is what I took with me to Portland, Oregon, Paul's and my first home. Some of my first efforts were halting, but even during that World War II era of ration stamps for canned goods, sugar, and meat, we fared moderately well, primarily because of Paul's genial acceptance of whatever food I placed before him. He says now that the cooking was quite good, what with salmon steaks, blue crabs, and other Pacific Northwest goodies.

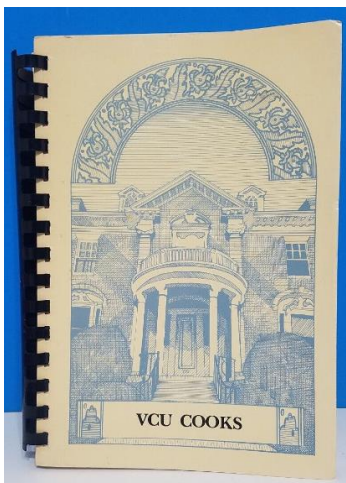


Paul's office in the Federal Building was across the street from the Portland City Library. When we had plans for the evening, I went early to study from the wonderful collection of cookbooks I found on the first floor of the library. I appreciated the introductions giving instructions about nutrition and general kitchen management and copied recipes that looked like something I could handle. Those books gave me the courage to attempt my first Thanksgiving turkey, which happily was successful.

But I ran into trouble when I tried to cut up a chicken and fry it for an office picnic. In order to learn for future reference, I wrote an anguished letter home which brought a prompt reply, with drawings, for the whole process. Even so, I've never felt comfortable with frying chicken. As time went on, I began exchanging recipes with friends, and in a few years, I became much more confident about planning and cooking for family, for "company," or even for a party. By the time we had children, I had a bewildering collection of scraps of paper, backs of envelopes, three-by-five recipe cards, magazine and newspaper clippings, and a small collection of cookbooks, not much help in planning meals. When Paul took a sabbatical, I bundled up the lot to carry with me to Oak Ridge and had a great time there sorting through those piles and achieving a kind of organization. Instead of copying my collection into a book I avoided copying errors by

taping the recipes into spiral notebooks, always noting the source of the recipe. I'm still using those notebooks and find them a fascinating history of my friends and associates, as well as a help in planning meals.

I developed a desire to write a real, printed cookbook. When the VCU Woman's Club decided to compile a cookbook to raise money for a scholarship, I happily joined my friends Mary Catherine Dunn and Nan Kennedy in agreeing to edit a collection of recipes from members of the club, VCU faculty, wives of current and former presidents of the university and of all local universities. After six months of soliciting recipes, we had an impressive array of material. We sorted the contributions into categories and began the painful process of deciding whose recipe should be included when there were duplicates. Seventeen recipes for zucchini bread were submitted, for example. We dodged that problem by choosing three recipes from those submitted from the highest ranks in the academic pecking order. Many of the duplicates for most recipes were similar enough that we could give credit to several people. When we discovered that there were some obvious gaps in the range of the recipes, all three of us contributed from our own bountiful supply of recipes. All along we had enforced a limit of three recipes from each donor. We solved the dilemma of how to include what we considered our necessary fill-in recipes by giving them the names of the persons from whom we had originally gotten them, and each of us added from eight to twenty-six recipes. Paul was later startled to see that his mother, who had died some years before at age ninety-two, had contributed a recipe to *VCU Cooks*, published in 1979.

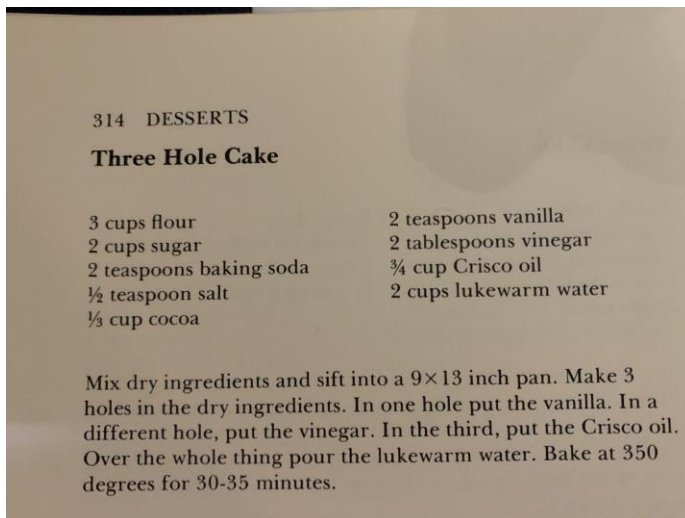


As to production and design, after investigating printing and publication costs, we decided that we wanted to take advantage of the varied architecture of the lovely old homes converted to office buildings on the Academic West Campus along with the variety of architectural styles of buildings constructed over a span of a century on the Medical East Campus to provide a distinctive format for our book. Each section of the book - appetizers, entrees, salads, breads, desserts, and a motley collection of unclassifiable recipes which we named "Serendipity"- was to be introduced by a drawing of a building. One of the art professors suggested pen-and-ink drawings of the buildings as a senior project for one of his students. The student didn't think the mere drawing of a

building, no matter how well done, would get him a very good grade, so with his help we decided to research patterns on china plates belonging to the period of the architecture of each building. He used the designs we turned up to provide a semi-circular arch over each building. He got his good grade, we were greatly pleased, and we were able to auction his original pen and ink drawings to provide him with a stipend, in addition to his grade.

We think the cookbook is beautiful, representing almost two years of our hard work. We marketed it successfully not only among the members of the Woman's Club but also in several local stores. The income from the invested profits goes to an annual scholarship to a woman graduate student with a dependent. Despite the success of our sales, we decided not to reprint because not only of increased printing costs but also of the fact that the nutrition revolution of the eighties made most of our recipes conspicuously *not* heart healthy.

Our only goof in our book, so far as we know, came to light when one of the books sold by Thalhimer's fell into the hands of an inexperienced cook who was attracted to the recipe for a "Three-hole Cake." She followed directions by putting the dry ingredients into the cake pan, making three holes, filling one hole with salad oil, one with milk, and the third with an egg. When she baked her concoction she was horrified to find that the ingredients had not automatically combined themselves into a cake and complained in outrage. Thalhimer's refunded her money, and we refunded Thalhimer's cost.



The publication of one cookbook is quite enough for me, I decided when we finished our two-year's pleasant labor. But I'm still collecting recipes and adding them to my well-used spiral notebooks. Between those notebooks and *VCU Cooks* I have satisfied my two itches where cookbooks are concerned.