



A Living Past in Your Kitchen

- Mary Nadal

To begin, talk with family members and ask them to contribute the recipes that they find most memorable. You can then copy these recipes by hand into a blank notebook or type them on a computer and take them to a copy center or printer to be put into a bound booklet.

My mother-in-law is famous for her tender, savory pernil, a traditional Puerto Rican pork roast. Yet her recipe has never been committed to paper – it lives in her head. When preparing it together one day, I asked her how much salt and cilantro to use, she shrugged and said “oh, about this much,” indicating with her fingers. Without measuring cups or spoons, she always manages to use exactly the right amount; years and years of practice have made delicious perfection. So many cooks, especially from older generations, create their masterpieces by feel rather than by recipe, making it even more essential to preserve these traditions.

The old index card is torn and yellowed, stained with traces of batter and faintly smelling of brown sugar. My grandmother has passed away, but she lives on in the loops and swirls of old-fashioned cursive, in the meticulously detailed directions that if followed, will lead to a kitchen smelling of heavenly cinnamon and soft, tasty cookies.

How many of us have these unassuming heirlooms in our kitchen or even just in our minds, the family recipes passed on from generation to generation? How many of us take for granted the family dishes that mark the arrival of special holidays and celebrations or simply everyday comfort food?

Don't let these cherished recipes disappear with the passing of generations – create a family cookbook that preserves them for your children, grandchildren and beyond.

Recipes can capture much more than simply how to create a particular dish. They can also give future generations a snapshot of what life was like in a certain era. I always get a kick out of one family recipe for chocolate cookies that instructs the cook to bake in a “fast oven” and calls for a bar of “ten cent chocolate” – today that bar costs about \$3.99. Ingredients, directions, special notes about serving the recipe: all these things can give hints of life in times past.

WHAT ELSE CAN YOU INCLUDE IN YOUR COOKBOOK?

- * Stories or notes about each recipe. Perhaps you have one dish that's only made at Christmastime, or maybe there's a special dessert that is reserved for birthdays.
- * Notes about where the recipe originated and its history. Did Grandma find the recipe in a magazine or has it been passed down through so many generations that nobody remembers who started it? Did it come with the family from the Old Country when they immigrated to the United States? Has it changed over the years?
- * Pictures of the dish and/or pictures of the person most

associated with that recipe. Who's best known for the chocolate cookies that disappear the moment they hit the table? Which relative who always brings the delicious green bean casserole at family reunions? Who prepares the Thanksgiving turkey better than anyone else?

Finally, you can organize your cookbook in several different ways: by type (appetizer, main course, dessert), by occasion (Thanksgiving, Easter, Passover, summertime), by family member (Grandma, Uncle John) or by branch of the family tree (the Smiths, the Washingtons, etc.).

You may also want to include some extra blank pages so that your cookbook can expand as your family grows. Someday your children may have new recipes that they want to add, especially as they get married and start families of their own. The cookbook can itself become a family heirloom full of not just recipes, but memories and traditions, collected and cherished for generations to come.

“Do not dismiss the dish saying that it is just, simply food. The blessed thing is an entire civilization in itself.”

-Abdulhak Sinasi, Turkish poet