

Cooking by the Book

by

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I had been going through boxes in search of old photographs when I stumbled upon two notebooks: my grandmother's collection of recipes and a collection I had started in the mid-1950s as part of a high school assignment. My mother, who kept both notebooks until her death, had added other recipes to my notebook through the years.

My Grandmother Irene's book of recipes is penned with red ink. As a title page, she inscribed in letters as elegant and old-fashioned as a starched white linen damask tablecloth:

Receitas de Doces

Irene Flores da Cunha

Uruguayana, 1 de Dezembro de 1921

The title page tells us that these are her dessert recipes and that she started writing them in her hometown of Uruguayana, deep in the south of Brazil, on December 1, 1921. Below her name, she had glued a sticker of a pink English rose. The paper is now yellow, the red leather cover loose, and the ink is faded and blurry in places, but the writing is still legible. There are 180 recipes of compotes, creams, tarts, puddings, cakes, candies, cookies and breads.

The other collection of recipes has no examples of my culinary talents, except for those I sent my mother from the United States, Haiti, and India after I married and left Brazil. They had pride of place in the notebook I left behind. In my mother's hands, this notebook became a sort of family cookbook. Most of the recipes were passed down by aunts, cousins, and the cooks we employed, before good cooks became scarce and unaffordable. My mother was a great collector of family recipes; she added them to this notebook into the early 1990s, until she ran out of blank pages and the desire to cook following the death of my father.

The two notebooks encompass almost a century of family cooking. Like my mother, I never stopped collecting recipes and buying cookbooks, but nothing in my considerable culinary library replicates quite the same ingredients that permeate those two collections: the salt of tears, the spice of lives lived to the fullest, the sweetness of happy memories, the aftertaste of times gone by, and that mysterious and most potent ingredient that binds us together as a family through the generations.

As I leaf through the pages of desserts my grandmother began to record in 1921, I imagine the large, two-story townhouse on the corner of Avenue of the Republic, its tall windows framed by wrought iron balconies, its green wooden shutters closed to protect the family against the afternoon sun. The house was in downtown Uruguayana, a frontier town of 24,000 where my grandparents were living. I see her sitting in the cool company of her royal palms, writing away. Those would have been the best years of her married life: My handsome grandfather had returned from Rio Janeiro, the capitol, where he had been in Congress for several years, to run for and win the office of mayor of his home town. Raising her five surviving children, who ranged in age from my father at fifteen to my aunt Maria at three, recording her recipes in carefully elaborate handwriting, and serving large meals of home-cooked food were the simple pleasures of a mayor's wife. I have never been to Uruguayana, but the scene is vivid from my father's descriptions of his childhood. "Mamãe never had to cook in her life, but she loved to make desserts; she created the best guava paste I ever had," he remembered years later.

I recall my grandmother as I knew her in Porto Alegre decades later, living in a similar townhouse overlooking Independence Avenue with Uncle Marco Aurélio and his family. Grey-haired, frail, and blind, she was perhaps more beautiful in her old age than she had ever been. She spent her days in her rocking chair, surrounded by her grown children and many grandchildren, dressed in a black skirt and pristine white blouse. She was the undisputed center of attention during those long Sunday afternoons when no one had anything better to do than "go to Grandma's." This visit was a tradition, more sacred than the Sunday mass.

"Oh, I was never much of a cook," she used to say at those gatherings. "I always had Babá with me when the children were growing up, and *she* was the great cook, particularly with sweets." She was referring to Nicácia Vieira, known to all in the family by the Portuguese word for nanny: the woman who had started working at my great-grandparents' house as a wispy girl of thirteen, had followed my grandmother after she married my grandfather, had cared for all their children, and ended her life helping the youngest, my aunt Maria, raise her own children. Babá was an icon in our family and a

relic from the days of slavery, although she herself had been born a free woman. Speak of Babá and my father became misty-eyed: “She was a saint. There are no longer women like her . . . and nobody made ambrosia like Babá.” His longing for the sweet food was as great as that for the good nanny.

Recipes for ambrosia—a sweet that has nothing in common with the American dessert of the same name—figure prominently in Grandma Irene’s and my own cookbooks, as they do in any Brazilian cookbook worth its name. It is one of the numerous sweets concocted by heavenly-inspired Portuguese nuns who managed to make delicacies of just three, sometimes only two ingredients. Do you know how many ways there are to transform sugar and milk into a delectable feast? Or egg yolks and sugar? If only you could leaf through my grandmother’s book of recipes, you would find out. The ability to create something wonderful out of a few common ingredients reminds me of my grandmother’s own life, lived in simplicity in the shadow of her husband’s anarchic political life, limited to the home and family, and yet a thing of beauty that affected all those who knew her.

My mother never even tried to replicate the famous ambrosia of the old nanny. She did, however, cook some of the traditional gaucho recipes for beef that my father favored, as witness her additions to my high school cookbook. My favorite is one for *Arroz de Carreteiro*, which can be translated loosely as “Chuck Wagon Rice.” She used to cook it every time my father came back from his excursions to Porto Alegre, bringing the indispensable jerked beef in his travel-worn Gladstone bag. Since jerked beef is one of the ingredients of the ubiquitous national dish of *Feijoada*, it can be found anywhere in Brazil—but, no, my father only wanted it salted and cured in his home state of Rio Grande do Sul, the land of the “best jerked beef in the world.” His return from the south was always fêted with my mother’s *Arroz de Carreteiro*. She brought to the table the large, fragrant platter of rice mixed with the tasty, hand-cut little bits of jerked beef flavored with sautéed onions and garlic. There was always a disclaimer: “I don’t know if it is any good . . . maybe a little too salty?” The answer was invariably a voracious attack on the food, my father showing by his appetite that he approved of her cooking. This dish

was as good as any that his mother had supervised, hovering over Babá as she cooked it on the old wood-burning stove in the kitchen of the house in Uruguayana.

I can still hear the way in which my mother legitimized her own talents in the kitchen: “Well, Tunico likes my cooking very much.” And whatever my father liked must have been good; he couldn’t ever be wrong in her book.

Years earlier, when I was a little girl of five, we had moved to a farm in the foothills of the Mantiqueira mountains, in the state of São Paulo. There, my mother worked diligently at turning herself—a city girl to her core—into a farmer’s wife. Among her greatest accomplishments was learning how to make pork sausage. For that, she had to overcome the guilt and pain that was caused by the pig shrieking in agony. She unsuccessfully tried to shield me from the piercing noise, taking me away from the slaughter room and closing my ears tight with her hands while the farm hands did their dastardly deed. But once the deed was done and the poor pig had been transmuted into slabs of pork, my mother and I would go to the kitchen and spend hours cutting pork fat and lean meat alike into tiny bits to stuff into the sausage casings.

My mother could also make Minas cheese—smooth, silky, and wet—a farmer’s cheese like no other I’ve ever tasted. Rounds of it sat on wooden planks, suspended from the ceiling by long ropes inside the dark cheese room where they dripped and dripped whey until they reached that perfect point, not too wet and not too dry. Thick slices of Minas cheese over bread and butter, all homemade, and a glass of milk, still foamy and warm from the cow’s udder, were the heavenly trio of my breakfasts at the farm.

Now, as I skim the fat and foam from the surface of my chicken soup, the spirits of my mother and grandmother hover lightly in the air of my American kitchen. I am cooking for my daughter, who has just had a baby and needs a break. I watch the boiling point to avoid overcooking the tender breasts and add two laurel leaves to the pot. I peel a skin curlicue from the face of a lemon and drop it in the soup: the air quickly smells green and fresh. When the liquid is clear and gently bubbly, I add a cup of rice, sliced

carrots and chopped celery. In twenty minutes the soup is ready. I de-bone and chunk the chicken and add the final touch, a fistful of mint leaves.

The familiar aroma rising to my face conjures up the overwhelming feelings of becoming a new mother more than three decades ago. Newly arrived in the United States, I remember how close I felt then to the two absent women, my mother and grandmother. I had the sense of being a necessary link in some chain that went past them in Brazil, back to the Azores, to Portugal, to the Basque Country, to the beginning of time. I felt like an elemental force of nature, like a human spring that comes reassuringly after winter, bearing new life. I felt connected, complete and alive. And the same feeling floods me now as I cook this simple soup for my daughter, a new mother herself.