



Aunt Mag's
Recipe Book

Aunt Mag's Recipe Book: Heritage Recipes from a Carolina Kitchen
by Carolyn Rawls Booth with illustrations by the author
September 2004
Wilmington, NC: Winoca Press (www.winocapress.com)
60 pp., index. Coil binding. \$12.00.
ISBN 0-9755910-0-2

An Interview with the Author: Carolyn Rawls Booth

Q: So, where did your inspiration to write a heritage cookbook come from?

A: Some time ago, I realized that my sister and I were the last of the good cooks in our family. My mother had become “best cook emeritus” and at family events only made the tea or maybe the potato salad. We have lots of family gatherings, and the food served is always from our southern heritage: fried chicken, chicken ‘n’ pastry, chicken salad, potato salad, deviled eggs, ham, green beans and potatoes—all the foods that our mother before us, and her mother before her, put on the table when her family gathered. Our families expect these dishes. They look forward to the memories they invoke, but they don’t necessarily know how to cook them.

Q: Don’t you have recipes that have been handed down?

A: The way our ancestors cooked has been passed down through the good cooks, but until now there had been no written recipes. As a food writer, I accepted the challenge to write a family cookbook. I gave it as a Christmas gift to everyone in our family several years ago.

Q. This cookbook?

A: No, not exactly, but many of these recipes were in it. But that effort was so well received that I decided to expand it into a larger volume that would include menus as well as recipes. It’s called *Gatherings: Menus and Recipes from a Southern Kitchen*.

Q: So, how did that evolve into *Aunt Mag’s Recipe Book*?

A: I was waiting for you to ask that. *Aunt Mag’s Recipe Book* is a collection of the most traditional of the recipes that make up *Gatherings*. These are the recipes that we do over and over, at every family gathering. The larger cookbook will have more varied menus, but they will include the old dishes along with new, more contemporary dishes that incorporate the cultural influences of our world today. For example, basil was not one of the savory herbs grown in my grandmother’s—or even my mother’s—kitchen garden, but I use it almost daily. Fresh produce is available year round, and the old tough cuts of beef and pork that required long hours of cooking are no more.

Q: *Aunt Mag’s Recipe Book* shows us how to cook without those advantages you mentioned?

A: My goodness, no. I have misled you! *Aunt Mag's Recipe Book* incorporates the advantages we have in food production today, but I have stayed true to the principles of heritage cooking.

Q: Which are . . . ?

A: First of all, using the freshest meats and produce available. Straight from the home garden or the farmer's market if possible, or from the best grocer you can find. Secondly, seasoning, not to overpower, but to complement the flavor of the basic ingredient. Most people think that the flavor in country cooking came from the grease. Not so; the smoky flavor of ham and bacon contributed complexity to vegetables, but that can be achieved without the fat. Actually, it is sugar and salt that bring out the flavor of vegetables. A pat of butter or a teaspoon of olive oil goes a long way.

Q: What about meat? Country people used to eat a lot of meat. And what about all that lard stored in lard stands?

A: I'm not sure you can even buy lard anymore. Now the issue is trans fats, like in my favorite shortening, Crisco. But back to the meats. Pork is so lean today that it's marketed as "the other white meat." We have to brine a pork roast to make it juicy. The last steak my husband and I had was completely trimmed of fat, and there was very little marbling. Have you noticed how difficult it is to brown meat anymore? There is so little fat in it.

Q: Okay, I'm convinced. Let's get back to *Aunt Mag's Recipe Book*. Who is Aunt Mag?

A: She was my great-great aunt, the sister of my mother's grandmother and my father's grandmother. I came by her proud.

Q: Did you know her? I mean, was she still living in your time?

A: Aunt Mag was a legend. I never knew her personally, but she was a member of the family whose legend was passed on from generation to generation. In my novel *Between the Rivers*, I brought that legend to life. I gave Aunt Mag all the qualities that had been portrayed to me as my kin described her. She was a pretty straightforward person—feisty, determined, sort of a female activist in her time.

Q: And a good cook?

A: The best. She was so good, she could make gravy out of a squirrel's tracks. That's an old saying that tells me that she could cook anything.

Q: Is that what makes one a good cook?

A: I'm not talking about crème brulée or coquilles St. Jacques here—those are dishes or recipes that have been developed. Aunt Mag developed her own recipes, but the gist of the squirrel-track analogy is that she could cook most anything that was put before her using the basic means of cookery that civilization has used forever. And she could improvise. I'll bet she never said, "I don't have everything that goes in that, I'll have to cook something else for dinner." That's what I'm talking about.

Q: Are you a good cook?

A: I think so. I love to cook, and that is a primary quality for being a good cook. I also love to eat really good fare. My appreciation of good food drives me to cook well.

Q. Have you had any formal training in the culinary arts?

A. I studied foods and nutrition at Woman's College in Greensboro, N.C., but I did not complete my college degree until graduating from Meredith College in 1981—at the age of 50. I like to think Aunt Mag would be proud of me for earning that degree.

Q. Foods and Nutrition was your major?

A. No, I majored in English. I wanted to be a food writer, among other things. In my senior year I did an internship with the *Cary News* and wrote a column called "Creative Cooking." Later I wrote for *Taste-Full Magazine*. I became a professional food writer and loved it. Food writers also write cookbooks, but I got waylaid for awhile and wrote a novel.

Q: *Between the Rivers*?

A: Yes, not a cookbook, but a story full of references to food and Southern customs of cooking and dining.

Q. Which brings me to one last question. Will we hear more from Aunt Mag and the other characters in *Between the Rivers* and Aunt Mag's Recipe Book?

A. Oh, I'm pretty certain you'll be hearing more of Aunt Mag's words of wisdom! And although the forthcoming sequel to *Between the Rivers* takes place a few years after Aunt Mag's prime, I hope it'll be an story readers will enjoy equally well.

www.winocapress.com

Carolyn Rawls Booth
P. O. Box 6
Cary NC 27512-0006