

# History in a Dog-Eared Cookbook

By Rand Richards Cooper



*When my mother made Spanish rice, she served it with a theatrical flourish, as if flamenco dancers were close behind.*

Recipes and details from cookbook courtesy of the author.

My mother died two years ago at age 79. We two were close, talking once or twice a week, often around dinnertime and often about food. I've been cooking her recipes most of my life.

Her zest for food traced back to Midwestern German roots and mammoth country dinners served on the hand-hewn dining-room table at her grandparents' farm: sauerkraut, pork loin, roast potatoes, "and everything cooked in bacon lard!" she would recall, laughing. She grew to be a petite woman and a vegetarian—albeit one who allowed herself spectacular lapses, like gorging on pickled tongue while visiting her brother.

Mom's favorite cookbook was *The Joy of Cooking*—another product of Midwestern Germans, Irma and Marion Rombauer. I own it now, her 1953 edition, covered in the same red-and-white-checked contact paper with which, for a lurid interlude during my early childhood, she papered our kitchen walls. The spine of the

book is broken, and opening to the broken place gives you a pretty good idea of the Rombauer culinary worldview. It's a salad page, but don't expect arugula. Instead, you'll find Mock Ham Salad (made with bologna); Veal or Beef Salad; Salad of Sweetbreads, Cucumbers, and Mushrooms. And, yes, Pickled Lamb Tongue Salad. Irma Rombauer wrote that she hoped "to encourage the cook in her daily grind," and her advice reverberates with a humor, arch yet generous, that I'm sure my mother loved. For instance: "Serve hot food hot from hot dishes. Serve cold food chilled from chilled dishes. Keep calm even if your hair straggles and you drip unattractively."

My own joy of cooking goes back four decades, to boyhood hours spent in the

kitchen of our house in New London, Connecticut. The room was the warm, thumping heart of our home, and already as a grade-schooler I loved being there. Especially when my mother stood at the stove. Sometimes I'd help her sift or stir or fry. Other times I'd just sit, tasting spoon in hand, perched atop the green-painted stool she'd saved from her mother's kitchen. I had only a few memories of my grandmother—she died when I was four—but my mother spoke of her often; and sitting there listening to stories about her and sampling dishes my mother had inherited from her, I understood something about how we navigate the loss of those we love most.

When I graduated from college, my mother sent me off into the world armed with a copper-bottomed Revere saucepan, cast-iron skillet, spatula, and her recipes, copied by hand on note cards in protective plastic slipcovers. I still have them, in a box in the pantry. They carry the flavor of my family's past. Like Mrs. Ghormley's Chocolate Cake, the recipe of a cranky elderly neighbor whose husband left the house so seldom that we joked, morbidly, she'd killed and buried him in the basement. Or Bunny's Breasts, a chicken-and-tarragon specialty we chortled over because its originator, a friend of my mother's, was so amply endowed. There was Swiss Steak, a top round simmered with onions, tomatoes, and garlic—the first dish I ever made on my own, circa eighth grade, relishing the violent action with the tenderizing mallet. Another favorite, fettucine with prosciutto, mushrooms, and peas in a béchamel sauce, was called Straw and Hay for the Pope, a dish that afforded this Catholic middle-schooler a satisfying tang of the blasphemous.

From the perspective of today, the mid-20th-century cooking revealed by my mother's recipes seems remarkably free of fresh ingredients. Why use fresh tarragon when you have it dried, right there in the little bottle—and it lasts forever? Recently my sister made

Mom's broccoli casserole. "Do you realize it includes *three cans* of Campbell's mushroom soup?" she asked me. Not to mention frozen chopped broccoli and a half-package of Pepperidge Farm stuffing. Mom's prized Fish Daufuskie featured a vermouth sauce with mayonnaise, Worcestershire, Tabasco, mustard, and garlic powder. Call it Condiment Cuisine. It's also startling today, when every Main Street boasts Thai and Indian take-out, to recall how provincial mid-century America was at the table—and what counted as "exotic." When my mother made Spanish rice, she served it with a theatrical flourish, as if flamenco dancers were close behind.

But her midlife coincided with the end of the meat-and-potatoes domination of American cooking, and for her, food increasingly became an adventure—even, for a person who cherished the familiarity of her home and kitchen, a means of vicarious travel. Take, for instance, her eggplant lasagna, made with fresh mint, a daring Mediterranean touch inspired by a Lebanese friend. Or her sesame asparagus, blanched to a brilliant green hue, then sprinkled with soy and roasted sesame seeds. Leaving her German meat-loving roots far behind, she discovered simplicity, color, freshness. A light touch. And a funny one, too, complete with friendly Rombaueresque exhortations. "Shake like hell," Mom wrote on the recipe for French dressing she gave me. And I do, with gratitude and pleasure.

Rand Richards Cooper is the author of the works of fiction *The Last to Go* and *Big As Life*. His fiction has appeared in *Harper's*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and other magazines, and he has been writer-in-residence at Amherst and Emerson colleges. A film critic for *Commonweal* and longtime contributor to *Bon Appétit*, Rand lives in Hartford, Connecticut with his wife Molly and three-year old daughter Larkin.

