

THAT Was Cooking!

by **SIDNEY W. DEAN**



MY FATHER was famous locally for his fried oysters and for his lobster "Block Island style," both served for breakfast on Sunday mornings with the accompaniment of piping-hot raised rolls.

My mother knew her baked beans and brown bread and Injun pudding, her chicken and veal potpies with feathery dumplings, and her chicken pies with crust that melted in your mouth.

My grandmother was noted for her home-made sausage meat, her root beer, spruce beer, and mead, and her currant, grape, and gooseberry wines, but as a general cook she was the best of the three.

My mother and my grandmother were adepts in what might be termed early American cookery, which began along the Atlantic

tidewaters from Maine to the Carolinas and moved inland and westward, varying the menu and the art according to locality. In fact, practically identical basic receipts can be found in heirloom cookbooks in New England, up-state New York, Ohio and the old Western Reserve, Indiana, Illinois, the Michigan peninsula, Iowa, and, nowadays, Los Angeles. It might prove an interesting culinary tour to trace fricasseed chicken across the continent and note the variants owing, of course, to local ingredients and seasonings and early cookery makeshifts.

Brought up in an atmosphere of nose-tickling and mouth-watering eatables, is it any wonder that as a boy I wanted to cook — especially since camping out was my favorite summer sport during the long vacation and since canned goods in those days were not what they are today? We either cooked our fish, clams, scallops, and small game or we went hungry — and we did not go hungry often.

I can see that old home kitchen now. The family homestead was a two-story-and-a-half colonial, with a kitchen ell and, back of that, a summer kitchen or sink room, with sink and permanent mixing-board dresser about 10 feet in length, under which were ensconced a barrel of haxall bread flour, a barrel of "patent" flour, sugar, molasses, vinegar from our own apples, and a 50-pound pail of homemade lard tried out in the fall from the leaf. (And what souse and head cheese and crackling bread we had in those crisp fall days!)

A large chimney, with a smoke oven for hams and bacon, and a Franklin fireplace took up the space between the cellar stairway and the door into the main kitchen. The latter room was at least twenty feet square, with windows to the south, while on the north side was a sunken pantry closet and a little refrigerator hall opening on the side porch. This kitchen was our favorite sitting room in the

winter, and there was ample room for boys, dogs, a calico cat, and usually a swarm of kittens, without getting too much under the feet of the cook.

It was a pleasant room, indeed, with its wide floor boards painted a Tuscan red, as were the bricks in the chimney and the fireplace trim. The fireplace had been closed in with a zinc-covered fireboard, and close up against this was a monster range, with a huge copper boiler. We burned coal as a rule, but, when we were broiling steaks or chops, bluefish or shad, the fire was made with birch, and then when the fire pot was a mass of deep coals the lids were replaced with a heavy grid.

PRETTY GOOD FOR AN AMATEUR

MY FATHER was an editor and publisher, and cooking with him — as also his cabinetmaking — was more or less a relief mechanism. He had traveled extensively and, while he was not a gourmet (his regular dinner order at hotels was rare roast beef and potatoes, followed by apple pie), he could do things with fish and shellfish which were the envy of his friends — and, it must be admitted, of my mother. Lobsters and oysters never seemed to have the same savor when she cooked them, although there were no secrets in his stove wizardry.

I can see him now on Sunday mornings in cold weather — when we always had a nine-o'clock breakfast. Oysters were the menu in months with the *R*, lobster during the balance of the year — and this was the unbroken rule as long as we lived in that little old Rhode Island whaling town.

Before him at the kitchen table, which had been drawn up beside the range, was a large bowl of freshly opened oysters, fryers, just as they came from the shell. They had not been touched with fresh water. In another bowl were two fresh eggs, and beside the bowl a hickory egg whip. He did not use an egg beater.

On his special cutting board, about two feet square, he first rolled out bread slices which had been twice heated and browned in the oven. These were rolled almost to a flour. He dipped each large, succulent oyster first in the beaten egg and then in the bread crumbs on the board, turning the oysters again and again until the coating was complete. This process continued until every oyster had been thor-

oughly coated with crumbs, and then they were set back on the board until he was ready for them.

To amuse us — and perhaps to keep a record of his “fry” — father used to count them out as he dipped them, to the accompaniment of an old nursery rhyme: *One, two, buckle my shoe; three, four, shut the door; five, six, I need more sticks; seven, eight, lay them straight*, and so on, with variations of his own, until the roster of three or four dozen was complete.

(Father also had a mannerism similar to one for which Daniel Webster was noted: He never caught a fish — and he was an enthusiastic fisherman — except with an enthusiastic rendition of couplets from Pope’s *Essay on Man*. “Lo, the poor Indian,” he would exult as a twenty-pound codfish came tumbling over the coaming of the boat.)

From a thick piece of fat-back salt pork — modern cooks call it larding pork — father next cut a dozen or more slices, scarfing the rind with cuts about a sixteenth of an inch apart on the edge of the cutting board. These slices were fried slowly and carefully in a high-sided cast-iron spider, until every particle of the fat had been fried out of them, and then they were carefully deposited upon a small platter on the cold shelf of the range. When served they were snowy white, crisp and luscious.

Into the almost boiling pork fat in the spider the oysters were lowered gently — there never was more than a quarter-inch of pork fat — and each bivalve was carefully browned and crisped on one side before receiving an equally efficient crisping and browning on the other.

The result was a perfect fried oyster — brown and delectable and appetizing, moist and untoughened in the center, crisp on the outside. To add to the savor, they were eaten with the puffy raised rolls and with bits of the crisp pork with every bite.

This was no modern breakfast — of a roll or toast, orange juice, and coffee — but it was a *meal*! In fact, early American cookery was planned for hearty eaters — man, woman, and child all enjoyed their vittles, and “reducing” was as unknown a system as air-conditioning.

Father’s coffee was as good as his oysters, and he always brewed it the same way. His mixture was one third Mocha and two thirds

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Old Government Java, and he leached it through a cone bag through which boiling water was poured — once. He learned the art in Cuba “befo’ the Wah,” and he always served both hot milk and real cream with it.

In summer his lobster-breakfast procedure differed in detail, but he used the same cast-iron spider, this time with a cover. First he extracted the meat and the green fat from freshly boiled lobsters until he had about a quart of the meat. He saved about a third of the fat, but the lobster meat was cubed or diced into three-quarter-inch pieces, and a large piece of butter was put into the spider and slowly melted. He used no condiments, considering the salt in the butter and lobster to be enough seasoning. It was.

When the butter was melted, the spider was placed on the back of the stove, and the diced lobster and most of the fat turned into it. A careful shaking evened the shellfish over the bottom of the cooking utensil, and then it was covered tightly and put back on the range where it would steam slowly but would not brown.

The principle of this cookery, Father used to say, was simplicity itself. The steam from the butter and from the little water remaining in the lobster meat percolated through the mass, breaking the meat down into fibers and flavoring the dish through and through.

Served piping hot with puffy rolls, it was a breakfast fit for old Lucullus himself. Dad used the green fat not included in the cooked lobster as butter for his rolls. So did some of his guests as a rule, but the lobster was good enough for the rest of us. No lobster since that day has ever tasted so good. It is not generally known in such urban communities as New York and Chicago, where “devils” and Newburgs and thermidors are the rule and where lobster prices run up into the higher brackets. But along the coast of Maine and the New England capes, from Eastport to Wood’s Hole, this sea delectable is served when you can get it. It was once indigenous to Block Island, where it was first named. Incidentally the rock lobster and the crayfish of the South lend themselves to similar treatment.

GRANDMOTHER WAS GOOD TOO

MY GRANDMOTHER knew her oysters, too, but she preferred them creamed or scal-

loped. She had about twenty ways of cooking salt fish, an art in cookery which began to go out with the advent of refrigerator cars and frozen sea foods but which is still fostered by canny cooks when fresh fish is not available, since it is too precious a heritage to be allowed to die from inanition.

Grandmother would have despised the fish cake of today, with its bulkage of potato, for hers were something to brag about. Not that the dear old lady ever bragged of her cooking — far from it — but compliment it, and a wistful quirk at the corner of her mouth and a demure twinkle in her deep blue eyes indicated that she had not overlooked the encomium, although ostensibly she paid no attention.

This is how she used to make her fish cakes:

Pick the soaked salt fish very fine and use enough to fill a pint bowl lightly. Deposit two bowlsful of pared raw potatoes in a cooking pot or saucepan, top with the fish, and boil for just 30 minutes. Drain off all the water and then mash fish and potato together until very light. Season with black pepper and add a piece of butter the size of an egg and two eggs beaten light. Work all into a fluffy mass and then drop a spoonful at a time into boiling fat. Be careful to get good-shaped spoonfulls through careful manipulation of the spoon. The latter should be dipped in the hot fat each time, to prevent sticking. It takes about 2 minutes each to brown these fish cakes if the fat is hot. They will be found delicious. If placed upon brown paper to drain in a heated oven as soon as cooked, they will not be greasy when served.

As I have already said, Grandmother was famous for her sausage meat. We have all kinds these days, and some of it is better left alone. With the price of the choicer varieties topping that of porterhouse steak, why not try Grandmother Maxwell’s receipt, which has been proportionally reduced to the terms of ordinary family demand? She made it in bulk — 40 pounds of meat at a time — and kept it in cloth bags in a cool place, for use as required with her raised buckwheat cakes. But here is her proportional rule:

To five pounds of fresh pork — shoulder is perfectly good, using both fat and lean without the skin — add an ounce and a half of salt, a quarter-ounce of leaf sage, a half-ounce of black pepper, a quarter-ounce of cayenne pepper, a quarter-ounce of sweet marjoram, and a

half-dozen cloves. Cut pork in small pieces, add seasoning, toss, and then grind fine in a meat chopper — *twice*. Make a cloth bag about three inches in diameter and a foot long — or use an old salt bag — stuff tightly with the sausage meat, and tie the open end of the bag. Then roll into a cylinder and allow to hang in a cool place for three days to season before using. It will be *real* sausage.

As may be imagined, Grandmother's mince pies were well worth the eating, but nobody wants to take the trouble to make mincemeat these days. Her pastry and piecrust were equally delectable, and were made with a half-pound of butter and a quarter-pound of lard to each pound of flour, rolled at least three times and preferably four times.

But she made an egg mince pie, like unto nothing ever seen outside early America, which will be found worth experimenting with. Here is her receipt, just as written in her faded old receipt book, dated at Providence, Rhode Island, on February 2, 1821:

Boil six eggs. Pare and chop six apples. Chop one and a half pounds of beef suet fine. Add one-half pound of currants, one-half pound of seeded raisins, and the peel of a lemon, chopped. If you have it, add a quarter-pound of chopped candied citron. Shred these all together and season with mace, nutmeg, and sugar to taste (she used brown sugar). Moisten with a little cider and further season with a glass of brandy and two glasses of sherry.

MOTHER'S SPECIALTIES

COMING DOWN nearer to my generation — my mother's cookery had certain very estimable features about it. I still use some of her favored receipts, notably for chicken dishes — chicken pie and scalloped chicken. Her baked beans were neither "New York" nor "Boston," since she used a combination of sugar and molasses for sweetening and placed an onion in the bottom of her bean pot. Her pork was in one piece, crisp on the scarfed top, and of gelatinous consistency beneath when sliced and served with the beans.

She used to serve huckleberry griddlecakes, made by her own rule, during the berry season, and also berry fritters, using the same batter as for her banana or apple fritters. Pineapple in those days was a rarity.

Mother made her batter with a pint of

flour, a half-pint of milk, a tablespoon of butter, melted, a teaspoonful of salt, and two eggs. The eggs were beaten light, and the milk and salt added to them. Half of this was poured on the flour and beaten, then the balance of the milk and the butter, and beaten again. The berries were tossed in a half-and-half combination of flour and powdered sugar and then turned into the mixture. These fritters were sprinkled with powdered sugar while hot from the deep-fat frying kettle.

Her receipt for berry griddlecakes, brought down to date, would be something like this (amount of sweetening depending on individual taste as well as the ripeness of the berries):

To two cups of self-rising flour add one well-beaten egg, three quarters of a cup of sugar, and a quarter of a cup of molasses. Roll a cup of blueberries or huckleberries in a half-and-half mixture of flour and powdered sugar to which a quarter-teaspoonful of nutmeg has been added. (A tablespoonful each of flour and sugar will be sufficient.) Brown on a well-greased griddle on one side until the juice from berries appears in bubbles on top of the cake, then turn and brown the other side. Dipping cake turner in hot fat will prevent sticking.

With crisp bacon these are a welcome addition to the summer menu.

Berry muffins and berry breakfast cake baked in a shallow pan are just as good as they ever were, but a dash of nutmeg helps in accentuating the spicy flavor of the berry, no matter what the variety. Mother always added a scraping of nutmeg to her crushed strawberries when making a shortcake, and the berries turned appreciably wilder in flavor.

There are almost as many ways of making a chicken pie as there are cooks to bake it. Some add oysters, some peas, some carrots; some simply thicken the broth in which the fowl was boiled and add a few diced cooked potatoes. Mother had several receipts she used alternately, but here is her "company" chicken pie:

The chickens or young fowl are washed and cut into joints. These pieces are placed in a stew pan with an onion cut fine, two cups of pared and diced potatoes, a bunch of parsley cut fine, a spoonful of sweet marjoram, a bay leaf, and a few slivers of lemon peel. Season with salt and black pepper and add a piece of butter the size of an egg or an equivalent

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amount of chopped larding pork. Then stew slowly until chicken is done — about an hour.

This mixture is later transferred to the baking dish, and into it are stirred the yolks of two eggs, beaten in a cup of thin cream. The crust, made tender and flaky with extra shortening, is next placed over the dish, vents being cut in the center to permit the steam to escape. If the crust is too tender and shows a tendency to drop into the pie, give it backbone by placing an inverted teacup in the center of the baking dish.

This same receipt, omitting the crust, and with or without dumplings, makes a most delectable fricassee; but add the beaten egg and cream just five minutes before serving and stir in quickly.

Mother's scalloped chicken and oysters and clams were made by the same method, except that with oysters and clams the liquid used was half milk and half clam or oyster liquor. In her scalloped chicken, the broth from the boiled fowl, slightly thickened with flour, was the moistening element. Here is Mother's receipt — I have used it scores of times:

Cut up a chicken or fowl just as you would for pie or fricassee and stew until the bones can be removed. Take out bones and skin and skim most of the fat off the broth. Chop meat coarsely or dice with a knife. Butter a baking dish and cover bottom with a layer of meat. Season with salt and black pepper and cover with bread crumbs, moistening well with the thickened broth. Then add a second layer of the meat, season, more crumbs, more broth, and build the dish nearly full with alternate layers, having the top layer of crumbs. Pour broth over the top, dot generously with butter, and bake covered in a hot oven for 30 minutes. Remove cover and brown. The thickened broth should be the consistency of thick cream.

Scalloped clams were made with the clams cut in small pieces, after the black parts of heads and bodies had been removed. Small oysters were used whole. The crumbs were rolled bread crumbs and cracker crumbs, half and half, and in these dishes the juice of the shellfish and milk were combined half and half for the moistening element. Every layer of scalloped clams or oysters, however, must be dotted with butter; the chicken broth will be found fat enough.

Mother always liked parsnips; we didn't. Nevertheless, she converted us with parsnip pie. It was not a pie in reality but belonged to the fricassee family, but it was good in cold weather (which, incidentally, is the only season in which to eat parsnips). This is how she did it:

She pared and sliced enough potatoes to make a pint and then scraped and sliced an equal amount of parsnips. These were par-boiled, until soft, in a pint of water; and then a slice of toast for each diner was placed in the bottom of her turkey-roasting pan, after being thoroughly buttered. Upon this toast, slices of potato and parsnip were spread and salted and peppered generously. Over the top of the piled vegetables were placed thin slices of larding pork (fat back); and, over all, the water in which the vegetables had been parboiled was poured. The combination was placed in a hot oven, and, just as soon as the pork was crisp, the toast brown at the edges, and the top layer of parsnip-potato a delicate amber, it was placed on the table. Incidentally it did not remain there long.

NO RESTRAINT IN DESSERTS

NOW WHAT of desserts?

Cooks of my grandmother's day went truly hog-wild (as she would have been the first to say had eggs been as expensive then as now).

Imagine a bride's cake calling for twelve eggs to one and a half pounds of flour! Think of a plum cake calling for twelve pounds of flour, five pounds of butter, five pounds of sugar, six pounds of raisins, four ounces of cinnamon, two ounces of cloves, two dozen eggs, a quart of milk, a quart of wine and five pints of yeast! Let us be reasonable in all things.

Perhaps you might relish a carrot pudding. Then mix together a coffee cup of boiled and sifted carrots, five eggs, two ounces of sugar, two ounces of butter, nutmeg, mace, and clove to taste and bake in a deep dish. (It sounds like something out of Pepys' Diary.)

Or an Indian pudding, old style: Add three pints of milk, scalded, to a pint of Indian (white corn) meal, salted. Stir until smooth. Then add two eggs, four ounces of butter, two apples pared and sliced, sugar and molasses to taste. (The majority of old-time cooks used taste as a cookery standard.) Put in a buttered dish and bake for two and a half hours.

Grandmother and mother had twin red-earthenware bean pots and Indian-pudding dishes.

Did you ever hear of rocks? (No, not Plymouth.) They were once sold widely in Gloucester and Salem and Marblehead, yet this receipt comes to you from Iowa:

Crack and shell twelve ounces of English walnuts and chop quite fine. Cream together a cup of butter, one and a half cups of sugar, three eggs and three cups of flour. Stir in a teaspoon of cinnamon and a teaspoon of soda dissolved in a little warm water and then add two tablespoons of milk. Mix well and then drop from a teaspoon upon a greased cooky sheet and bake. Drop only small quantities, without rolling or spreading.

How about dough cake or poor man's pudding or gingerbread made with cold tea? Or apple cake to be eaten with molasses sauce? Or apple pie, flavored with lemon and sweetened after it is baked?

The gingerbread was a specialty of the oldest descendant of an original settler when I was a boy, and many times have I enjoyed it when visiting her at the Old Ark — the oldest house in town — in which her people had lived since the seventeenth century.

Abby used one and a half cups of molasses, one cup of shortening, half lard and half butter, a teaspoon of saleratus dissolved in two tablespoons of cold tea (green tea in her case), a tablespoon of ginger, flour enough to roll out if for cookies, enough to make a thin mix if for baking in a loaf.

It was simple enough in Mother's day to make a dough cake (some called it raised cake), for baker's bread was anathema except for crumbs or for stuffing poultry and enough dough could be saved out of the bread mix to meet cake requirements. Here is a tested receipt for a cake men usually like because it is chewy:

Five cups of dough, three cups of sugar, one and a half cups of butter, two thirds of a cup of milk, ground cloves and nutmeg, a teaspoon of saleratus dissolved in a little warm water. (Use baking powder, if you wish, but only a little, as there is yeast in the dough.)

Suppose you want something "different" for dessert and have a few apples available. Try your hand at this variant of a dutch apple cake with molasses sauce:

Mix a pint of flour, 2 scant teaspoons of baking powder, a tablespoon of butter, a little salt, an egg, a half-cup of sugar, and a scant cup of milk. Mix and pour into a greased baking pan and over the top place 3 or 4 apples, pared and sliced thin and dusted with sugar and cinnamon. Bake in a hot oven for 45 minutes and while it is baking prepare the sauce:

One cup of sugar, one tablespoon of molasses, one tablespoon of butter, a half-pint of boiling water. Mix a teaspoon of flour with the sugar before adding water. Salt, add nutmeg or lemon peel or both, and finally boil up once or twice.

As for pies — there were custard and apple and mince and lemon and pumpkin and Hubbard squash and quince and pear and berry; and they even (believe it or not) ate them for breakfast!

Perhaps we are more civilized in our diet; perhaps, to the contrary, our education has been neglected. In the depths of older America three kinds of doughnuts — plain and raised and molasses — and three kinds of pie — always including apple — still appear, although perhaps in rotation, at the matutinal meal. And fried apple pies — how good they were just from the deep iron frying kettle on the fiery range, and how peevish we used to get because mother was modern-minded and was sure they were indigestible!

GIVE THEM CREDIT

WHEN WE STOP to consider that our grandmothers and our mothers (if you belong to the same generation as I do) labored under great difficulties in their stewing and roasting and baking and that all preparation was manual — since there were no choppers but the chopping bowl and knife, no oven thermometers, and few can openers (thank heaven!) — we are amazed at the results obtained.

It is fascinating to delve into the recesses of a more than a century-old cookbook, as I have done, and attempt to bring such receipts up to date. We have no pearlsh instead of baking powder, no Demerara sugar, and our yeast comes in medicinal cakes instead of from a stoppered jug in a cool cellarway — but could our grandmothers cook?

I ask you!

The Artist's Point of View

My Creed for Art Education

LAST MONTH I made some unkind remarks about a certain unnamed museum art school. This month I want to balance the account by stating what, according to my experience, should be the base of all art education, whether for the child, the amateur adult, or the professional artist and designer. Not that any one conception should dictate uniformity in all goals and methods — I am not arguing that. I am arguing that one standard of values can and should be the base of all creative art teaching. Within this one very general standard there is plenty of room for all manner of diversities, technical skills, and media.

This general standard of values has emerged from the modern movement. It is international in scope. It is widely understood and practiced. It is also widely misunderstood, distorted, vitiated, violated, and denied. The chaos in art teaching standards all over the country, in spite of recent additions to knowledge, is one of the remarkable evidences of the power of the human mind to resist and exclude new ideas, as I said last month. Several new art instruction magazines have recently started and are apparently making a financial success, though based on the naturalistic standards of the last century, and certain modern artists, when teaching, fall back on the academic practices of their early training — practices which their own work denies.

Here, then, are the axioms of my credo:

All creative art teaching and art practice should be based on feeling and sensing. It should not be intellectual. As intellect comes into play it should be subordinate to feeling.

The design sense — i.e., the power to organize color, form, line, and space into visual harmonies — should be developed before technical skill in rendering subject. As this design sense grows, it can be applied to subject even in early training, but always the feeling for design should be dominant. Once thoroughly

absorbed, this process becomes automatic; then emphasis can be shifted to subject, and subject can give character to design.

All technical skills should be by-products of creation — not goals in themselves. The full energy should go into feeling for color, design, and, at first, a rough generalization of subject, in order to develop creative power. On this solid foundation, skill can be built as a necessary means to making real a creative conception. The lack of this skill is a much lesser evil than the lack of these art qualities of the ages.

The great, enduring values in works of art are aesthetic, not practical. That is to say, a picture which is a work of creative art is first of all valuable as the peculiar, different expression of a human soul and as an experience in color and form harmony. It is not primarily valuable as a story or record of facts seen in nature or as an evidence of technical skill. It is something which is to be felt and enjoyed rather than recognized and admired. Skill is a means, not an end.

These, I am saying, are or should be the basic axioms in all creative art teaching. They place emphasis and value on those qualities in pictures which are least understood by the great public today but which must be understood if we as a nation are to use the arts. It is the aesthetic experience of thrilling to chords of color and form, rather than the practical one of drawing correct perspective or telling a story with pictured facts, which will really broaden the cultural life. Intellectualizing the arts — i.e., knowing about art, artists, and methods — is not aesthetic experience. It alone does not give one the power to enjoy or participate in and use the emotional excitements in the great fields of color, space, and form.

RALPH M. PEARSON